



Santo Tomás Pachuj Nature Reserve at 4,300 feet to 7,000 feet above sea level



Coffee, a commodity as valuable as oil, and whose flavor is examined and critiqued like wine, touches almost everyone's daily life. Whether it is meeting up with a friend or discussing a business deal, the occasion is so much more at ease if it is done over a cup of coffee. But how much do we really know about coffee?

In La Taza, a coffee house in Charlottesville, Virginia, proprietor Melissa Easter introduced me to a fine coffee from Guatemala. In addition to the great flavor, this coffee is grown with minimum impact on the environment. Its producer, Santo Tomás Pachuj Nature Reserve, a 170-acre coffee plantation within an 890-acre private reserve amidst Guatemala's volcanic chain near Lake Atitlán, is a Rainforest Alliance certified coffee plantation. The Fahsen family, which owns the reserve, has been growing coffee for five generations. Frederico Jose Fahsen was our host and took us to visit four plantations to educate us about coffee on a fact-finding trip Easter and I took last spring.

The best coffee is grown at high altitudes. Coffee plants grown above 4,500 feet produce only the hard beans that are considered gourmet. The altitude in Pachuj ranges from 4,300 feet to almost 7,000 feet above sea level. Coffee plants range from four to six feet in height. Shade trees are planted among the coffee plants to create a canopy to protect the plants from wind, extreme heat, direct sun or the occasional frost. They also help to maintain the humidity, and their decaying leaves provide

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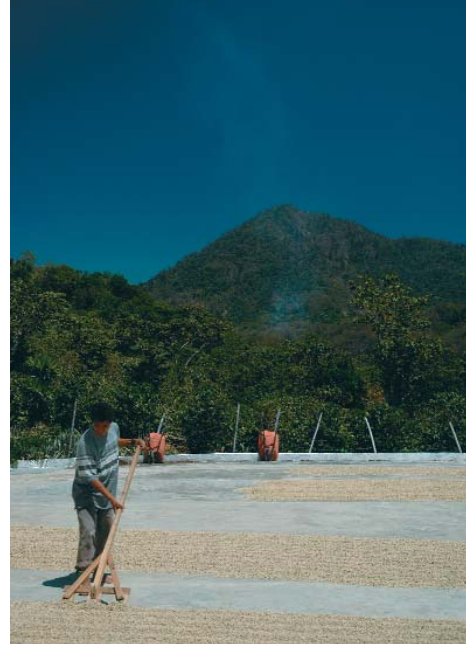
by
Hay Hardy



Cherries are hand-picked one at a time.



Fahsen and Easter examine the beans as the floaters are siphoned off.



Coffee beans are turned over frequently while sun-drying.

Federico Jose Fahsen at Santo Tomás Pachuj



additional organic matter for the coffee plants.

A good rain induces flowering in the plants and produces a harvest eight months later. The fragrant white blossoms are pollinated by bees and other insects and mature into clusters of red cherries. Each cherry houses two beans.

The cherries are hand-picked, one by one. Only the ones with just the right maturity are picked. The greener ones are left for a second picking. Cherries that are too green will produce coffee that tastes like grass while those that are too ripe will produce coffee that tastes almost like vinegar. The entire picking process requires two to four months. Before sending the cherries to the coffee mill, workers further sort through them to ensure optimal ripeness.

Since water is plentiful in Guatemala, the cherries are processed using a wet method. They are placed in a siphon filled with water. If one or both beans are rotten, the cherry will float. These are separated from the good cherries that sink to the bottom. The good cherries then go through a de-pulping machine where the red shell, called pulpa, is removed. The beans are placed in tanks where they undergo a natural fermentation process to remove the mucilage around the bean. This can take up to 48 hours, and the process is carefully monitored to avoid over-fermentation, which could result in a vinegar flavor. The beans are then thoroughly washed and are further selected. Again, floaters are siphoned off, and the process is repeated several times until all floaters have been eliminated.

In most areas, except the rainy regions, the beans are sun-dried. When drying, the beans must be turned over frequently, and the layers of beans must not be more than two inches deep. At the end of this process, the beans will turn the color of hay and are called parchment. Leaving the beans in their parchment state protects them from changes in temperature and humidity.

To get to the jade-green coffee bean, the parchment is later removed. Often

they are sorted once more by weight, size and color. Then they are placed in burlap sacks for shipping. The green beans, when stored properly, retain their flavor for up to a year. Beans are roasted medium or dark, according to formula. Roasted beans should be used within a couple of weeks and should be ground right before brewing to ensure the best flavor in the coffee.

Santo Tomás Pachuj and many other coffee plantations in private reserves practice sustainable farming methods to minimize the impact on the environment. Every step is carefully examined, and every possible measure is taken to protect the land. Erosion in the steep hills is prevented by terracing and planting such plants as yucca along the edge of the rows. Husks removed during the de-pulping process are collected and composted with the help of earthworms to be used as fertilizer. Workers are sent back to pick up cherries that were dropped on the ground after each harvest to minimize the infestation of coffee borers that attack the beans, a practice that eliminates the need to spray with chemicals. In Pachuj, the processing mill is structured to use only 5% of the water that a regular coffee mill would require. At other plantations such as Tarrales, electricity for the plantation is produced by their own hydroelectric plant. Trimmings from the coffee plants



Plantation owner Mario Aguilar of Reserva Patrocinio shows Fahsen and Easter a planting of giant exotic flowers.

A hanging foodbridge connects the ridges at Reserva Patrocinio.



Zip lining provides added excitement for visitors.



provide fuel for heating and cooking.

Frederico Fahsen is also the president and one of the founders of Guatemala Association of Natural Private Reserves, an organization that promotes sustainable development and the conservation of natural resources. Towards that end, plantation owners must maximize their income-producing capacity. Aside from planting and producing other agricultural products such as bananas, pineapple, cacao,

nuts, exotic flowers and plants and honey, many provide attractive lodges and dining facilities for ecotourists. Visitors have the opportunity to stay on a working plantation filled with exotic flora and fauna, take a walk in a rainforest or even zip lining from ridge to ridge for added excitement. Many of the plantations are self-sustaining communities, providing housing for their workers, schools for the children and medical facilities and religious services for

the families. For many of us, it is a glimpse into a way of life from times past.

For additional information on coffee and the private reserves, visit www.anacafe.org and www.reservasdeguatemala.org.

La Taza Coffee House, Charlottesville, VA. www.latazacoffeehouse.com.