

COFFEE TALK



Costa Rica

By Miles Small

Costa Rica is best understood by defining what it is not.

Understanding Costa Rica means that first you have to get your arms around the astonishing fact that the country has no standing army, unlike its more volatile neighbors. It is not wracked by the financial ruin of violent upheaval. If anything, the people of Costa Rica, Ticos, take enormous pride that they have managed to avoid most of the wars and conflicts that have ravaged the rest of Central America.

By Central American standards, it is rich. Costa Rica enjoys the highest standard of living in Central America. No war, strong social programs, profitable exports and tourism, all join to make the country a safe, stable, and progressive place to live.

It is not illiterate. Costa Rica requires compulsory Primary education for all school age children. 97% of Costa Ricans can read and most in the urban areas are multi-lingual to some degree. (an effect of tourism)

The coffee areas are accessible by good roads and the co-op towns and rural villages are prosperous, bustling, and happy. Neat, cared for homes with antennas on the roof and cars in the yard. In fact, the level of prosperity in the rural communities is the most startling feature of all. Compared to other Central American coffee growing regions, the co-op towns of Costa Rica seem like utopia.

No guns, no turista police, no edgy sense of violent tension. For those among us that thrive on the 'Ernest Hemingway' appeal of

traveling to coffee lands, Costa Rica will seem like a trip to a Disney World of Coffee. Lots of jungle, bird and animal noises in the canopy, dignified and happy workers, but no real danger.

For those others among us that believe our real job is to identify and deliver some of the world's greatest coffee in the world, even if it means staying in a four star hotel, then Costa Rica is the place to go.

Coffee has been grown here since the 1700's. Almost devoid of mineral wealth, the Spaniard Conquistadors planted coffee to challenge the near monopoly of the Dutch. For the area that eventually became Costa Rica, the Spanish decided it was 'mostly harmless' and ignored it. Except for some notable exceptions, this is pretty much how things continue today.

Costa Rica became official in 1824 when the province of Gaunacaste-Nicoya was annexed from Nicaragua and the borders were established. Juan Mora Fernandez became the first elected head of state, and the country quickly moved to distance itself from the violent upheavals racing across Central America. Costa Ricans today take great pride in the successful conclusion of one of the most bizarre incidents in Central American history.

Taken straight from a script of the 'Wild, Wild, West' TV series, in 1855 an American named William Walker arrived in Nicaragua with a private army intent on conquering all of Central America and enslaving the population in order to build an East-West canal across Nicaragua. Upon conquering Nicaragua, Walker headed south to take Costa Rica. Having no standing army, a citizen's militia of 9000 rose up to face the challenge. In February of 1856, this citizen's army faced and defeated Walker, giving

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Ninety-two percent of Costa Rica's coffee growers have less than 12 acres of coffee plantation; as a whole, their farms account for 44% of the total coffee-growing area of the country. Six percent have between 12 and 50 acres, representing 21% of the total coffee-growing area, and 2% have plantations of over 50 acres, representing 35% of the land planted in coffee. Coffee growers mostly plant short, high-yield crops such as Caturra and Cataui, which account for over 90% of the coffee grown in the country.

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Great Restaurants Serving Great Coffee

Past articles in this series have addressed many problems plaguing the quality of coffee served in America's restaurants and made some suggestions of the first steps that should be taken to resolve them. We now shift our focus away from the current gloomy state of everyday restaurant coffee reality and move onward to showcase and learn from four rare, shining examples of restaurant coffee excellence.

Despite offering different fare, sometimes opposing styles and being geographically separated by distances of up to 3,500 miles, these role model restaurants have more than a few things in common: each is a successful and profitable venture, each enjoys a loyal following as a result of its consistently outstanding performance, and most important for our purposes here, each has made coffee an important part of its business.

Zingerman's Roadhouse

In 1982, Ari Weinzwieg and Paul Saginaw founded a small delicatessen in an historic building near a local farmers' market with a mission to serve flavorful, traditionally made foods. The deli got its start with a staff of two, a small selection of specialty foods, a host of traditional Jewish dishes and a relatively short sandwich menu. But this was to be no simple deli: Zingerman's Delicatessen, the Ann Arbor, Michigan institution was born.

A quarter century later, Zingerman's is one of America's best-known delicatessens and the cornerstone of a thriving enterprise of eight unique businesses that collectively generate a more than \$22 million in annual sales and have earned Zingerman's national recognition as "Specialty Food Retailer of the Year" by Gourmet News and "Coolest Small Company in America" by Inc. Magazine.

The Zingerman's philosophy holds true at Zingerman's Roadhouse, Zingerman's full-service restaurant that specializes in regional American cuisine, or simply "good American comfort food" explains General Manager Ric Jewel. "Coffee is a vital part of the meal; it's an important piece of American culture and food history."

The Roadhouse enjoys the benefit of having their own custom blend of coffee roasted fresh daily by sister-business Zingerman's Coffee Company – itself, a nationally recognized wholesale artisan coffee roaster. The Roadhouse Joe blend has become a top seller at Zingerman's locations and also for their mail order business.

Coffee is held in the same high regard as all other menu items at Zingerman's

Roadhouse and is prominently featured in new and ongoing employee training curriculum. Ric routinely looks for staff members that have a keen interest and demonstrated mastery in coffee preparation to identify internal specialists that serve espresso and specialty coffee drinks.

When asked what customers have to say about the coffee served at the Roadhouse, Jewel responds, "More than half of our clientele know Zingerman's other businesses and what our name represents before they walk in the door. They expect that the coffee they drink to be outstanding – they would only notice if it were anything less than spectacular."

The Angus Barn

Ms. Van Eure is the charismatic owner and manager of the Angus Barn, beefeater's icon of Raleigh, North Carolina for more than 45 years. A business co-founded by her father Thad Eure, Jr., the Angus Barn is open 7 days a week and serves from 400 to an astounding 1,500 meals daily to an eclectic crowd of business executives, ordinary folk and the Triangle-area's elite power brokers. Angus Barn's celebrated 30,000-bottle wine cellar attracts connoisseurs from around the region to fly in just for the experience.

Van's careful attention to every detail, adept management and legendary customer service focus has allowed her business to grow and become one of the top 100 grossing restaurants in America rated by Restaurant & Institutions Magazine and earned the Angus Barn hundreds of accolades, including prestigious Ivy, DiRöNA and Wine Spectator Grand awards, as well as, a spot in the Fine Dining Hall of Fame.

"Coffee is huge in this town," comments Ms. Eure, "almost every table orders it." "We've always served coffee, but in the last 10 years, it's really taken off. Customers are no longer satisfied with an average cup, they want specialty coffees and cappuccinos."

The Angus Barn maintains a close relationship with their specialty coffee roaster, Counter Culture Coffee of Durham, NC, who has developed a custom blend of coffee for their menu. The Angus Barn blend has been so popular that it is available for retail sale in the restaurant's country store.

Ms. Eure credits the performance of Counter Culture with the success of her coffee program, "Counter Culture is instrumental in training our employees to maintain high standards of quality and has truly become a part of our business." She applauds Counter Culture's dedication to environmental responsibility; having lived in Kenya for 5 years, Ms. Eure knows first-hand the effect that the coffee industry has on the world's environment and is committed to making a difference.

In the continuation next month, read the advice from owners of Anchorage, Alaska favorite, Snow City Café, and multiple James Beard award winner, The Magnolia Grill, along with my conclusions. *CT*

Andrew Hetzel is the Founder of Cafemakers, a specialty coffee business consultancy based in Hawaii. Cafemakers assists restaurants, hospitality businesses and coffee shops in North America and worldwide to improve customer satisfaction and profitability by serving better quality coffee. Information is available online at www.cafemakers.com or by calling (808) 443-0290.



Costa Rica, Dota, and the Roasters Guild

It might be more entertaining to wax poetic about the exotic jungles of Nicaragua, or the treacherous conditions of Dominican roads that (barely) tie together its coffee farms. We all want to believe we've gone to the ends of the earth in order to source our amazing selection of coffees. But sitting center stage in the Americas, as pretty as you please, with a thriving economy, a 98% literacy rate, and a healthy stream of eco-touristas, is Costa Rica. One of the first to forge a specialty coffee legacy with Arabica varieties, Costa Rica still produces some of the most elegant and lively coffees around. And while the many of us search far and wide for that tiny farm with an exclusive relationship, the large Costa Rican cooperative structure runs like clockwork and delivers consistent quality.

Set at almost the dead center of Costa Rica in the heart of the Tarrazu region, Dota Farm and Cooperative continues to thrive and set quality standards. Since its

inception in 1960, the farms and mills of Coopedota have, in many ways, become the model for all others in Central America. Through its work in the community, the galvanizing of members, and the pursuit of quality and sustainable solutions, Dota has been at the forefront of Costa Rica's specialty market.

Coopedota boasts more than 750 active members, (small family farms with an average production of 100 bags a year) and the involvement of roughly 85% of the overall community. The coop is able to return more than a half a million dollars to the growers every year, and on average, the producer will put 2.5% of that back into the development of his/her farm. The quality standard is, consequently, high enough to illicit claims from other coffees that are a "Dota Style" or "from the Dota region". It's the combination of shade and sun, as well as altitude and variety, that are responsible for the superior flavor of Dota, and steps taken toward sustainability here are integral to Dota's overall mission. For instance, any coffee pulp that isn't composted, is either dried by eco-efficient Bioflame systems and used for fuel, or metabolized in an experimental biodigester to create methane gas. Fertilizers are used sparingly and the crops seem to thrive under natural conditions. Surrounding shade trees are hosts to a wide array of delicate orchids- a sure sign that the environment is in balance here.

A dozen or so members of the Roasters Guild made their way to Costa Rica in late January to witness the tail end of Costa Rica's harvest and to learn, first hand, about cultivation and processing. Café de Costa Rica (ICAFE), the government agency that promotes and supports farms, regions, cooperatives and producers of coffee in Costa Rica, sponsored the trip. The group visited the regions of Tarrazu, Central Valley, Orosi and Turrialba. A cupping of the region concluded each day of tours, with an informal contest of "finalists" to be cupped on the last day. Guild members were not surprised to find Dota's coffee at the top of the list in that final round. Vowing to return to Costa Rica amid all their other more "adventurous" travels, the Roasters Guild has adopted this trip as necessary business. *CT*