

“Extraordinary coffee”

The Mother of Direct-Trade Coffee

BY MARK PENDERGRAST

High in the mountains of southwestern Guatemala, about 5,000 feet above sea level, the coffee cherries of the Manos Campesinas cooperative, not far from the village of Santa Clara, grow on traditional Bourbon and Typica trees. Although the trees do not produce as many cherries as newer hybrids, their coffee is aromatic and rich, bright with tangy acidity, showing hints of melon, cacao and almond, with a satisfying mouthfeel that helps the taste linger.

This coffee is unusual in another way: The beans are roasted and sold by Pachamama Coffee Cooperative (www.pacha.coop), a farmer-owned company based in Sacramento, Calif., that is redefining the scope of “direct-trade” coffee. The term has been abused in the past few years; Gilles Brunner, co-founder of online grower and roaster community Algrano, has called it “an empty label, a meaningless marketing tool.” But Pachamama, founded in 2006 by Ohio native and former Peace Corps volunteer Thaleon Tremain, practices authentic direct trade, guiding organic beans from farmer to cup and ensuring all profits flow back to origin, where they’re paid out to co-op members and spent on improvements to processing facilities, local schools and medical care.

Currently, the enterprise, named after an Incan fertility goddess, represents some 140,000 coffee-growing families in Guatemala, Peru, Nicaragua, Mexico and Ethiopia. And the coffee’s exceptional quality speaks to its meticulous sourcing, processing and roasting.

According to a 2015 financial snapshot provided by the company, Pachamama farmers get about \$3 a pound for roasted coffee, and another \$6 is returned as profits to the cooperative. Pachamama’s board of directors, comprising one spokesperson for each of the five regional member cooperatives, represents the farmers and allocates profits.

Tremain’s original concept for Pachamama was a coffee version of popular community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs, in which consumers subscribe to regular purchases of produce from local farms. The subscription model is still the company’s primary outlet, but now you can also make one-time purchases. The roasted Santa Clara beans cost \$19 for 12 ounces, including shipping—a price that compares favorably with those of other specialty roasters such as Counter Culture Coffee and Intelligentsia.

In addition to the Guatemalan beans, I sampled superb Yirgacheffe from Ethiopia, grown at around 6,000 feet above sea level by the large Oromia cooperative. The coffee offered a honeylike sweetness, notes of lemon and wild blueberry, pleasing acidity and an underlying hint of cedar oil. At \$20 for 10 ounces, this extraordinary coffee is a bit more expensive than the Santa Clara, but well worth it.

To get a sense of the range of Pachamama’s offerings, you might try the \$50 sampler box, consisting of 6-ounce bags from each of the five origin countries. An assortment of blends of those origins (and with different roast levels) is available as well. You can also buy green beans and roast them yourself.



To lend a personal touch to the coffee, Pachamama packaging features photos of farmers, and a series of videos provides insight into the lives of the cooperatives’ members. One clip features a farmer and a mule laden with heavy bags of processed beans trekking across a long bridge over a river to the co-op’s distribution point. In another video, Catarina Yac of Santa Clara savors her freedom as an independent, unmar-

ried female coffee farmer; she keeps up with the coffee world through her cell phone and regional coffee seminars.

Since its founding 10 years ago, Pachamama’s business has grown steadily. It now employs 15 people to roast and package the beans and to sell brewed coffee at the company’s Sacramento café. “We’re only a block from a Starbucks and Peet’s, but we’re doing fine,” Tremain notes. “Give customers an option and many will choose to support farmers when they can.” He plans to open other cafés, perhaps in San Francisco, Washington, D.C., or overseas. For now, 70 percent of the company’s revenues come from national wholesale accounts, many with food cooperatives, but retail sales and direct sales online are picking up.

Under the direction of Jake Sockolov, a young wine and coffee specialist, Pachamama is about to launch La Reserva, a monthly subscription to two single-origin coffees, with tasting notes. Sockolov plans to feature the Yirgacheffe among his first selections; he praises the “subtle understatement” of the beans, comparable to an elegant Burgundy.

Given its ambition and ever-expanding purview, Pachamama is fast developing into a textbook example of farmer-owned coffee ventures. With ethical practices buttressed by stunning results in the cup, direct trade in this case feels less like a moral obligation than an acknowledgment of superior quality. A good cause never tasted so rich.

Mark Pendergrast is the author of *Uncommon Grounds, a history of coffee*, and *Beyond Fair Trade*.