

The Branding of an Origin

How Colombia Promotes Denominations of Origin



Cauca, Colombia | photo by Patricia Rincón Mautner, copyright FNC 2015

Consumer education is critical to the success of the specialty coffee industry. What variables impact a coffee's quality—from origin, terroir, variety and processing methods to roasting, brewing and beyond—and how can we communicate the value of these quality indicators to consumers? One approach that's been gaining traction for several years is the designation of Denominations of Origin (DO), and no country has developed a more comprehensive program for designating and promoting coffee-focused DOs than Colombia.

The Federación Nacional de Cafeteros de Colombia (FNC, aka Colombian Coffee Growers Federation) has been working to connect

Colombian coffee with cup quality since the 1930s, providing technical assistance to producers, conducting in-depth research and enacting quality control standards. The first widespread promotion of the Café de Colombia brand was introduced in the 1960s, and a Colombian coffee certification mark (CM) has been recognized in the United States and Canada since the 1980s.

For the past decade, the FNC has been working on a more wide-reaching program to define DOs—also known as CMs and Protected Geographical Indications (PGIs), depending on where they're registered—in Colombia and abroad. Café de Colombia, an umbrella designation covering all the coffee-growing regions in the country, was approved as a DO by the Colombian government in 2005. This opened the door for registering the origin with other governments, including Perú, Ecuador, Bolivia, the European Union and Switzerland.

Once the umbrella DO was defined, the FNC turned its focus to sub-denominations to showcase the distinct coffees grown throughout Colombia. To date, four regional DOs have been registered: Cauca and Nariño (both registered in 2011) and Huila (2013) in the south, and Santander (2014) in the north. Three additional DOs are in the works, including Tolima, Sierra Nevada and the Coffee Cultural Landscape, a UNESCO World Heritage site made up of 51 coffee-producing towns in the departments of Caldas, Quindío, Risaralda and Valle.

To demonstrate a correlation between specific quality attributes and origin—required for approval of the DO designation—FNC researchers collect and analyze thousands of samples from each origin over three harvest cycles. Samples are geo-referenced and logged into a database, with information on 1,234 variables for each sample, variables such as variety; biochemical components (lipids, organic acids, etc.); climate, altitude and other growing conditions; processing methods; soil analysis results and more.

After the data are gathered, scientists with FNC's research division, Cenicafé, analyze, verify and document the correlations between origin and quality. They use a number of methods to define

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Huila, Nariño, Cauca and Santander have been designated as Denominations of Origin (DO) in Colombia. DOs for Sierra Nevada, Tolima (not shown), and the Coffee Cultural Landscape are in the works. | image courtesy of the FNC



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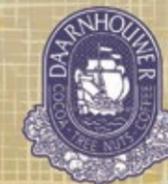
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Colombia's diverse landscapes and climates produce coffees with distinct characteristics. (Pictured: Part of the UNESCO World Heritage Coffee Cultural Landscape.) | photo by Patricia Rincón Mautner, copyright FNC 2015



photo by David Mauricio Bonilla Abreo, copyright FNC 2015



In addition to cup quality and flavor attributes, there are cultural aspects of origin that can create an emotional connection for the consumer. (Pictured: Picking coffee in Santander.) | photo by David Mauricio Bonilla Abreo, copyright FNC 2015



The FNC has been promoting Colombia as an origin of excellence since the 1930s. photo by David Mauricio Bonilla Abreo, copyright FNC 2015

and identify each DO, including near-infrared spectroscopy, which illustrates a unique spectral print for each origin's coffee.

The process is labor intensive and costly, but the potential benefits for growers, wholesalers and retailers of Colombian coffee are extensive.

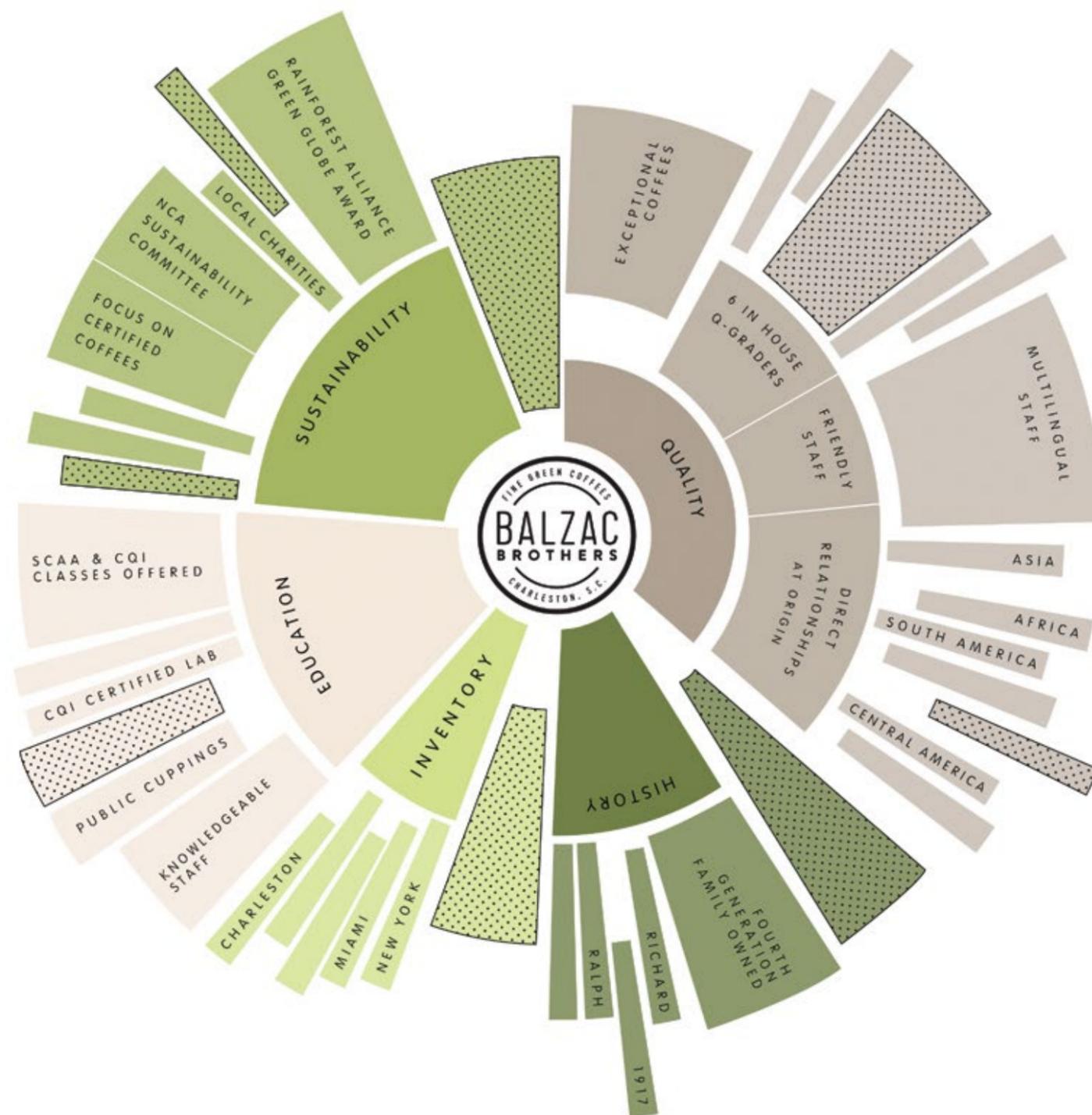
"We believe the unique attribute that collectively belongs to the growers is the origin," says Luis Fernando Samper, chief communications and marketing officer for the FNC. "You can have certifications and other things that can create goodwill among consumers, but they don't belong to the growers." For example, he notes, you can replace a fair trade-certified coffee from Colombia with a fair trade-certified coffee from another country, but Colombian coffee can come only from Colombia.

This provides a jumping off point for countless consumer education and marketing opportunities, but it also creates a potential for fraud and mislabeling. In defining the unique characteristics of each DO, Samper says, "We were able to develop the fingerprinting of all the coffees to make sure the labeling will be accurate."

The FNC has created a number of programs to help producers and retailers promote Colombian coffee based on origin. The Juan Valdez Café chain—owned by the FNC, which represents about 500,000 Colombian coffee growers, along with several thousand individual grower-investors—has launched a specialized coffeehouse concept called Orígenes to showcase Colombia's DOs. The cafes invite patrons to taste coffees from the different origins, discover the subtle flavor differences (in very basic terms, the coffees grown in the north of Colombia tend to be higher in body and lower in acidity; coffees from the south are generally higher in acidity and sugary notes; and those grown mid-country tend to exhibit more balance), and explore how different brewing methods affect each coffee's sensory attributes.

Starbucks also markets coffee from Nariño as a select origin, and Nespresso created a limited edition "Colombian Terroirs" line featuring coffees from Cauca and Santander. The federation has worked with consultants to develop food-pairing ideas for each DO, too, and has presented on the program at gastronomy- and coffee-focused events.

In addition to the science behind Colombia's distinct origins, there's a cultural component that "provides the opportunity to explore avenues of differentiation that are more emotional and can create a lot of loyalty," says Samper. Every region of Colombia, he notes, particularly the Coffee Cultural Landscape—designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage site for its long history of coffee production and the deep impact coffee growing has had on every aspect of local culture—provide rich opportunities to connect consumers with Colombia and Colombian coffee.



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