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Durhams go to Guatemalan source

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Justin Durham picks coffee cherries in the mountains of Guatemala. *photo by Eli Pyke*

"It's all about the altitude," Justin Durham, of Sisters Coffee Co., remarked after returning last week from a coffee-buying adventure deep into the lofty mountains of Guatemala.

"When coffee grows at high altitude it ripens slower and creates better bean density and gives a more consistent, cleaner cup. High altitude equals high quality and it's something our customers have come to expect."

Durham, along with his father and Sisters Coffee owner, Winfield Durham, Eli Pyke of Zion Pictures, Johnnie Driessner, from Concordia University, and five others, ventured to Central America to meet Aurelio Villatoro and tour his coffee plantation, "Finca Villaure."



Winfield Durham with host Aurelio Villatoro in Guatemala. *photo by Eli Pyke*

The Durhams had purchased specialty coffee from Villatoro in the past and were invited to visit the farm, meet his family and further expand their relationship. Villatoro is a fourth-generation coffee grower, and his family has owned the farm since the 1950s. In addition to running the day-to-day operations, Villatoro is also an expert mechanic and the music leader at his church.

"It was an incredible trip," said Durham. "We flew into Guatemala City and then took a five-hour van ride up into the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes mountains via the legendary Pan-American Highway and across the Continental Divide. Guatemala is extremely mountainous. It's a country the size of Tennessee, but if flattened out would be bigger than Texas. Eli Pyke shot some amazing documentary footage and interviews for us. He worked really hard."

It's a natural ecosystem with plentiful water due to all the runoff from these mountains. The coffee is grown right on the steep hillsides and rugged inclines. In addition to the abundant water, Guatemala's rich volcanic soil delivers vital nutrients to the flourishing java crops.

"Everything that comes out of Guatemala is really clean. They have a very solid infrastructure for coffee harvesting and exporting. Most farms have their own washing stations, which is pretty rare compared to the rest of the world," Durham said.

Finca Villaure is located at an altitude of between 4,600 and 5,400 feet. The farm is not measured in acres, but in total quantity produced. This particular harvest yields approximately six containers total, which equals 225,000 pounds of green coffee beans per year.

"After hiking into the fields and touring the farm and processing center, the Villatoro family prepared a huge feast for us back at their home. It was the best Latin food I've ever had," said Durham. "All fresh tortillas, homemade salsa, and real seasoned carne asada (grilled flank steak). We ate very well on this trip."

The Durham group also stayed with the Martinez family at their house in Huehuetenango. Their coffee farm, Finca Vista Hermosa, is a much smaller and more remote farm a few mountain ranges over from the Villatoro farm.

"Coming back through the area, we stopped in the town of Hoja Blanca and played soccer with a group of kids in the street. They were really good, and beat us 4-1," Durham said.

Coffee growing is a tough business, demanding long hours and attention to detail. The best quality coffee still has to be hand-picked. It's necessary for the pickers to develop a scrutinizing eye for the "cherries."

In order to harvest, a worker needs to trek up into the mountains with a backpack and carefully pluck only the ripest fruit. Late December through late March is harvest season in Guatemala, and each picker will haul 80-90 pounds of coffee per day, hiking back down the mountain to one of the specially built shuttle trucks. Each coffee plant typically takes four to five years to produce a crop.

"Healthy coffee trees in full harvest bounty are a beautiful sight," said Durham. "Bright green and red cherries with dark green leaves, covering the hillsides and mountains."

After picking, the crop is then taken to washing stations that drain into a de-pulper, which separates the skin and pulp from the prized bean. From there, the beans flow into a fermentation tank for 1-2 days, then onto the big concrete drying patios for five days. Once dried, they're bagged and taken to the dry mill plant in nearby Huehuetenango, where each bean is individually inspected for defects in a 20-step process to ensure optimal color and size.

The Guatemala Finca Villaure coffee sold at Sisters Coffee Co. is considered a medium roast. It offers a jasmine aroma with notes of grapefruit and honey with a clean, crisp finish.

"We want to buy lots more coffee from Aurelio. We love the relationship, love the story, and he grows some high quality coffee. We hope to subsidize this quality and reward their hard work and dedication by paying a premium price for the product they develop. One of Sisters Coffee's core values is innovating toward coffee excellence and developing direct trade relationships with our growers," said Durham.

Sisters Coffee Co. plans to hold a "Guatemala Night" sometime later this month, and will invite the community to come share trip photos, souvenirs, sample Guatemalan food, music and experience coffee directly from the Villatoro farm. A new short film by Pyke's Zion Pictures will be screened, chronicling the entire expedition.

Check the Sisters Coffee Co. Web site at www.sisterscoffee.com for upcoming date and time, or call 541-549-0527.

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