



*Brewing
a Cup of
Goodness*

by PATRICIA KUTZA

photos JESUS MOUNTAIN
COFFEE COMPANY

At the Jesus Mountain Coffee Company, three Stockton natives blend friendship and beans in the coffee trade.

THE 1970S PRODUCED THREE AMERICAN PRESIDENTS, the microprocessor (the most important component in today's computers), and three Stockton-raised, San Jose State University-schooled fraternity brothers who got the travel bug, and sowed their adventurous oats in Nicaragua. Since that time, four more presidents have occupied the White House, the computer has become the frontrunner of emerging technologies, and those three frat brothers are now poised to become world-class players in the international coffee trade.

Goodbye Stockton

After they said goodbye to San Jose State in the late '60s, each left to explore other parts of the world. Mike Atherton headed for Tahoe, eventually opening a gift and pawn shop there. Bing Kirk found the slopes of Sun Valley, Idaho to his liking, and worked in construction. Dave Lintner joined the Peace Corps, and as fate would have it, landed in Nicaragua. By the mid '70s, Lintner had lured Atherton to work on a farm with him in Jalapa, a region located near Nicaragua's border with Honduras. It didn't take long for Kirk to join them there in 1977.

"Here we were, these adventurous gringos working on these farms," Kirk remembers. They were also learning everything they could take in about coffee production.

"By the late '70s we became coffee brokers, loaning farmers money for the planting of their coffee crop," says Kirk. "After the harvest, they would repay us in coffee beans, which we would then sell to the coffee market."

Sandanista Coffee Break

Just as the three friends-turned-coffee brokers were hitting their stride in the coffee market, civil war erupted in Nicaragua, and the Sandanistas, a leftist Nicaraguan

political group, overthrew the Samozza regime of the time. By 1978, all three men were forced to leave the country. It would be almost two decades before Atherton, Kirk, and Lintner would reunite in Nicaragua and begin the next phase of their grand adventure.

Back in Business

This time around, in the early '90s, Atherton and Kirk brought the expertise they had acquired developing land in California during those intervening years, and Lintner contributed the regional knowledge he had absorbed during his lengthy stays in Nicaragua. They bought 1,200 acres in Nicaragua's Nueva Segovia region, in the shadow of *El Cerro de Jesus*—loosely translated as Jesus Mountain in English—which at 1,792 meters is the country's second tallest peak. It is here where such favorable climatic conditions as altitude (1,200 to 1,500 meters above sea level), rainfall (1,500 to 2,000 millimeters per year), and temperature (65 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit) permit a long growing season. The microclimate in this small, specific area, the Nueva Segovia region, allows such shade-loving Arabica tree varieties as Caturra, Bourbon, Catauai Rojo, and Pacamara to thrive, leading these budding entrepreneurs to launch their mission—the creation of specialty coffee under their own Jesus Mountain Coffee Company label.

Community Outreach

Lintner manages all on-site farm operations, which, in 2007, produced four hundred thousand pounds of coffee beans, a 25 percent increase over their 2006 output. The Jesus Mountain workforce employs sixty full-time

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employees, and, at harvest time, as many as four hundred additional temporary workers, housed in dormitories on the property.

With about 48 percent of Nicaragua's approximately 5.7 million residents living below the poverty line—the third lowest per capita income in the Western Hemisphere—it's not surprising to find that workers often value earning a wage over sending their children to school.

"That's what we discovered early on," says Kirk. "The closest school to our farms was located about four kilometers (over two miles) away. After discussions with officials in Jalapa, the community near our farms, we decided to build a school and a church on our property, making school attendance a condition of employment. Now kids attend school (up to sixth grade) at least four hours a day."

Back in the States

While Lintner resides at the Jesus Mountain farm, keeping the beans growing, Kirk, Atherton, financial partner Bill Filios, and roaster Art Nunes, Jr. work the marketing and roasting end of Jesus Mountain Coffee Company at the same Manteca site that was once home to the Spreckels Sugar Plant. In a spacious room that shares occupancy with large, Jesus Mountain logo-imprinted, burlap bags is a bright red machine that looks like it would be equally at home, at least in color and style, on a fire truck. It is the company's Diedrich Coffee Roaster, a computerized roasting machine that enables Jesus Mountain to faithfully reproduce their signature coffee profiles.

"Before roasters became computerized, companies relied on the abilities of a seasoned roaster, as the process relied on more heart than science," says Nunes, Jr. "Computerized roasting machines can fine tune the necessary heat, airflow, and timing." Mastering these controls, he explains, produces roasted beans that have a distinctive flavor and aroma.



Successfully duplicating these profiles, which denote characteristics of body, acidity, and balance, is all about carefully controlling each stage of the coffee bean processing process, says Kirk.

"Traditionally, Nicaraguan coffee farm growers did not separate the beans from the various coffee trees they harvested," he says. "So, for example, Bourbon tree beans would be mixed with Caturra or Pacamara beans. We are changing this process so we can, at will, mix these varieties in the specific proportions we need."

Their Cup Runneth Over

This mix and match strategy has already produced a big payoff for the Jesus Mountain Coffee Company. In 2007, their signature Jesus Mountain Estate coffee won fourth place in the Specialty Coffee Association of America's (SCAA) annual Roasters Guild Cupping Pavilion Competition. The annual competition is a three-day international cupping where over a hundred participating companies present coffee samples to be evaluated by thirty judges for bean fragrance, aroma, taste, flavor, aftertaste, and body. Gaining this recognition is a huge honor for the Jesus Mountain Coffee Company, says Kirk, because coffee from Nicaraguan-grown beans

has never placed in this competition's top twelve rankings.

It's also just the type of distinction that's needed to help Jesus Mountain differentiate itself in the burgeoning specialty coffee sector. Becoming Starbucks-accredited is another part of their strategy.

"You're looked upon highly in our industry if you carry the Starbucks accreditation," says Kirk, of a set of stringent criteria that Starbucks coffee producers have to meet.

"Arabica trees are vulnerable to certain diseases, and we still rely on pesticides and farmicides to keep them healthy," Nunes adds. "When Starbucks visited our farms, they were concerned that our nearby waterways might be polluted from a chemical runoff."

The good news, he explains, is that Jesus Mountain is now recapturing that slimy mucilage that covers the coffee bean during the fermentation process and composting it. This compost will eventually take the place of fertilizer and other chemicals, and now allow their production to conform to Starbucks standards.

Not the Only Game in Town

As attractive as it would be to sell beans to Starbucks, they are by no means the only choice, says Kirk. >

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"We are currently exporting our beans to Hawaii, where roasters are actually paying 30 to 40 cents more for our coffee than Starbucks would pay," he says.

In fact, Hawaii will continue to loom large in Jesus Mountain's future.

"While we have a fee simple deed [allowing the rights to control, use, and transfer the Nicaraguan property at will], and our company is registered as a Nicaraguan corporation, the political climate there is turbulent," says Nunes. "We are focusing on acquiring land in Hawaii, where we would grow beans in such places as Molokai, Maui, and the Big Island." On the local front, Jesus Mountain is expanding its marketing clientele with coffee service accounts at Bank of Stockton and the Pacific State Bank.

From Seed to Cup

Wherever the Jesus Mountain Coffee Company expands its farming footprint, and whichever brokers choose to do business with the company, Jesus Mountain is intent on creating specialty coffee brands in a

socially-responsible way—producing their coffee sustainably, and improving the living conditions of their workers.

"Our motto is 'From Seed to Cup,'" says Kirk. "We are one of the very few vertically integrated coffee producers around [involved in all phases of the production, shipping, and distribution of our product]. That means we can introduce quality into every step of production, from the sowing of the plants to the harvesting, milling, and lastly, the roasting process. That's what we stand for, and that's the message that we want everyone to hear." SJM

» You can find Jesus Mountain Coffee Company's award-winning Estate coffee and their other coffee varieties at the following locations:

Kelly Brothers Brewing Company

112 E. Yosemite Ave., Manteca
(209) 825-1727, www.kellybrewing.com

Alder Market

151 W. Alder St., Stockton
(209) 943-1921, www.aldermarket.com

Garlic Brothers Restaurant

6629 Embarcadero Dr., Stockton
(209) 474-6585, www.garlic-brothers.com

Jitterz Coffee House

149 Lincoln Center, Stockton
(209) 956-3229

www.jesushillcoffee.com/jitterz.htm

» FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Jesus Mountain Coffee Company
Manteca, (209) 824-7832
www.jesushillcoffee.com



Bing Kirk, Art Nunes, Bill Filios, and Mike Atherton



LOVE AT FIRST CRACK: THE COFFEE-MAKING PROCESS

The coffee that we drink starts its life as coffee berries picked by hand from different varieties of Arabica trees. The flesh of these berries is removed, and the remaining seeds, called 'beans' are fermented, then washed to remove the sugary, slimy coating on the bean, and dried in the sun. The dried, green-colored beans are now ready for roasting.

The skilled coffee roaster is a bit like an alchemist, who, with the assistance of a coffee roasting machine, applies heat and airflow, transforming the chemical and physical properties of green coffee beans. During roasting, green coffee beans expand to nearly double their original size, changing during this process to the color and density that we recognize as coffee beans. It's an art that relies on both audible and aromatic cues.

"That first crack happens at about 380 degrees," says Kirk. "And it sounds much like popcorn popping. The second crack happens at 425 degrees, when the actual physical structure of the bean starts to fracture."