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Guardians of the Future

Part I of *Tea & Coffee Trade Journal's* three-part series on Colombia discussed the increase in the country's domestic coffee consumption. Part II looks closely at Colombia's new generation of coffee growers. Not only are they avid coffee consumers, they are outfitted with the capabilities to rise to the challenges of producing Colombian coffee in the 21st century. [By Rachel Northrop](#)





A generation ago, being a coffee producer in Colombia was fairly straightforward: you grew coffee on your land, sold your coffee, and went about raising a family and living your life. That reality has become an image of the past. Being a coffee grower in Colombia today means navigating unpredictable weather, arming your property and plants against the unprecedented pests and plagues that accompany shifts in climate, deciding how much of your land to renovate with new varieties, reacting to drastic price spikes and dips, and learning to incorporate technologies from iPads to Brix refractometers into your daily operations.

The challenge of growing coffee in Colombia in the 21st century is the responsibility of a new generation, a generation that considers themselves entrepreneurs, inventors, polyglots and environmental stewards as much as coffee farmers.

Coffee & a New Type of Education

Colombia's School and Coffee Program is a form of education that delivers academic instruction pertinent to future coffee growers. The format is supported by the Colombian Coffee Growers Federation (FNC) in conjunction with Secretariats of Education in several Colombian departments. "In the rural primary and secondary schools we're helping youth develop knowledge, through curricula starting in grade school and continuing through model farms at the secondary level, which they can implement on their parents' properties," said Luis F. Samper, chief communications and marketing officer with the FNC, Bogotá, Colombia. "This has been our model framework, which has been replicated across various coffee growing departments with much success."

The FNC represents 563,000 coffee growing families, all with multiple children. This constitutes a rising generation of several million, each of whom seeks access to education in order to produce coffee in today's global society. "The School and Coffee Program has so far

benefitted 39,992 students in 323 schools across Colombia," said Samper. "The program has also built and outfitted 89 new schools that will reach 14,000 students."

Department of Antioquia

The task of educating the next generation of coffee growers is a complex one that requires reaching the most remote regions of the country and becomes successful when national programs, like those promoted by the FNC, are layered with departmental and regional programs.

From June 16 to 20th, 1,000 15 to 25-year old coffee growers from 80 municipalities across the Department of Antioquia assembled in the small town of San Jerónimo for a week of "coffee camp," where they attended classes in barista beverage preparation, roasting, cupping, commercialization, processing, fertilization, seedling nurseries and plant genetics.

As part of the Antioquia La Mas Educada initiative, Antioquia's Governor Sergio Fajardo Valderrama, prioritizes equipping young coffee growers with the informational tools and skills for success. "Education is the motor for transformation—education with science, technology, innovation, leadership, empowerment and culture," said Governor Fajardo.



(Left) Students at St. Francis of Assisi primary school in Antioquia showcase their coffee seedlings. (Above) Students germinate coffee seeds.

Yenny Velasquez, with Antioquia's Specialty Coffee Program, said that this all started because Governor Fajardo heard about people in Africa sharing online videos of best agricultural practices. "He said, 'Let's see if we can do something like that.' But we had to take a step back and ask, 'How would people connect to start sharing? How can they upload videos if they don't have computers, internet, or even electricity in their towns? How do people decide what is a good practice, anyway?' From that initial idea we worked backwards, and the New Generation of Coffee Growers (NGC) camp was born," she explained.

Tea & Coffee Trade Journal was invited to the camp to see firsthand the enthusiasm with which young coffee growers embraced the diverse yet coffee-centric education. The content of the camp's seminars explained what "best practices" are and why they matter, connecting actions taken in the field to outcomes in the roasting drum and on the cupping table.

Brayan Leandro Montoya Rueda is a 17-year old from the municipality of Urrao. "My responsibility, as a teenager, is to study. When I do have time, I help my parents with their work on our eight-hectare farm. My mom and I also make artisan crafts to sell, to help pay for costs of schools. I'm entering 11th grade."

"As young people, we can change the concepts that we have, region by region, neighborhood by neighborhood. It's our job to go out and replicate what we learn here. We can inspire others to have a greater awareness and to do things more effectively," he said.

Leide Tatiana Cartagena Valderrama, 22, lives in the Alejandria municipality. "We have a family farm of 2.5 hectares, and there's another lot that I'm buying. I graduated high school and am currently studying agricultural systems at the university. At the NGC camp, I've learned about things I had no prior knowledge of, like what happens to coffee after we sell it and why it's important to understand cupping—you have to know what your coffee tastes like! I see coffee as one of the best agricultural products to guarantee



Through a program developed with CRS, students learn academic and agricultural skills.

our family's stability. I think that coffee can guarantee well-being on a personal and familial level."

Governor Fajardo is building Educational Parks in 80 of Antioquia's rural communities so that people don't have to abandon agricultural enterprises in order to access technology, communication, and education that allows them to make decisions as informed as those made by people in cities. "We're creating Educational Parks to build hope; to restore people's capacity to dream," said Fajardo.

Tea & Coffee visited the construction of the Educational Park in the municipality of Titiribí, an agricultural community where young coffee growers like Robinson Alejandro Rostre Pocano are indeed daring to dream. "Before the NGC camp I also took the Coffee Career course (offered collaboratively by the Government of Antioquia and local coffee co-ops) where they gave us a home roasting kit. Right now I'm working on a plan to start selling roasted coffee by the pound," said Rostre.

Department of Caldas

Lukas Meza, age 29, has traveled internationally, speaks conversational English and is a sci-fi film buff. He is nothing like the traditional image of a mustached coffee farmer with a wide-brimmed hat and mule in tow, but he is every bit a Colombian coffee farmer. Meza belongs to the new generation of coffee farmers who inhabit multiple identities and arrived at the vocation of coffee growing via unconventional paths.

"My family's coffee farm is located in Chinchiná. I've studied here and at the University in Manizales, and also in Medellin, and Buenos Aires, Argentina. I wasn't born with a calling to be a coffee producer; I've always been drawn to science and art, especially astronomy and music," said Meza. "My father, who was



Tents where 1,000 attendees of the New Generation of Coffee Growers camp in Antioquia slept.



An FNC Extensionist teaches a seminar at the week-long education and agricultural training camp.

in charge of the farm, suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and was unable to continue working. Naturally, as I'm his only son, the responsibility fell into my hands."

When Meza started managing the farm, it didn't have a formal cost structure. "Thanks to new internal accountability, I've developed strategies to maxi-

mize efficiency and improve the cost-benefit relationship of producing coffee," he said. Meza can also fully trace all the coffee his farm produces so he knows which lot it came from, what its characteristics are, "and I can then continue to improve both quality and yield."

"I've renovated 40 percent of the

farm with leaf rust-resistant varieties. Nevertheless, I think that my biggest contribution to modernizing Colombian coffee growing has to do with a change in mindset towards sustainable coffee production and an ecological consciousness that prior generations didn't have," said Meza.

The FNC is also supporting the Rural University program in Caldas. In June, 11 high school students earned Professional Certificates as part of a pilot project with the University of Caldas. The program brings the university to the students, allowing them to attend classes on weekends right in their rural communities and graduate high school with one year of university education completed.

Department of Nariño

In Colombia's southern Department of Nariño, along the border with Ecuador, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is working to address some of the particular challenges facing rural producers in one of the country's most violent regions.

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“Young coffee producers in Nariño face extreme poverty, dangers of *coca* production, food insecurity, and lack of incentives for coffee production,” said Andrés Montenegro, program manager of the CRS Borderlands Coffee Project in Colombia.

To address these challenges with a holistic approach, CRS partnered with the local St. Francis of Assisi primary school to develop a program bridging the divide between formal academic education and agricultural skills typically gleaned over years in the field.

“CRS, through the Borderlands Coffee Project, strongly believes that a focus on generating new capabilities, aptitudes and attitudes is required in order to help producers access the competitive coffee market. The strategy with St. Francis is an initiative that involves school children in basic activities related to their farm—such as planting coffee nurseries and animal breeding—and creates a bridge with formal education,” said Montenegro. “Students learn basic contents with applied exercises; the school is a laboratory of learning by doing. Students sell their products within their communities and perform a cost analysis of their experience.”

The classroom and the coffee fields become mutually supportive rather than mutually exclusive, demonstrating to the youngest members of Colombia’s new coffee growing generation that education and agriculture both flourish when developed in tandem.

“These activities are the seeds of a new culture in the Colombian coffee lands. CRS has created a partnership with the



(Left) New Generation of Coffee Growers (NGC) camp attendees cupping coffee for the first time. (Right) Antioquia’s Governor Sergio Fajardo Valderrama visits with an NGC camp attendee.

University of Nariño and the National Learning Service (SENA), in order to connect the students of the St. Francis program with formal education. The University of Nariño now offers a professional certificate in specialty coffee. Currently, 140 young coffee growers are enrolled in this course, which is 100 percent subsidized by the central government for students with minimal financial resources,” said Montenegro.

New Landholders, Renewed Commitment

Another model project managed by the FNC is Young Coffee Innovators, in which 100 coffee growers between 18 and 35-years old from nine departments received training, guidance, and capital to revitalize family coffee properties.

“The program developed different models of intervention to permit young coffee growers to close the generation gap

in coffee communities with limited economic resources,” said Samper. “Over the course of the project 500 hectares of coffee farms were renovated and 24 farms entered the hands of young coffee growers through new bank loans. These were producers who, before the pilot project, had no possible access to credit.”

Owning land is one of the hallmarks of Colombian coffee growing, and the mountains of Colombia are making their way into the hands of a new generation who will use that land to not only grow coffee, but to run coffee growing businesses that are economically and environmentally sustainable and shaped by the educated intent of their owners.

Colombia’s next generation of coffee growers, like Brayan Leandro, are ready to carry that torch. “I think that things done with dedication are the most meaningful. I am Colombian coffee. It’s what I carry in my blood, and it’s a passion.” ☕

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