

Profiles in Sustainable Agriculture: *One Salvadoran Coffee Family's Innovation Takes Pressure Off the Land*

IT'S NOT EASY TO SCOFF AT THE IDEA THAT COFFEE could take a place next to, say, wine, on the pedestal of elite beverages when Diego Llach compares the two. Llach, the fourth generation and latest in his family to inherit the management of their nine Salvadoran coffee farms, makes the convincing case that the quality of coffee, like that of grapes, is at the mercy of location and chance — factors such as soil and weather conditions that can doom a bean or a grape to the generic aisles or make them worthy of an espresso cup or a wine cellar. Coffee, Llach suggests, may only need a better PR firm before it takes what he believes is its well-deserved place among the coveted foods that demand intricate preparation. “We are 100 years behind in the sophistication of marketing that wine has, but in terms of the production, the [coffee] process is much more sophisticated,” he says. “But we can't compare ourselves to wine, that's just the goal.”

The Technology of Sustainable Coffee Production

The Llachs' farms, Los Nogales, produce carefully monitored coffee beans on the slopes of the Santa Ana volcano and the Cordillera del Balsamo mountain range in Western El Salvador. The beans are grown under rigorous standards that control quality, environmental safety and social welfare, as determined by the Rainforest Alliance, a nonprofit organization that works around the world to ensure that farm and forest products are produced using methods that benefit wild lands and wildlife and support workers and communities. Rainforest Alliance standards, developed in collaboration with scientists, NGOs, coffee growers and community members, have effectively transformed the way the Llachs run their farms, protecting springs and streams, conserving soil,

managing waste, protecting wildlife habitat and improving conditions for workers.

As an example of its sophistication, coffee production at Los Nogales is computerized. A program tracks the beans from the patch of land on which they are grown to the drying patios and warehouses where they are left to age. This strict organization is a stipulation of Rainforest Alliance certification that guarantees responsible production, but it has also allowed the Llachs to control the quality, acidity and sweetness of the beans for on-order delivery to buyers.



Diego Llach and his family are enthusiastic about the results and benefits of Rainforest Alliance certification.

Roberto Llach, Diego's father, likens the conversion of the farms' management methods to a rolling stone gathering speed — he has become increasingly enthusiastic about the results of Rainforest Alliance certification. “It becomes very contagious,” he says. “You begin to see the farmers being more conscientious of throwing away trash, washing their hands after using chemicals. You begin to see the farm as a living entity instead of as a mere machine of production. You used to see the weeds and destroy them so the ground was barren, but now you see the weeds under the coffee as necessary and part of the system. You begin to see it as a balance.”

A Farm Family's Unconventional Ideas

Ever since 1889, when Roberto Llach's grandfather, James Hill, left his birthplace in Manchester, England to escape his fate as a violinist and sail to El Salvador to become a coffee farmer, the Llach family has been given to a novel and often inventive approach to coffee farming. For example, Roberto's brother Prudencio Llach developed and patented a

mechanical system for removing mucilage — the transparent, slimy pulp between the skin and the beans — that eliminates the need for the water-wasting fermentation process normally used to remove mucilage. The Llachs reduced water usage from 120 gallons per 100 pounds of coffee to 30 gallons per 100 pounds, an important feat in a country that suffers its most intense water pollution from the wastewater drained from its coffee mills. The system was improved by Colombian coffee farmers and is now used in mills concerned with cutting their water bills.

Having proven its partiality to new ideas, the Llach family quickly adopted Rainforest Alliance standards, making theirs among the first privately owned farms to become certified in El Salvador. Not only, as Diego points out, to protect the environment, but also to give them an edge over their Salvadoran competition. “Because of certification, we have differentiation from other producers that allows us to have a less risky business,” Diego notes.

Farming That Supports Wildlife and Workers

Among the further innovations on the Llachs’ farms, coffee pulp from their mills is mixed with organic garbage and spread as fertilizer on the fields. Using integrated pest management, workers combat the insect *broca* with traps, weed with tools instead of herbicides and spray a natural marigold solution —



On Los Nogales, a pediatrician provides exams and free medicine to workers and their families.

made like a tea in a barrel — to control fungal diseases and other insect pests. “We use pesticides only as a last resort,” explains Diego. “However, this year they were not necessary, as all our pests were fought through organic means with the marigold tea.”

Since 2002, the Llachs have planted more than 85,000 trees along roads and streams, around worker housing and in the fields; 11,000 are native species in danger of extinction. 225 acres (91 hectares) of forest on their lands are under protection, a rarity in a largely deforested country. Biologists

from the Salvadoran conservation organization and Rainforest Alliance partner SalvaNATURA counted 82 species of birds on one of the Llach farms. They also noted armadillos, foxes, coatis and agouti, a large rodent that has been hunted to extinction in most of the country.

SalvaNATURA, the leading environmental group in the country and charged even with the management of the national parks, inspects certified farms like those of Los Nogales to ensure their adherence to the Rainforest Alliance’s exacting social and environmental standards.

Together with other partner organizations throughout Latin America, Salva-NATURA and the Rainforest Alliance make up the Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN), a cross-continental coalition of nonprofit organizations committed to sustainable farming.

The Llach’s environmental awareness is in lockstep with their concern for workers and communities living near their farms. For eight years, the Llachs have paid a pediatrician to provide exams and free medicine to workers and their families. They also donated land and provided financial support to schools attended by the children of farm workers, some of whom have gone on to high school and later returned to Los Nogales to take well-paying jobs.

“The philosophy of the Rainforest Alliance goes hand-in-hand with our four generations of coffee-growing experience,” observes Diego. “These environmental and community improvements help bring pride back to the coffee-growing sector.”



Rainforest Alliance Certified coffee is grown according to rigorous standards that support workers and communities while ensuring benefits for the environment.



www.rainforest-alliance.org

The mission of the Rainforest Alliance is to protect ecosystems and the people and wildlife that depend on them by transforming land-use practices, business practices and consumer behavior. Companies, cooperatives and landowners that participate in our programs meet rigorous standards that conserve biodiversity and provide sustainable livelihoods.

Rainforest Alliance

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