

MEXICO

BY MIKE WHITE

For years now I have been a barista, trainer and manager for Gimme! Coffee in New York state. I've kept up to date on espresso theory, machine technology and barista techniques. I followed and/or participated in almost every online forum I've discovered. But until now, I've never fully understood the depth of the industry that we all know and love. This past February I was lucky enough to join a small crew of roasters on an Eco Tour of Nayarit in Mexico. Hosted by San Cristobal Coffee Importers, our group was treated to an inside look at the problems the region has traditionally faced, and the solutions that San Cristobal is offering and implementing.

In this region of Mexico, coffee grows on the sides of mountains, deep in the undergrowth of native and non-native trees. Migrant workers navigate the hills and brush to fill their baskets with ripe cherries, hauling their bags by horseback to the wet mills at the end of the day. Traditionally, the entire day's harvest has been processed together, regardless of initial quality indicators and specific farm of origin. To the farmers, coffee is just another fruit, similar to avocados, bananas, limes, etc. Value has always been determined by weight, not by quality. Until recently, there has never been a source of motivation for learning about quality, nor has there been a realistic method for educating the locals about the quality. For the last 10 years, however, James Kosalos has dedicated himself to the improvement of quality and sustainability in a region generally lacking of any infrastructure to encourage it.

Kosalos, a member of the Specialty Coffee Association of America's (SCAA) Technical Standards Committee and certified SCAA cupper, is also a founding

father of Cafes Sustentables de Mexico. Cafes Sustentables has worked hard to consolidate the large number of local cooperatives into two specific integradoras, or cooperative of cooperatives, all operating under the control of Cafes Sustentables. It's a hierarchal system based on any successful business model, and it allows the long process of accountability and communication to exist and grow. It's also a system completely foreign to the coffee farmers of Mexico, who without the proper motivation have had no desire to change the systems they've used for hundreds of years.

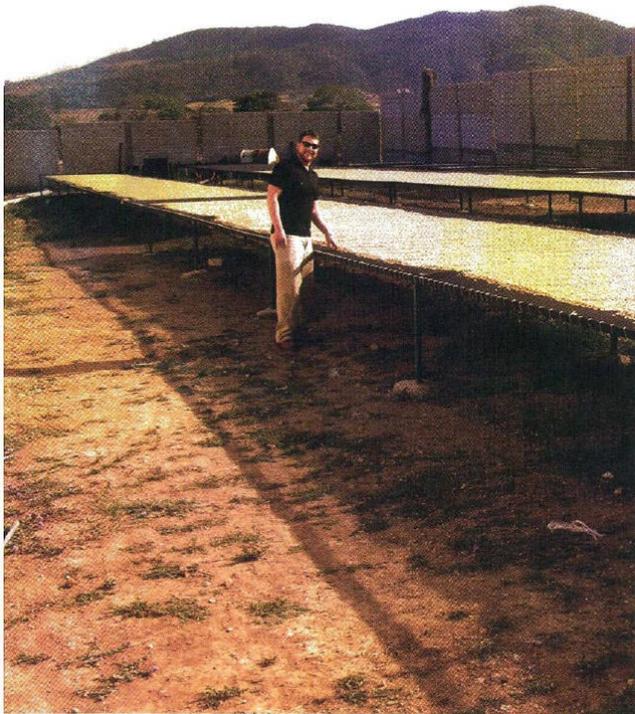
Typically in our American culture, we pay more for things we perceive as being of higher quality. Capitalism. Survival of the fittest. The best survive, the lesser do not. We all know it and love it, and as coffee roasters and retailers, we work hard

to provide coffee and drinks of higher quality than our competitors. It's the perception of quality that we take for granted here. We cup coffee and we recognize the differences in the cup. We know what we like, and we happily spend more money for the things that we think are worth it. This simple act, however, removed from our market place becomes quite revolutionary, and in this Mexican coffee growing region, the perception of quality has to be taught and encouraged just like when specialty coffee first emerged in our own communities and displaced the traditional, and not as tasty, coffee everyone had always known.

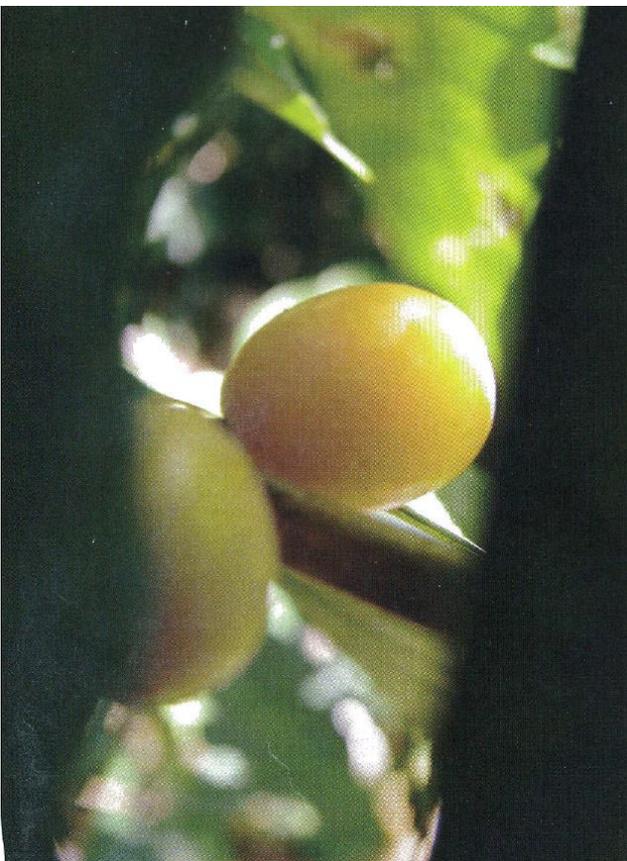
In order to control and improve the production from the integradoras, Kosalos and Cafes Sustentables have taken it upon themselves to create beneficios, or offices dedicated to the logging of information and traceability. Every minute detail, from the hill to the cup, is logged in software created specifically for this purpose by Cafes Sustentables. As the coffee



James Kosalos developed the Cafes Sustentables de Mexico organization as a way to empower Mexican coffee producers. By consolidating many local cooperatives farmers are given more power in terms of both communication and accountability.



Mike stands next to coffee laid out on patios. Each lot is separated by various indicators. This system results in an increase not only in prices for the coffee, but in the producer's knowledge of their crops so they can make improvements for years to come.



is processed in the wet and dry mills, paperwork provided by the beneficio is filled out to record the weight, farms, mills, processing type, and dates. Coffee is laid out on the patios separated by various indicators such as farm and date, and labeled accordingly. Samples are brought to the beneficios from the mills every day with their respective labels and entered into the software that tracks and sorts every detail recorded. From there coffee is processed further with details such as water density and defects taken into consideration, and cupped using self-contained mobile cupping units that have been designed and built for this purpose. These cupping units include meters, roasters, grinders, cups, etc., and cupping notes and scores are further recorded in the same software. Every detail from lot number to cupping score can be categorized and accessed at a moment's notice, allowing instant traceability and notes used for blending lots. Higher scoring lots are instantly separated from the rest of the pack, and premium prices can be awarded to the farmers who provide them.

This system of accountability is the heart of the sustainability movement here. With the mountain of knowledge being recorded by Cafes Sustentables, it is easier than ever to recognize and cross-reference the different factors that lead to higher quality in the cup. Armed with this knowledge, Cafes Sustentables can educate and inform the producers of the coffee about the different factors that lead to premium prices, and offer viable and tangible incentives for the improvement of their farming techniques. It is a simple economic model, yet in Nayarit it is being implemented from scratch, with absolutely no pre-existing infrastructure in place.

It is in this vein that the people of Cafes Sustentables are transcending the traditional methods of certification. The enormous efforts to increase sustainability through education and quality control are tied directly to the improvement of quality of life in the region. Farmers are not simply paid premiums for great coffee; they are taught how to evaluate their harvests and to continuously improve their crops, thereby providing not only incentive to grow great coffee, but the knowledge and information required to do so year after year.

Utz Kapeh is an example of the less traditional forms of certification that Cafe Sustentables does believe in. To become certified by Utz Kapeh, certain requirements must be met pertaining to social and environmental factors. In addition to complete transparency and traceability, mills must operate at a level of organization and safety that we take for granted in the United States. Safety precautions must be met at all levels of production, similar to the guidelines enforced by the U.S. Occupational Safety & Health Administration. Mills are inspected on a regular basis to ensure the enforcement of these guidelines, and those failing the inspections are subject to the loss of their certification. It is not an easy process to be part of, and the government does not require these standards. Becoming certified Utz Kapeh is a labor of love, a system of production followed strictly for the benefit of the people involved.

San Cristobal Coffee Importers is single-handedly revolutionizing the coffee industry in Mexico. With virtually no pre-existing infrastructure to account for quality and sustainability, James Kosalos has devoted himself to creating this infrastructure from scratch. From the safety of farmers and the quality of the bean, to the long-term economic growth of a region generating some of the world's best coffee, Kosalos has been undertaking this massive responsibility with relentless and altruistic passion. Passion for the local culture, passion for the local landscape and passion to help the industry continue to grow and provide award-winning coffee.

I feel blessed to have experienced this type of insider tour of an amazing coffee growing region, but the opportunity is available to all those who are interested. For more information on coffee from Nayarit in Mexico, contact them directly at www.sancristocafe.com. They'd love to show you around.