

# Food, Farming and Fair Trade in Nicaraguan Coffee Country

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Coffee and contemplation. The two go cup in hand. Stories are shared, the news of the day, the forecasting of weather, problems are solved - all in the course of a cup and a conversation. But what about contemplating coffee? What type of plant is it? How is it grown and where? Who are the people and the culture behind, well, our world's culture of coffee?

This past winter, I raised funds to help cover travel and resources needed to travel with Just Coffee Cooperative's Grower Delegation to visit La Fundacion entre Mujeres (La Fem) and learn about Fair Trade and organic coffee production. I want to thank the Family Farm Defenders for helping cover costs associated with airfare and in helping me realize my dreams for co-creating the conditions and potential for a women's grower exchange program. FFD's work in supporting farmers, learning from other farmers and realizing global food sovereignty is an important emerging story built around creating health, wealth, connection and capacity for growing food and building community. I want to share the story that involves women collectively organizing for their health, the health of the Earth and for their right to a living wage.

## Who are the people behind the coffee 'beans'?

In Nicaragua, land access and tenure are major issues, with less than two percent of land owned by women. Land reform programs, together with the break up of communal land holdings, have led to the transfer of exclusive land rights to males as heads of households even though the proportion of women heads of household continues to grow.

Women coffee producers in Nicaragua have a chance to participate in a different model of sustain-



Erin Schneider harvesting coffee at Adevida's farm outside the community of El Colorado, Nicaragua PHOTO BY JULIA BAUMGARTNER

able agriculture working with an umbrella organization called La Fundacion Entre Mujeres (La Fem). La Fem is a well organized all-women's NGO in Esteli, Nicaragua that promotes ideological, economic, and political empowerment of rural women through projects such as formal and informal educational programs, reproductive rights, women's health clinics, domestic violence support, access to land, gender workshops and product diversification through organic agriculture trainings. Additionally, La FEM aims to build a model of sustainable economic production based on principles of solidarity and cooperation among women.

Through such programs, women from the rural communities - often at the greatest disadvantage for equality - are able to be both stewards and owners of their own land. "It's important for women to hold land. It's hard for them to have a life based on equality without it," says La FEM Director Diana Martinez. I was struck by this diversity in land holdings when talking with the women of La Fem. Some

of the women were able to negotiate separate parcels of land with their husbands to grow their coffee, or were gifted land from their fathers or grandfathers. Others told stories of growing weary of their husbands' abuse, "I got tired of being hit, so one day, I hit him (husband) back, packed up my things, and my kids and left him, and found La Fem." Currently, La Fem, supports over 3,000 women through their programs, with 330 who are part of 12 organic, fair trade coffee cooperatives on about 352 acres (176 manzanas).

So how do you grow this thing called Fair Trade Coffee?

Well, you don't need fancy equipment. In fact most of the women do the work by hand. All you need is a little bit of love, a little soil, a little vision to piece together your farm with the help of the butterflies, bees, and critters, you can help make coffee come to life. It starts with the soil.

It was fitting that we starting our delegation trip to visit La Fem's organic composting facility and plant propagation nursery where I got to experience making boccachi, which

is there their organic compost It's a lot like sheet mulching - so I knew I was at home.

Specifically, their recipe for sheet mulch or 'rastroj' represented the following:

- Carbon layer - coffee chaff
  - Molasses from sugar cane
  - Water
  - Decomposed cow manure
  - Nitrogen layer - coffee cherries fermented 'juice or honey'
  - Charcoal -phosphorous
- They also use rice flour or dried corn

All of the producers make this on their farms as well, but they usually don't have enough materials to mulch all of their plants, so they pool together resources to do this on a larger scale. Everything is still done by hand with at least two people. This practice was integrated into growing and harvesting the coffee plants as well.

Once we got grounded in the dirt, we visited some of La Fem's farmers and got to help with the coffee harvest. There are many tasks involved in making coffee from seed to cup.

When grown in the tropics, coffee is a vigorous small tree that reaches a mature height of 10 - 12 ft, bearing fruit after three to five years for up to 50 - 60 years. The fruit takes about nine months to ripen from green to a deep red (which looks like the shape of a cranberry) called 'cherries'. The cherries contain two seeds, the so-called 'coffee beans', which despite their name are not true beans. Botanically-speaking they are really drupes. The caffeine in coffee is a natural plant defense against herbivory. Unfortunately, this does not extend to the insect world. The coffee borer beetle and coffee leaf miner can devastate crops, so it was important for us to pick all of the 'beans' to prevent any borers showing up post-harvest. It was also important that we left a petiole/stem so the fruit would grow back the following year. The most commonly cultivated coffee species



Erin Schneider & Anna mixing organic mulch or Boccachi at Casa Sede Fem. PHOTO BY JULIA BAUMGARTNER



Erin Schneider harvesting coffee PHOTO BY JULIA BAUMGARTNER

grow best at high elevations in the shade, which makes coffee a natural addition to an agroforestry system. Many of the women's farms integrated multi-year coffee plantings, under the canopy of mango, banana, and avocado trees along steep slopes. Women also grow hibiscus in their annual crop rotations to generate income during the off-season.

The work continues post-harvest

where the sorting, pulping, and drying begins in preparation for distribution and export. In 2009 and 2010 the women turned in 356 quintales or 356,000 lbs. of coffee, respectively. Our delegation at Adevida's farm harvested 13, 5 gallon buckets (in general, workers are paid \$1.50/bucket of \$5.00/day). This year, for La Fem's coffee cooperatives it was 189,000 lbs.

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