Food, Farming and Fair Trade in Nicaraguan Coffee Country
BY ERIN SCHNEIDER, M.ED FARMER, FACILIATOR & EDUCATOR

Coffee and contemplation. The two go hand 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 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 sustainable 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 both steward 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 5,000 women through their programs, with 330 who are part of 12 organic, fair trade coffee cooperatives on about 452 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 crickets, 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 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 when 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 1.5 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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Erin Schneider harvesting coffee at Adevida’s farm outside the community of El Colorado, Nicaragua PHOTO BY JULIA BAUMGARTNER

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

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

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