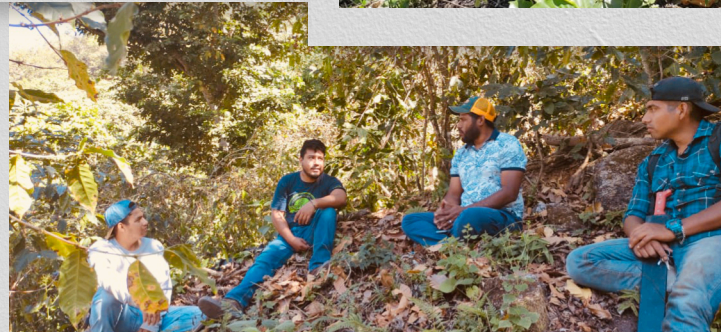
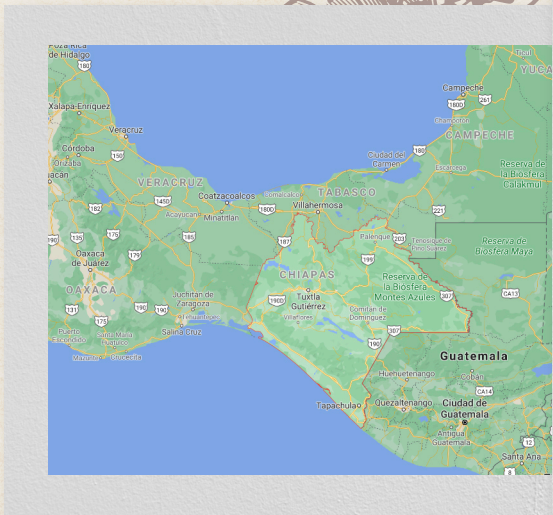


ENSAMBLES IN CHIAPAS, MÉXICO

FLOR DE CAPITAN: INTRODUCING SPECIALTY COFFEE IN JALTENANGO, CHIAPAS

We call this project “The flower of Capitan”, in reference to what a producer in the Capitan region told us recently as we were discussing the fact that many growers choose to sell their land in order to buy a car or a tv – he said things should be bought from the flowers of the coffee tree, not from its roots.



ENSAMBLES
CAFÉS MEXICANOS

CALIDAD · EQUIDAD · SUSTENTABILIDAD · BIEN COMÚN

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Chiapas is the biggest coffee producing state in Mexico, providing roughly 40% of the country's total coffee production.

Located above Huehuetenango in Guatemala, the first plantations in Chiapas date back to the mid-19th century and originated from Guatemala.

Initially Chiapas was known for its large farms - typically owned by Europeans, who had settled in the country following the Second World War.

However, the Mexican Revolution in the 1920s led to a redistribution of those large farms, splitting up the land. Today, while there are still a few big plantations, most producers in Chiapas are small scale land owners with an average farm size of 3 hectares.



The great strength of coffee from Chiapas derives from its cultivation practices: most farms are polycultures and are located under shade. This type of agriculture creates great resilience and crops can be sustained with low external inputs.

Most coffee in Chiapas is organic, even though not all farms are members of an officially certified cooperative. This type of agriculture is environmentally friendly, but has costs in terms of productivity, making Chiapas - and Mexican coffee in general - not very price competitive compared to monoculture countries such as Brazil or Colombia. However, Chiapas certainly wins out on low ecological impact.

Today Chiapas is known for its cooperative system offering mainly high volume FTO coffees. Almost half of the small-scale producers in the region are members of a cooperative, with the goal of gaining better and more stable prices for their crops. Producers who are not affiliated with a cooperative are left with the sole option to sell to local intermediaries, called the "coyotes", who buy coffee by weight at the lowest possible price. Regardless of either approach, producers in Chiapas have never been incentivized to prioritize quality. A producer who takes extra care in their coffee, and offers a differentiated product (in terms of cup quality), cannot find an option on the local market place. Specialty coffee is in its infancy in Chiapas and Ensamblés aims at contributing to offering market access to producers of higher coffee quality.



ENSAMBLES
CAFÉS MEXICANOS

CALIDAD · EQUIDAD · SUSTENTABILIDAD · BIEN COMÚN

THE PROJECT

There are 12 coffee regions within Chiapas. Ensembles has chosen to focus on the region with some of the highest altitudes: Ángel Albino Corzo - sometimes called Jaltenango in reference to its main town. Coffee farms can be found up to 1900 meters above sea level. The harvest season lasts from January to April. In Jaltenango, producers grow many of the traditional varieties: typica, bourbon, and the local peñasco. We also chose this region because most coffee farms are in the buffer zone of the UNESCO protected biosphere reserve of Triunfo Verde.

In this region of Chiapas, producers deliver their dry parchment to the main coffee trading hubs, Jaltenango being one of them. We decided to partner with a small-size organization in Jaltenango, named Capitan (400 members is small for a cooperative in Chiapas). Capitan staff know almost all producers in the area of Jaltenango, mainly spread in four municipalities: Ángel Albino Corzo, Capitán Luis A. Vidal, La Concordia and Montecristo de Guerrero.

This knowledge allows us to map out and directly access all producers, which was the baseline of our agreement with Capitan. For Capitan, Ensembles is offering a different market for some of the coffees, allowing their members to sell their crop at a better price if they decide to enter the specialty market. Capitan strives towards offering a market for all coffees: from the lowest to the highest quality. It is very important for producers to have all those options, because not all coffee coming from a farm will be of exceptional quality - there will always be a mix of qualities.

Ensembles has set up a lab in Jaltenango where we can evaluate all incoming lots into the Capitan warehouse. This way we can identify the different qualities, the main challenges against quality, and help to accompany producers towards quality, if they wish to. Most organizations, cooperatives and producers have never heard of a cupping in this region. This is a very new coffee buying dynamic, and we are dedicated to making a change and bringing Chiapas to the specialty coffee map.

Of the 422 members of Capitan we made a pre-selection based on altitude and varieties and ended up cupping lots from 188 producers in the area, of which 71 resulted in a coffee scoring 84+.



ENSAMBLES
CAFÉS MEXICANOS

CALIDAD · EQUIDAD · SUSTENTABILIDAD · BIEN COMÚN

CHALLENGES

Most of the labor force in Chiapas comes from Guatemala. In 2021, two factors drastically reduced labor during the harvest: firstly, COVID-19 prevented Guatemalans from travelling, and secondly, the Guatemalan Quetzal became strong against the Mexican Peso, disincentivizing Guatemalans from traveling and working in Chiapas this year. This means a lot of coffee was left to dry on the tree in 2021, and production is down this year by an estimate of 30%. This shortage of labor affected mostly the bigger farms, but it had an impact on the local price, which went up, making Chiapas coffee even less competitive in the international market.

The second main challenge in Chiapas for cup quality is the mix of varieties with different genetics. In 2012 leaf rust hit the region severely. Despite the agroecological practices, the fungus hit the Mexican farms because trees are old and very little attended in terms of pruning (passive organic). The response of the Mexican government was to give away free plants of timor-derived varieties.

This resulted in a short-term relief for farmers, but it turns out those varieties are not designed for agroecological farming practices, and after a few years their productivity lowers drastically, with many cherries only producing one bean instead of two. Producers usually have a mix of varieties now in their farms, and even though new hybrids can yield decent cup scores, they require a different maturation level for picking and a different processing than traditional varieties such as typicas and bourbons (because of different sugar contents).

We address this by encouraging picking of particular varieties together, and advising the renovation of farms with traditional varieties and a shift towards active organic practices.

Another challenge is that, because there have never been any incentives for quality in the region, post-harvest practices are very rustic: no floating, short fermentation times and coffee dried on plastic under full sun. Our field team works with producers to change some of those practices so that the quality of the coffee is not majorly negatively impacted during the post-harvest.

We hope you can accompany us with this project and contribute towards introducing specialty coffee to the producers of Jaltenango.



ENSAMBLES
CAFÉS MEXICANOS

CALIDAD · EQUIDAD · SUSTENTABILIDAD · BIEN COMÚN