

Making a Costa Rican cup of coffee

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RONALD PETERS SEEVERS has worked in the Costa Rican coffee industry for four decades. He graduated from Purdue University in 1971, where he studied industrial engineering and administration. He has run his own coffee processing companies, as well as being the President of the Costa Rican Chamber of Coffee Growers and is currently Executive Director of ICAFE – The Costa Rican Coffee Institute.

When you sit down to enjoy a cup of delicious Costa Rican coffee, you probably have little idea of everything that has gone into producing the bean that made it possible. Dating back more than 200 years, the Costa Rican coffee sector continues to grow and produce the best-quality coffee, based on a sustainable model that is unique in the world.

Nature has been generous with Costa Rica. Covering just 52,000 square kilometres, our country is home to around six per cent of the world's bio-diversity, and a quarter of its territory is made up of private reserves and national parks. The country's commitment to protecting its environment is reflected in Yale and Columbia Universities' Environmental Performance Index, 2008, which puts Costa Rica fifth, after Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, and Finland.

In line with this approach, Costa Rica's coffee sector is based on sustainable development and environmental conservation. Thanks to its excellent climatic conditions and highly fertile volcanic soil, Costa Rica produces only Arabica coffee, which is recognized by the experts as one of the finest species in the world.

The coffee bean is produced in biologically diverse plantations with plenty of shade. This is an industry that not only protects the ecosystem, soil, and wildlife, but which contributes to the well being of growers and society in general.

The quality and distinctiveness of Costa Rican coffee is due to the careful cultivation of the 54,000 producers (more than 80 per cent of whom are SMEs) who then pick by hand only mature berries. There are 118 Costa Rican companies dedicated to the processing, storage, and conditioning of beans, along with 60 exporters who specialise in niche export markets for the finest coffees. More than 70 per cent of beans are grown in high altitudes, which produce coffees with the aroma and flavour required to satisfy the most demanding palates.

Costa Rica has eight coffee producing areas, where the best agricultural practices allow for the bean to be harvested only when it is at the peak of its maturity, resulting in the consistent high-quality that characterises our coffee.

The Central Valley produces coffees with high acidity, a good body and aroma, and a flavour with a hint of chocolate. The Western Valley coffees have a good aroma, with balanced acidity and body. The Tarrazu highlands produce coffee with fine acidity and a trace of citrus. Tres Rios Coffee is a perfect balance of high, fine acidity, a good body, and aroma. Coffees

from the Brunca region offer excellent aroma, body, and acidity. Turrialba, thanks to its rainy climate, produces low acidity coffees, with good body and aroma. The coffees of the northern Guanacaste region are noted for a good balance between body, aroma, and acidity.

The processing of the mature bean respects nature and conserves the environment. Before being given the authorisation of the Coffee Institute of Costa Rica (ICAFE), processing companies must meet a series of strict requirements established by the Health and Environment Ministries.

Costa Rica's coffee industry has invested millions of dollars in modernising its processing plants since 1992. Water use has been reduced from around 4 cubic meters to process 46 kilograms of green coffee to less than 1 cubic meter; a 75 per cent saving. Processing plants must also certify the health and safety of employees, environmental impact, and the quality of their coffee according to internationally recognized ISO standards.

To make sure that producers are paid a fair price for their product, in 1933, the coffee sector set up the Coffee Institute of Costa Rica, the only entity of its kind in the world that works on the basis of an equitable arrangement between producers, distributors, processors, and exporters.

A little history

Costa Rica was the first country in the region to set up this now-flourishing industry. The course of the country's history was changed in 1808, when coffee was first planted here. The development and trade in coffee from 1832 onwards, principally to Great Britain, brought Costa Rica international attention, and the country underwent an economic, social, cultural, intellectual, and educational development process.

The distribution of private property, thanks to the cultivation of coffee, gave many small farmers access to fertile land. Around San José, such land was given free to those who wanted to grow coffee. Our ancestors were visionaries: coffee brought peace, prosperity, and development. Thanks to coffee, Costa Rica became a country of small and medium-sized coffee producers.

Throughout our history, coffee has been a key export earner, while providing employment for thousands of Costa Ricans and foreigners. During harvest time, coffee pickers directly gain, while service industries in coffee-producing areas benefit indirectly. **F**