

TEA & COFFEE

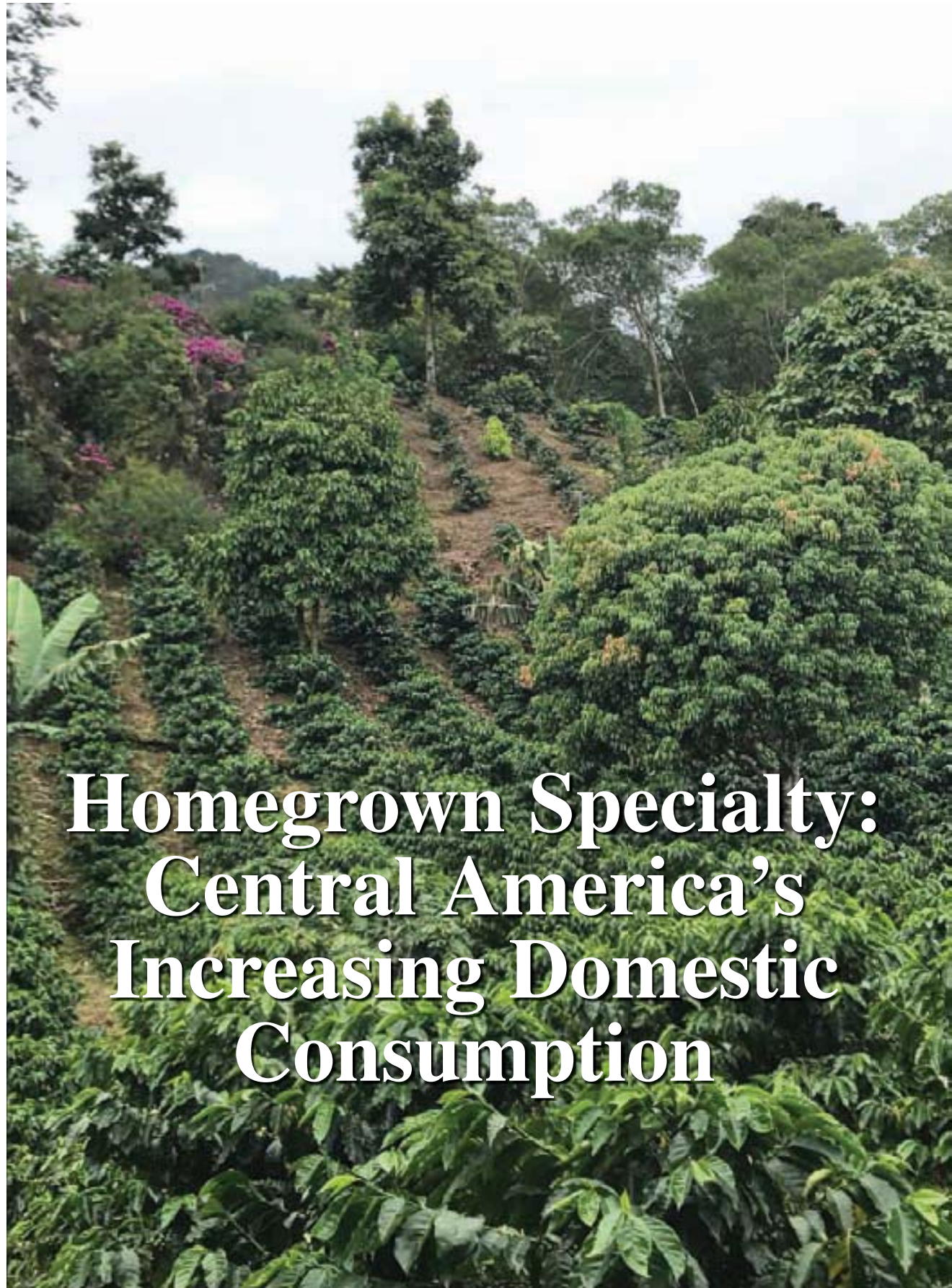
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Technology on Display at Pack Expo

- Domestic Consumption Grows in Central America
- The Topicality of Tea Auctions
- Personalizing Packaging
- Raising Awareness of Quality Decaf



Homegrown Specialty: Central America's Increasing Domestic Consumption

Courtesy of Angel Hernandez

It is the new normal to see packages of roasted coffee touting the connections between farmer and barista. These now-familiar claims, when made by the new wave of specialty roasteries and coffee shops in Central America's producing countries, take on a different meaning as coffee farmers and their families open businesses that directly serve consumers in the same places where fine coffees are grown.

Guatemala Embraces A New Sector

At the end of August, Promecafé (Cooperative Regional Program for Technological Development and Modernization of Coffee Production) held the first regional workshop on Promotion of Domestic Consumption at its headquarters in Antigua, Guatemala. A few weeks later, Guatemala's two-time barista champion, David Solano, who is also a coffee farmer, opened the second location of his specialty coffee destination Café 12 Onzas in Guatemala City. These two events, institutional and entrepreneurial, are indicative of the greater trend unfolding across Central America: the best beans are not automatically earmarked for export.

"Local consumption has increased with a double-digit volume in the past six years," said Nico Hammond of exporter Unitrade Coffee, based in Guatemala City, who supplies local retailer &Café. "This has been driven mainly by local coffee shop companies, which are emerging from curiosity and growth mainly of the consumer in Guatemala City." There is more potential than ever in retaining the value – both for the grower – and the consumer of specialty coffee close to home.

Honduras Plants for Specialty

Honduras is Central America's leader in production volume. "Only Brazil and Colombia produce more coffee in the Americas," said Angel Hernandez, owner of Becapeña, SA farms, dry mill, and export in Peña Blanca, Honduras. London-based International Coffee Organization (ICO) data supports this claim, with Honduras' production rising from 4.33 million 60kg bags in crop year 2010-11 to 8.34 million bags in 2016-17. Parallel to this increase in production volumes has been the increase in domestic consumption of Honduran coffee, particularly that of specialty coffee served in cafés and retail settings with a focus on service and quality.

"A clear example of the growing interest in the last five years is the city of Santa Rosa de Copan that has around of 60,000 inhabitants and has more than 25 specialty coffee shops," observed Katia Duke of Casa Ixchel, a café in Copan Ruinas serving coffee from her family's nearby farm, Finca San Isidro. The same qualities of coffee destined for cafés in Taiwan, such as Natural processed microlots sorted by Arabica

Central America is a recognized source of coffees with unique flavour profiles and high cup scores. As specialty coffee production and processing continues, Central America's origin countries are developing their own iterations of specialty coffee to meet rising local demand.

By Rachel Northrop

variety, also appear on the menus of Honduras' specialty outlets.

"The producers who supply Becapeña have been planting Geisha, Catuai and other specialty varieties," shared Hernandez. "They are still recovering from *la roya* several years ago." As Honduras' producers renovated their farms following the coffee leaf rust's devastation, they planted varieties most sought by international specialty buyers and then, with the strengthening of Honduras' own specialty market, can deliver those same specialty coffees to local roasters and retailers.

As the C market price continues to hover around a dollar, negatively impacting prices even for the rarest coffees, there is more incentive for specialty coffee to remain closer to where it was grown. "Today, one



Katia Duke preparing coffee from her family's farm, Finca San Isidro, at Casa Ixchel café in Copan Ruinas Honduras.

Courtesy of Casa Ixchel

Courtesy of Angel Hernandez



The producers who supply Angel Hernandez's Becapeña, SA farm in Peña Blanca, Honduras, have been planting Geisha, Catuai and other specialty coffee varieties.

doesn't have to sell at the low prices the market has been at," said Hernandez. "People are starting to enjoy the great coffee we grow."

El Salvador's Steady Climb

Much of the increase in instance and consumer popularity of specialty coffee in Central America is thanks to the success of national and international barista competitions, which showcase to local drinkers their countries' exceptional coffees. Staffing cafés with talented baristas trained to render specialty coffee in its most theatrical and delicious final form is a challenge across the United States, Europe and Australia. The skill of *barismo*, as the role of barista is known in Spanish, solidified itself as an attractive line of employment by first entering public attention in Central America at the level of international acclaim. There is none of the North American stigma of wage-worker attached to barista jobs in Central America – barista positions began as and remain roles associated with talent, expertise and global possibility.

"Around eight years ago we started to see better quality coffee in the Salvadoran market with the opening of few shops, such as Viva Espresso and Ben's Coffee." Anny Ruth is a pioneer of specialty coffee in El Salvador, advocating for fellow female producers and managing operations at Loma La Gloria farm and mill in El Boqueron, San Salvador. "In 2008, we had the first Barista Competition and in 2011 Alejandro Mendez from Viva Espresso won the national competition and the world competition in Colombia, becoming the first world barista champion from a producing country."

Viva Espresso is owned by the Pacas family, who

are also producers and exporters, demonstrating that the suppliers of specialty coffees are often the first to realize the potential of their products domestically. National organizations are not far behind. "The Consejo Salvadoreño del Café helped as the organizer of [barista competition] events as well as educating the consumer and increasing the awareness of how a good coffee tastes," noted Anny Ruth. A delegation from the Consejo Salvadoreño also participated in Promecafé's Regional Domestic Coffee Workshop.

Rural Development in Nicaragua

In late April, political violence diverted labour and resources from farms to protests and responses in urban centres. Amid the turmoil, farmers harvested and shipped their crops, and the nation's fledgling specialty coffee businesses continued to serve locally grown, roasted and prepared coffee.

In Nicaragua, the establishment of specialty coffee shops has been led by women and by organizations taking collaborative approaches to sustainable rural business, planning for long-term economic development and cooperative success rather than establishing and propagating a brand, as private specialty coffee businesses modelled after North American or European ones have tended to do.

The Community Agroecology Network (CAN) is an organization based in Santa Cruz, California. In 2011, they began collaborating with the Union de Cooperativas Agropecuarias Augusto Cesar Sandino San Ramon (UCA San Ramon) to end seasonal hunger among small coffee farmers. "The project was developed using our method of participatory action research. Communities take part with researchers," ►

said Carmen Cortez, associate director for CAN, on how members of the UCA San Ramon determined which diversified income strategies for women producers could reduce dependency on export coffee, strengthen gender equity and ultimately reduce hunger. “Going through the process of monitoring and reflecting, researchers accompany participants by providing additional resources to complement knowledge at the local scale. Coffee cooperatives and researchers are equally interested in what combinations of diversification are resilient,” noted Cortez.

Diversification within crops planted on the farm and within the coffee chain are two applications of the same concept. Research complemented the UCA San Ramon’s launch of Cafeteria Monte Grande in San Ramon, Matagalpa, a coffee shop run by the cooperatives’ women farmers serving a mix of patrons from both the emerging agritourism in the region and the town’s residents, and serving as diversified income opportunities for women producers. CAN supported the purchase of the espresso machine and established a revolving loan that the women collectively make decisions about how to invest in the coffee shop.

More than 20 women run the coffee shop that serves the beans they grow, and sources produce for smoothies and snacks from women’s home gardens, another diversification strategy that emerged from the project to end seasonal hunger. Offering espresso drinks and milk drinks, rather than just traditional filtered coffee, positions the shop as specialty coffee, but the entrepreneurial women behind the business are shaping it on their terms. This holistic approach is a continuation of the same philosophy that guides their methods of coffee production. “Agroecology is not a precise recipe for how things should be done,” explained Cortez. “Instead, agroecology focuses on processes for how communities can figure out things together.” Agroecological principles guide practices on integrating shade systems into farms for climate resilience and those same principles foster economic resilience through building local coffee retail businesses.

Fine Dining, Fine Coffee in Costa Rica

Franco restaurant and café is one of the businesses ushering in a new wave of specialty eateries and cafés in San Jose with a focus on quality, craft and local ingredients.

Only a few hours drive from the mountains of Tarrazu where the coffee was grown, Franco serves those beans using the same calibre of equipment and service found in specialty cafés worldwide. The company’s motto is “simple and neighbourly,” reminding that only in producing countries can coffee truly be grown by one’s neighbours. “We are a



Courtesy of Franco

producing country, so we should have the best here too,” said Carlos Montero of Finca La Pastora in San Marcos de Tarrazu, of his coffee being sold at Franco. “Customers in San Jose have high expectations.”

Owners of Franco restaurant and café in San Jose, Costa Rica, César Madriz and Brandon Maiz, prepare Carlo Montero’s coffee as a pourover.

Panama’s Baristas Lead the Change

Benjamin Roque is Panama’s 2018 barista champion, and as such the de facto national ambassador for his country’s coffee both at home and abroad. “There are many Panamanians who still do not know how popular our coffee is globally. As soon as people try it they are surprised at the different flavours found in specialty coffee.” There is now a dedicated group of local aficionados who now ask for their cup of coffee by processing style or farm where it was grown.

After competing in the World Barista Championship in the Netherlands in June, Roque returned home with a greater understanding specialty coffee as an industry. “It was not just about representing Panama on a world stage. I can share what I learned with my fellow baristas in Panama so we can all improve the work we do.”

After representing Panama to the world, Roque has the job of representing the world to Panama. Now, when he is behind the bar serving customers at Kotowa Coffee House in Panama City or educating staff as barista trainer at Kotowa’s shops, he not only talks knowledgeably about the production, roasting and brewing processes behind the cup, he speaks authoritatively about how coffee is served around the world, giving life to the direct trade, farm-to-cup taglines that further differentiate specialty coffee served at origin. ■

Rachel Northrop has been covering coffee for *T&CTJ* since 2012, while she lived in Latin America’s coffee lands writing *When Coffee Speaks*. She was based in Brooklyn, NY but has recently relocated to Miami, Florida. She may be reached at northrop.rachel@gmail.com.