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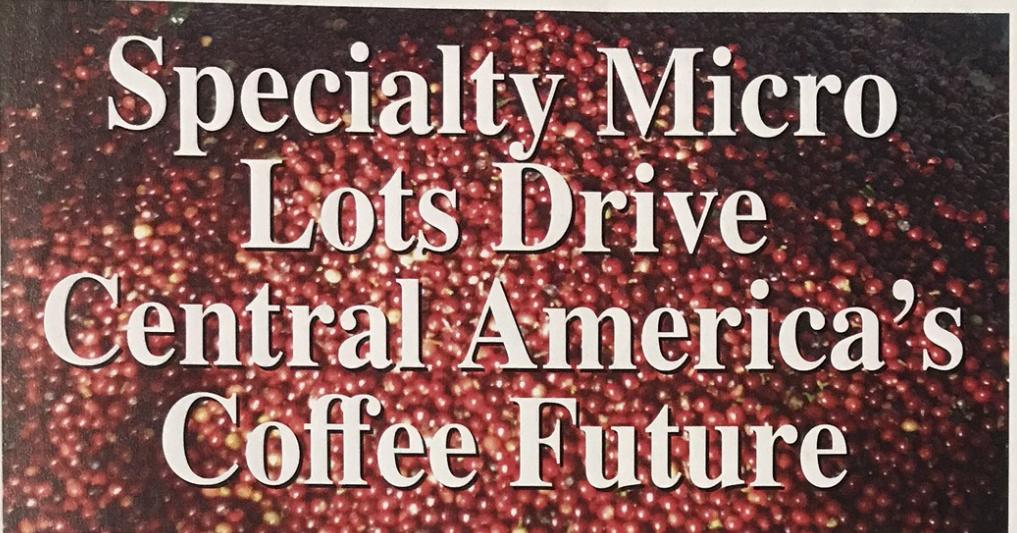
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Specialty Micro Lots Drive Central America's Coffee Future

Specialty coffee buyers prefer to have coffees that aren't going to be available to other roasters in order to offer uniqueness on top of quality.

Coffee producers in Central America are driving the trend of processing small lots of specialty coffee in specialized micro mills, facilities recently constructed to deliver superior quality and specific cup profiles to discerning buyers in North America, Europe and Asia.

Catalyzed in almost equal parts by the demand of roasters seeking uniqueness through direct trade partnerships and the coffee leaf rust epidemic that eliminated much of the region's commercial production, this trend signifies a changing of the guard. Producers of middle quality are struggling to keep pace with rising costs of production, mounting social pressures, and climate change. Small holders who are able to meet buyers' steep demands by innovating and responding to escalating challenges, are the ones who are driving the shape of Central America's coffee future.

Two case studies from El Salvador and Costa Rica offer perspectives of members of producing families who now own and work for importing companies in Europe.

Rodolfo Ruffatti Batlle runs the coffee import company Ruffatti Batlle in Berlin. He and his family business cultivate coffee in El Salvador and also work with other coffee producers, from buying fresh cherry to dry milling, to sourcing parchment and green coffee. Ruffatti has seen many troubling changes in El Salvador's coffee industry over the last five years. Deforestation for low-income housing has wiped out lower coffee plantations and eliminated the old growth forests that formerly protected shade grown coffee. But, Ruffatti also sees noteworthy emergences.

"The rise of Chalatenango/Metapan is one of the few positive developments in recent years. As Chalatenango had no real coffee production until recently, there are no big mills – you had to learn to process coffee yourself. Many farmers

Savvy small-holder producers who are able to meet buyers' demands for specialty micro lot coffee, while properly managing mounting challenges, are driving the shape of Central America's coffee future.

By Rachel Northrop

from Chalatenango won Cup of Excellence, which brought the attention of specialty buyers. Now more producers are planting varietals like Pacamara [desired by specialty micro roasters] and processing their own cherries."

However, climate does not always collaborate with farmer effort. "At the cupping table this harvest, coffees were generally two points down from their average over the past few years. The flavours were less intense; likely because of recent drought and from the effects of coffee leaf rust.

The trees are full of triazoles fungicides used to combat rust, making them weak and susceptible to a post-rust fungus, which causes anthracnose. The fungus starts at the tip of branches and dries up whatever beans it passes through as it goes down the branch, leaving shrivelled black beans. There was also not enough rain [early in the growing season], another detriment to bean development."

El Salvador's micro lots might not be cupping as astronomically as in the past few harvests, and much of Ruffatti's work as an importer in Europe is to explain these factors to buyers.

Added Costs of Micro Lot Coffee

Marianela Montero is from a coffee-producing family in Tarrazú, Costa Rica and works as the project coordinator for specialty importer Nordic Approach in Oslo, Sweden. Her role ▶

involves building containers of micro lots by cupping hundreds of submitted lots from regional producers in order to consolidate coffees that all meet the same strident quality standards expected by Europe's specialty roasters.

"For us, quality is important," said Montero, "but if we see there is passion, commitment, loyalty and hard work from farmers we will look at these other attributes as well. Part of the project in Costa Rica is to make both sides – farmers and roasters – understand the costs and expectations of the other. Producers have to know that specialty pricing is based on quality – how the coffee is cupping. It can be also hard for buyers, especially if their first concern is price, to understand farmers' situations, such as having to travel long distances to a shared dry mill to complete processing."

Creating boutique micro lots is an expensive undertaking for producers, and there are many added costs to operating a micro mill versus selling to a larger, less specialized processing operation, costs that have to be translated to buyers.

"Most of our customers are small roasters; entrepreneurs looking for great coffees," Montero said. "In Costa Rica, they see a more developed and safe country compared with other origins."

Buyers are attracted to countries they can visit safely. A major component of the direct trade movement in specialty coffee is for a single roasting company to be the exclusive purchaser of an entire lot (or even a full harvest) from one farm. The roaster then exercises a certain level of influence over the production or processing of that lot, sometimes advising producers which varietals to plant and what drying methods to adopt.

Costa Rica is indeed a safer, easier place to develop this kind of symbiotic sourcing relationship, particularly when contrasted with Ruffatti's account of a recent, but far from isolated, occurrence near his family's farm in El Salvador.

"A band of thieves broke into the farmhouse, tied up the farm administrator and his family, and stole tools and fertilizer. How do you setup a micro mill under these conditions?" Ruffatti asked.

Whereas Montero noted, "This year Nordic Approach will host several trips for customers so they can understand and support our Costa Rica Project." Central American coffee production will continue to evolve, even given the challenging circumstances that surround its production, because the resulting coffees, as eager buyers demonstrate, are still worth it. ☕