

# EL SALVADOR

BY DAVID LATOURELL

Was I prepared? No. Seriously. I wasn't prepared. We'd just spent a very long weekend at Coffee Fest Washington, D.C., serving coffee off the Clover. Every morning at 7 a.m. Oucht! Then, at 4 a.m. the morning of my trip, I receive the automated call from the airline, "Your flight to San Salvador has been cancelled." I'm packing my bags and jumping in a cab 20 minutes later, off to Reagan National—oddly fitting. The question is, can I make the 6 a.m. flight? So, really, when I arrive in El Salvador, am I prepared?

First impressions: the colors saturating the landscape are crazy. That stack of coconuts on the right is larger than a lean-to. The number of people in the back of that pickup just can't be safe.

If only my posture were good enough to carry that entire stack of wood on my head. Dogs. Dogs everywhere.

I love real traffic and am pleased to learn that San Salvador loves real traffic, too: hair-raising, hell-fire, horn honking, get-the-@#\*-out-of-my-way traffic. The hour drive straight up from the oceanside airport to the hotel takes us past villages, enormous shanty-towns on the outskirts of the city, and new development—malls with an array of sadly familiar fast-food joints. Pulling into the Radisson Hotel, the state of affairs is crystal clear: eight-foot walls topped with razor wire and closed circuit cameras. But it is lovely inside. We'll be living this dichotomy out for the next week.

Our little group is an eclectic mix of folks brought together by our good friends at Café Imports: Aussies, Memphians, Minnesotans, and me, the lone Seattleite. We represent different aspects of the industry, with roaster/retailers, wholesale roasters, equipment manufacturers, importers. The differences bode well for the coffee-related conversations to come, especially once you add in our new Salvadoran friends. We waste no time. The fabulous Patricia Valiente (Itzalco) arrives to sweep us off to our first stop: Viva Espresso. Owners Federico & Lily Pacas de Bolaños have a lot to be proud of. Not only is Lily, the reigning Salvadoran barista champion, looking forward to going



**We've all heard from friends how incredible it is to see coffee growing up close, in person, for the first time, but words don't do justice.**

to Copenhagen to compete in the World Barista Championship this June, but their micro-roastery/retail shop is producing the kind of quality most outlets at home only dream of. They're roasting the highest-quality coffee from their own farm, and it showed in the macchiato I ordered from the line baristas.

The next morning is early, but thankfully not 4 a.m. early. We have a lot to learn about Salvadoran coffee, and Ricardo Espitia, executive director of the Consejo Salvadoreño del Café, is just the man to start us on our way. Charting the path of coffee anywhere is political, but in El Salvador the twists of political fate are extreme. At exactly the time specialty coffee consumption was coming into its own in North America, El Salvador was going

through a protracted civil war. The relationships built in the Eighties and Nineties by neighboring countries' coffee producers just weren't available to Salvadorans. Yet, Unintended Consequence is the strange bedfellow of War. While other nations were replanting to lower-quality varieties such as Caturra and Catuai, Salvadoran coffee farmers were forced to leave their heritage Bourbon trees in place; over two-thirds of the country's plantations are planted with Bourbon, with Pacas and Pacamara representing the remainder. (And yes, that's Pacas, as in Lily Pacas.)

Now that we've had our history lesson, it's time to get our hands dirty. We hop into our ride, Linea Ejecutiva, and head north to the Santa Ana region. We're accompanied again by Patricia Valiente and also Karla Urias, the trading manager of COEX and current president of Itzalco, a producer association focused on premium coffees. Little did the poor women know, but I can be as tiresome as all get out. (No commentary, please!) Seriously, they must have felt the Spanish Inquisition was back with the number of questions I asked. And they answered and answered and answered—for two days straight. They outlined the convoluted public/private partnerships that make up the Salvadoran coffee landscape. They talked about the different forms of cooperatives, both private

and land reform. They described what life was like during the civil war, for themselves and for the families on their farms. They tried as best they could to unravel the mystery of Quintales, the unit of measure that varies depending on what moment you ask: at picking, at washing, at export. And on and on.

Our first farm was Dr. Mariano Salazar's Altos del Condor, the famous Bourbon Jungle.

Dr. Salazar is rewriting the rules of agronomy with the practices of El Condor: no longer pruning, using 100 percent organic fertilizer, tying or laying down trees to force upward growth—all fascinating experiments with amazing results on quality. He's not being followed by a large contingent of growers yet, though. As with all transitions away from dependence on petrochemicals, yields drop significantly. We talked about root growth and old vine production in the wine industry, noting the direct corollary to the 80-year-old Bourbon trees he has on his plantation: limited production, but amazing cup quality.

Our first mill visit was a COEX facility that processes their premium offerings. The mill was impressive in size, technology and organization. We were offered a cupping of an array of coffees that pass through the mill, as well as others from Itzalco partners. Especially instructive for me was to listen to the Consejo's master cupper, Jorge Escobar, describe each of the offerings and his previous experiences of them. He cups lot after lot from the same farm, learning the subtle nuances of the landscape through the cup. We stayed on to watch the beginning of the all-night washing, as the trucks pulled up one after the other—well that, and to eat pupusas, traditional Salvadoran stuffed masa cakes, drink beers and dance to a fabulous marimba band at the mill.

The next day's question: does Emily Naber Spende of Café Imports know how to organize an event effectively? Anybody who remembers Café Imports' party at the Specialty Coffee Association of America conference in Long Beach, Calif., knows she sure as hell does. How better for a group of gringos to understand the importance of shade and the forest canopy than to actually experience it first hand. So after our canopy tour, complete with zip lines and dizzying heights, our next stop is straight up to one of the land-reform co-ops, San Rafael. I said "up" deliberately, as we found the last of the picking happening at 1800 meters, clinging to

the steep edges of the volcano, Aguila. The differences in experience between the privately owned and cooperatively owned farms are large indeed, and noted also in the political signage seen at each—something an American can only squirm at when considering U.S. foreign policy over the decades. We were told the average monthly earnings would be in the \$100-per-month range at San

### The culture of El Salvador goes way beyond coffee. Here, we watched a loom work and meet the people who have kept the craft alive for centuries.

Rafael. This was 50 percent less than we were lead to believe for several workers on the private farms visited, though how representative these numbers actually are, I have no idea. The day is already done, and our muscles assure us that the canopy tour and endless 4x4 trekking up and down volcanoes have taken their toll on both bodies and time.

Our next two days are with the inimitable Marco Batres and his wife and business partner Teresa Giammettei de Batres. We are in the hands of professional hosts. Our setting is their Santa Teresa farm, which sits atop geothermal springs. These springs have an amazing set of uses—functioning

not only as pools for the destination tourist spot under development, but also for the washing and drying of Batres Family coffees. The following days are a non-stop tour of farm after farm: Altamira, Tazumal, Monte Carlo, Los Nogales. We also tour the Bendix mill founded by his grandfather. Here we have a cupping. Again, incredibly instructive! This time we have our own experience of terrain, as the Tazumal lots are separated out by altitude. We also have a chance to cup an experimental lot of natural processed coffee, picked and sorted to perfection (10 bags of which may arrive at Café Imports' door, hint, hint). This and a Pacamara are the highlights, both well over 90 points.

Then, on our next to last day, I receive an amazing text message. Alistair Durie of Elystan Coffee in Vancouver, B.C., has no idea I'm on tour in El Salvador, but his company won this year's Clover-at-Origin prize as our best reseller. He's been working for months to find the perfect spot for the Clover. After much debate, he's finally chosen: the Salvadoran Coffee Council's School of Coffee. I cannot tell you how pleased am I to call Ricardo and tell him the news. We've had an incredible trip, we've learned an enormous amount, and now we have the opportunity to repay our debt just a little. **b**

### Going to the beach in El Salvador was an experience in fish smells.

