









Altos de Marfil

Puyango, Chaguarpamaba, Loja, Ecuador

 VARIETY: Typica, Caturra, Bourbon	 PROCESS: Washed	 HARVEST TIME: August - December	 FLOWER SEASON: October - January
		 WET MILLING: Fully washed process in micro-mills at each farm and traditionally fermented in cement tanks	
 ELEVATION: 1300-1800 MASL	 PRODUCER: Small-scale producers	 DRYING: Fully sun dried on patios	
		 DRY MILLING: Dry milled by Caravela in their export warehouse and mill in Quito	

Altos de Marfil comes from 44 small-scale producers growing traditional varieties high on the slopes of the El Limo mountains outside the town of Puyango in Loja province, Ecuador. Brightened by complex citrus sweetness of grapefruit and dried peach, it is balanced with rich notes of hazelnut and cacao.

This exceptional coffee came to us by chance, as an unsolicited sample from our sourcing partner, Caravela, in order to fill an unexpected gap in our menu. Impressed with the coffee's performance on the cupping table but unfamiliar with Ecuador as a coffee growing region, we contracted the coffee for our menu and decided to use the opportunity to learn about Ecuador as a nation that has been producing high-quality coffee for nearly 200 years.



Ulbio Rogel rakes the sun-drying coffee.










The trajectory of coffee's agro-economic and social presence in Ecuador can be loosely correlated to the arc of its progress grappling with post-colonial politics and economic conditions.

Ecuador became an independent republic in 1830 after eight years as part of Simon Bolivar's Republic of Gran Colombia, whose government helped it secure independence from Spain in 1822. The political dysfunction precipitating the dissolution of Bolivar's government cast a shadow on the independent nations it was divided into, with fears about dictatorship, monarchy, and corruption having a lasting impact on Ecuadorian politics.

Coffee was introduced to Ecuador during the first decades of its independence when an agricultural economy was sustained by slave labor and indigenous peonage. Even after the abolition of legal slavery in Ecuador in 1851, laborers would continue to work in exchange for rent paid or low wages for the economic benefit of a powerful, elite, land-owning minority until extreme social and economic inequity resulted in economic, political, constitutional, and social upheaval in the late twentieth century.

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The low cost of indentured labor and favorable market conditions allowed the Ecuadorian economy to grow on cacao exports until the 1930's when production declined. Ecuador's coffee sector relied on and benefited from these factors, too, and in the 1930's, coffee production began to rise exponentially until it peaked in the 1980's and '90's.

Oil was discovered in Ecuador's Amazon region in the 1960's and oil exports became its primary economic driver. While oil allowed Ecuador alternating periods of great wealth and expansion, fluctuating oil prices rendered that wealth unstable and the Ecuadorian economy would come to the brink of collapse with each collapse of global oil prices.



Digno Granda presents a coffee tree with cherries at peak ripeness.

Relying too heavily on oil and other exports made the Ecuadorian economy vulnerable until it finally collapsed in 1997-1998 after an El Niño climate impacted its infrastructure and agricultural sector while global oil prices crashed again, resulting in a severe contraction of GDP, as well as extreme inflation and currency devaluation. The economic freefall at the turn of the century was halted only when the government decided to adopt as its currency the US dollar, which, due to exchange rates (23,000 sucre to 1 US Dollar) and institutional inconsistencies, would save the nation while plunging its poor into further ruin.










This crisis had an outsize impact on those already suffering from, or on the brink of poverty, including small-scale coffee farmers and others in the agricultural sector. During Ecuador's financial crisis, hundreds of thousands of Ecuadorians emigrated, mostly to the United States, while domestic migration brought young Ecuadorians to cities from rural, agricultural communities. As with other coffee growing countries in Central and South America, socio-economic, environmental, and global market conditions in the 21st Century have left many of Ecuador's coffee farms abandoned. Its coffee agricultural industry is

especially vulnerable to the risks and inefficiencies of an aging workforce; as younger generations have moved away, the average age of a coffee worker in Ecuador is 60 years old. Most recent calculations show Ecuador's coffee production is about one third the volume of production at its peak in the 1980's.

The lasting political ramifications of this crisis led to a period of relative stability, with social programs and wage increases aimed at redistributing concentrated wealth.

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However, a labor shortage in coffee, along with regular increases in Ecuador’s minimum wage, have increased the cost of labor. While we want to celebrate increased wages for coffee workers, increased costs for labor and supplies means that Ecuador has a very high cost for coffee production. According to Caravela, “The most expensive country is Ecuador, with a total cost of \$23,132 dollars [per 3 hectare farm], while Mexico is the least expensive, with a total cost of \$13,410 dollars [per 3 hectare farm].” The high cost of production during a period of historically low and wildly fluctuating global coffee prices means that coffee is an unreliable livelihood for its farmers in Ecuador, who are often unable to cover their costs.

Caravela began buying coffee in Ecuador in 2007 and in 2015, they opened their own export company and dry mill in Quito and a purchasing station and lab in Loja, including a full-time staff of QC and PECA professionals (Caravela’s team of agronomists providing education and support to farmers).

Knowing the history and context of coffee in Ecuador helps us to realize how phenomenal it is to be able to offer a lot as special as Altos de Marfil. The farmer-oriented and ethically driven work of our partners at Caravela, who search tirelessly for holistically beautiful coffees in underserved coffee agricultural communities, aims to counteract some of the conditions that have made it so difficult for farmers to sustain businesses producing such special coffees.



Wilber Sanchez standing among his coffee trees.