

ENSAMBLES IN LA CAÑADA, OAXACA

TEJAO: INTRODUCING SPECIALTY COFFEE IN LA MAZATECA

Tejao is the original name of the town of Huautla, the epicenter of our project. In Mazateco, it means twelve, the number of people who first arrived in this mountainous area to settle.



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CULTURAL CONTEXT IN LA MAZATECA:

La Mazateca is located in the northern part of La Cañada, a region in the state of Oaxaca, famous for its coffee. La Cañada benefits from an incredible diversity of climates, receiving currents from both the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans. La Mazateca is the highest part of La Cañada, with coffee farms located between 1500 and 1900 meters above sea level (masl).

This altitude and cold climate results in a much later harvest (Feb to April) compared to other parts of Mexico. Cherries in La Mazateca take longer to mature, resulting in a high potential area for very sweet and complex coffees.



3 languages are popularly spoken in La Mazateca: principally Mazateco, the indigenous language still widely spoken and taught to children.

Secondly, through whistling, a way of communicating that has been in use for centuries in order to communicate from one mountain to another, using echo.

Thirdly, Spanish, which the young generation - having emigrated in large numbers to the cities for work - can now speak.

Coffee is the main agricultural product of the region, but low prices and poor business perspectives have drastically reduced the numbers of producers in the past 20 years.

Nowadays, the main income stream in La Mazateca comes from the government, through the salaries of the many teachers employed in the area, and subsidies to farmers. The second biggest income stream is the money earned by young people in the cities, such as Mexico City and Puebla, sent back to their families.



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COFFEE CULTIVATION CONTEXT:

The main town of La Mazateca is Huautla de Jimenez. Coffee farming communities are between 1 and 3 hours away, by car, on dirt roads. Typically, a producer's farm is a 1 to 2 hour walk from their house (no road access), meaning coffee pickers transport bags of freshly harvested cherries on their shoulders, or by donkeys/horses.

Due to a high altitude, the region has not suffered significantly from Coffee Leaf Rust (roya), a dangerous and infamous fungal pathogen. As a result, La Mazateca maintains its historical cultivation of typica, a variety which is becoming very rare within Latin America due to its susceptibility to roya.

Coffee is traditionally fully washed and sold to local buyers in dry parchment. Local buyers purchase coffee by weight. These buyers don't measure humidity levels, don't cup the coffees, and mix all incoming lots together to sell in volume to large buyers, who are looking for the cheapest possible coffee.

Coffee cultivation is very largely organic. Producers fabricate their own organic fertilizers in their farms or homes. Farms all feature shade-grown coffee. The farms maintain a culture of minimal intervention; producers are quite reluctant towards pruning, and are proud of their 2-3 meter-high, 40-year-old typica trees.

Producers own, on average, 1-3 hectares of land. Productivity is extremely low, at 2-3 bags per hectare - in other countries, Colombia for example, the average is 20-25 bags per hectare. This low productivity is due to the varietal, Typica, which is typically low yielding, and more affected by disease. The lack of pruning and general farm renovation within Mazateca, also greatly contributes to this extremely low productivity per hectare.

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THE PROJECT:

Given the cold climate conditions, cultivation of traditional varieties, and organic practices, Ensamble has decided to invest in this region and give value to the beautiful coffees and hard-working farmers, through the introduction of a specialty coffee focus.

We aim at providing farmers a more hopeful perspective for their crop by paying better prices, and by revealing the pathway to higher cupping coffees.

In March 2021, we set up a warehouse for receiving dry parchment directly from producers, and a laboratory for evaluating the coffees instantly and giving feedback to producers.

The vast majority of producers in this region had never even heard of cupping and yield calculation, and have never seen a humidity reader – equipment and concepts so obvious to specialty coffee professionals in consuming countries.

We are introducing a new dynamic for coffee buying, with premiums for cup quality, lot separation and the guarantee of full traceability.

This requires a team of 10 people between the warehouse and laboratory. Ensamble is lucky to be working with local people from Huautla, most of whom know the coffee producing community and speak Mazateco. We regularly host producers in the lab and show them our processes, such that they can become familiar.

Ensamble has also endeavored to train young local agricultural students within our lab. Our staff supports the transport of coffee, from remote communities to the warehouse, when producers are unable to access a vehicle. Finally, most of our staff is from the Union de Comunidades Huautlecas (UCH), a local association focusing on community welfare.

Their most recent endeavor was to collect funds and build 200 houses in coffee farming communities.



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MAIN CHALLENGES OF SPECIALTY COFFEE

IN LA MAZATECA:

The main challenge of buying specialty coffee in this region is the high humidity level, due to very cold overnight temperatures.

Many producers have to bring their partially dried coffee into their homes overnight, so that it does not re-humidify. We have educated producers that coffees should be dried to 11% humidity, which is higher than common practice (usually 12-13%).

For specialty roasters, a more thoroughly dried coffee is a guarantee of longevity, for a producer it means less weight, which we compensate through better prices per kg. Regardless, this change requires a lot of effort, communication and a changing of habits. As soon as the dry parchment reaches our warehouse at the perfect humidity, we seal it within GrainPro bags.

The second challenge is yield, which is the percentage of exportable coffee derived from the parchment. Because no incentive has ever been given to farmers for quality, yields are very low in the region, meaning that it is more difficult and costly to mill. In La Mazateca, more parchment is required to make a bag of exportable green than in other regions.

We hope you can accompany us in this journey, from La Mazateca to coffee drinkers across the world, Xt'alanga!



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