

The real masters of “direct trade”

San Cristobal Coffee Importers

by Miles Small



In an office in Tepic, Mexico and another in Seattle, two icons of the specialty coffee industry accomplished what most want, many claim, but few achieve – real direct trade between growers and roasters. James Kosalos and Devorah Zeitlin through their Mexican processing and exporting company Cafés Sustentables de México and their US importing company San Cristobal Coffee Importers are directly involved with all elements of the production and sale of coffee.

There is a lesson to be learned from their experience and that is that direct trade is very difficult, complex, and expensive. Spending 6 months of the year stationed in Tepic, Kosalos has built the direct trade model from the ground up over several years of relationship building with growers and fragile business relationships with local vendors. Working with a handful of small cooperatives clustered around the Tepic area, Kosalos has been able to establish symbiotic relationships because he purchases their entire production at higher prices. By doing so, he has been able to nudge, lead, and push growers toward higher quality farm-wide. This process has taken years.

Cupping and scoring coffee continuously, Kosalos establishes a statistical basis for continuing improvement as well as establishing its value and market channel. Since CAFESUMEX takes title of the coffee at origin, and then has to sell it in the States, this process is mission critical, albeit time consuming and distracting from the array of other duties required to establish the vertical integration necessary for truly effective direct trade.

Kosalos’ core purpose, and passion, is to establish a statistical basis for forming predictive models in order to simplify processing and to provide

buyers with standardized comprehensive labeling documentation from crop to cup. Elemental to this process is the introduction in the farms he works with of the “PortaCafe” portable lab. Through using this lab, and especially the calibrated sample roaster developed by Kosalos, technicians trained on the system can cup and

grade each day’s production at the wet mill using standardized parameters. These results then track the lot through export and ultimately to the consumer. Through this process, he believes, the highest level of transparency and consistency can be achieved.

The struggle is balancing the strictness of statistical absolutes with the foibles of humanity because, after all, coffee is an industry of small business people both at origin and elsewhere. And, in truth humanity is really what it is all about for Kosalos. Pounding up the typical 18km of washed-out kidney crushing road in one of Kosalos’ trademark ancient Volkswagon Bugs, the conversation is focused on the prosperity and hope this program is bringing to the remote village of El Cuarenteño whose existence depends on coffee. The work of CAFESUMEX has brought fair pricing, improvements in processing, and access to markets for the Productores de cafe del Cuarenteño that otherwise would not have been possible.

Travelling with Kosalos is a reminder of why so many of us are a part of coffee – to do business honestly and fairly and openly. Jim and Dev are doing this every day. And, as we finish the day drinking beer and eating fresh fish with our feet in the ocean sand at Las Gaviotas in Miramar, I am reminded of another reason why we all do this gig...

