



Asociación La Victoria: A Pearl From Old Guerrilla Territory In Huila, Colombia

In late 2016, we were contacted through Facebook by a Colombian woman living in the US. She asked if we were interested in trying some coffee from her native village high in the mountains of Huila. "Sure," we said, a little intrigued. And a few weeks later, a young guy rang the doorbell of our office in Medellin, in his arms a huge bag of more than 25 samples! Andrés is the president and representative of the Association La Victoria in Santa Maria. He had spent 18 hours in a night-bus to meet us personally. We talked with him for a few hours until he had to catch the next night-bus back, the same night!

He explained that Santa Maria, in the foothills of the Huila volcano (Nevado del Huila) had been closed off from the rest of the country for decades because of the guerrilla in the region. There are only two narrow, unpaved access roads along dangerous precipices, so it was near impossible for the authorities to enter the area. This is fortunate for specialty coffee lovers: the National Coffee Federation wasn't able to heavily promote their varieties! This means almost all farmers of La Victoria grow Caturra, Typica or Bourbon varieties, at elevations ranging from 1,700 to 2,200 m.a.s.l.; very few renovated their farms entirely to Castillo or Colombia. When we cupped the samples a few days later, we were in awe; the percentage of 86+ lots in one single package of samples was higher than any we had cupped previously! These were farmers just doing what they've been doing for ages, but they could only sell their coffee to local buyers at the market price or a value well below the true value of their coffee. As such, they were never really focused on specialty. But after cupping coffees ranging from 84 to 88 points, we were thrilled to think about the prospects of future harvests.

In November of 2016, we visited Santa Maria for the first time and it was eventful trip full of flooded roads and night time drives along those same precipices. We were not disappointed, finally meeting the farmers who were equally excited to start working with us. We solidified our mutual goals and started working with the group in the main harvest of 2017. We found beautiful single farm micro-lots, and even put together a communal group lot, built lot by lot, targeting and achieving a final point score of 85.

We hit it off with this group so well, that for the 2018 harvest, we rented a warehouse, setup a cupping lab and hired a cupper, who will cup through every-single-sample that is delivered to the buying station. From there, we will separate micro-lots and also build out another

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communal lot. In addition, several of the youngest members of the association will be doing internships at the buying station, learning how to cup and grade green coffee.

We are helping this group of farmers preserve their heritage of great coffees by making sure they are (finally) fairly compensated! We are also working with them hand-in-hand on the basics of improving quality, as well as fermentation trials for the more advanced producers.

It's a very special group of producers and through the work they are doing, demonstrating that higher, sustainable prices are in reach, producers from nearby municipalities have started dropping by to bring samples and talk about their farms. We hope to continue growing the project with this group and nearby farmers and on behalf of La Victoria and myself, thank you for your support!



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