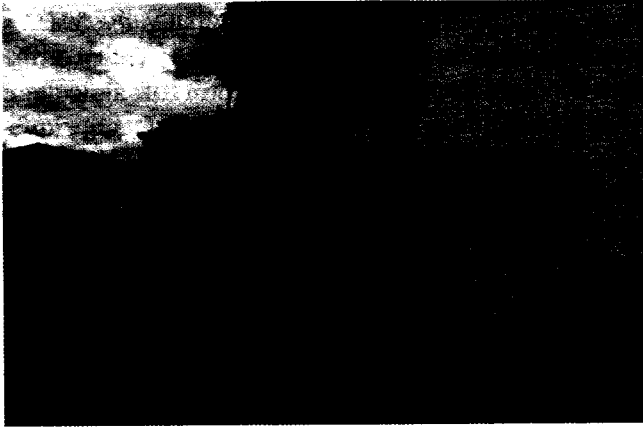
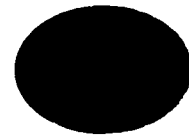


# What cost a cup of coffee?

by Armando Canales



It is a hot day in October and a large truck pulls up at the farm gate. The truck has been expected for the past two days so everyone is happy when it finally arrives. The buyer is impatient; he wants the coffee loaded up fast so he can move on to the next farm. The price had been previously agreed but now he turns up with only part of the agreed total. It is a take it or leave it situation for the farmer. This year's crop is a marked improvement over the past few seasons, the result of the extra attention to detail and the small investments the farmer has struggled to make over the past two years. The coffee is now of excellent quality yet the buyer is only paying commodity<sup>1</sup> coffee prices. But there is no alternative and the top quality coffee will now be sold on as only commodity coffee, to be mixed with dozens of other coffees in the area and, eventually, coffees from the whole country. This story repeats itself thousands of times around the coffee growing regions of the world. It is a situation that benefits neither the farmers nor the consumers. What can be done? What follows is the story of a Brazilian farmers co-operative and two of their farms that have now become part of a project selling their coffee directly to consumers in the UK offering a model for a new way forward.

The Chapada Diamantina (Diamond Plateau) is a lush, green mountain range in the state of Bahia in the north-east of Brazil, half way between the equator and the Tropic of Capricorn. With an average height of over 1,000 metres and a temperate climate, it provides an ideal microclimate for coffee farming. The Chapada Diamantina region is the largest biodynamic coffee-producing area in Brazil with over 600 workers and their families involved in this form of agriculture. It is here that 23 of the coffee growing farms formed a co-operative.

The roots of this co-operative can be traced back to the early 1980's when these farmers were part of a movement in the Chapada Diamantina region resisting the expansion and promotion by the Brazilian government – as well as many international organisations – of so-called modern agriculture, with its high degree of mechanisation and use of agrichemicals. This resistance group felt this modern approach to be a threat to traditional ways of farming. So they organized themselves and presented a united front against the pressures to change over to these methods and eventually they embraced an organic agricultural approach as a way to replicate or maintain their traditional ways of farming. At that time they were not organised as a co-operative, rather they were a loose group of individuals with a common belief – in this case it was organic agriculture – led in the beginning by one of the farmers, Adeodato, and to this day he remains very much the spiritual leader for this movement. About eight years ago, this movement came across the whole concept of biodynamic agriculture, promoted by Instituto Biodinâmico (IBD) in Brazil. Adeodato and the other leaders of this movement saw the principles in biodynamic in terms of the harmony between the cosmos, the earth and the people who work the land. What they saw in its principles reminded them of their older traditional values in terms of society and the good treatment of the land. Thus they recognised that the processes and procedures inherent in the biodynamic approach to agriculture, providing as it did a higher set of values to aspire to, would, importantly, be acceptable to local people, many of whom still farmed in the traditional ways. A traditional farmer in Brazil is called a *camponês*, meaning a worker of the field, a *campo*, traditionally on a small scale. These farmers were used to not questioning traditional practices, because what mattered to them was





that it produced results in a way that was right for the land, so the fact that the biodynamic approach was close to their own experiences was enough for them.

This movement became important for the whole region because, at its lower altitudes, the expansion of mechanized agriculture is very large and there are many areas that are farmed by the method of 'pivot'<sup>2</sup> agriculture, with a high consumption of water and fertilisers leading to contamination of the water further downhill. Many of the traditional farmers in these areas were losing their farms as a result of not being able to compete with these highly mechanised farms and so, being unviable, had to sell. The large corporations farming the land became even bigger as a consequence. This has all sorts of social implications, because when those farmers lose their land, where will they go? They will go into the big cities, then into the slums and the misery that goes with it; and it is the same all over the world, not just in Brazil. So this farmers' movement was an attempt to not let this happen. In the 1980s 65% of all coffee produced in Brazil came from family farms. Today, only 25% of the coffee is produced by family farms, a substantial decrease, meaning 75% of the coffee is now produced by large corporations or large farms, primarily through mechanised agriculture. Why does this matter? It has a huge social aspect. Family farms in Brazil today account for about 30% of all the arable land yet they employ 75% of the rural workforce, whereas the large corporations are handling 70% of the land but only employing a small percentage of labour.

About six years ago, the 23 farms in this movement gained the necessary biodynamic certification so that their produce could receive the Demeter label. Eventually they formed themselves into a co-operative that received government certification in 2007. In order to be more effective they recognised they would also need some political representation. It is a subtle aspect of working with the biodynamic approach that often a deeper social involvement with the land awakens, becomes more possible even, and so a group of farmers who had never been involved in politics in any way before found the confidence, in terms of their organisation, to now

stand up, make demands and even run for office in the local government. The person who now runs the local government is not one of the farmers, but somebody they promoted and who obviously has responded with the right policies to support this type of agriculture.

What biodynamics has done is to give the farmers a common belief enabling them to organise themselves in a way that can be more successful together and because its practices have led to such positive results the farmers believe in it in terms of the production capability of the land. Biodynamics is the purest form of agriculture and because it is not an intensive form of agriculture, you would expect productivity to be relatively lower compared to conventional methods. The key to making comparisons, however, is to understand the difference between a quantitative analysis and a qualitative one. Statistics from the region that includes the co-operative farming area in Brazil show that, on average, intensive agriculture produces about 90 bags (60kg bags) of coffee per hectare; conventional agriculture produces about 60 bags; biodynamic (in the co-operative farming area) produces about 38 bags. Whilst the biodynamic yield is less than that achieved by modern conventional methods, it should be borne in mind that a mixed crop approach is used whereby you lose a row of coffee bushes every few rows, but it compares well against the organic average in Brazil which is only 25 bags per hectare. So, even though the density of land usage is lower the production is still higher than organic and this is surely due to the methods of biodynamics imparting more vital energy to the land, coupled with the fact that the farmers have a procedure that they follow encouraging better productivity and based on respecting the balances needed for creating integrity and wholeness throughout the farm's land. But again, the issue of quality needs to be taken into account. In our culture we are too quick to judge things simply by weight, number and measure. Life forces are strong in biodynamic farms. In conventional coffee agriculture the variation of the coffee plant yield, which has a biannual pattern of production, (i.e. it has alternating good and not so good harvests), shows a drop in production every other year of 20-30% but with the biodynamic approach that variation is only about 10-15%, half of what the conventional plant may experience, so this is where the result of the stronger life forces inherent to biodynamics comes into play.

To try and see what this co-operative of coffee growers is achieving we first have to understand a bigger context. Coffee is in the top five trading commodities in the world (oil, steel, wheat, being some of the others). There is more coffee traded than bananas, than cotton and almost every other agricultural commodity. This is a huge business and Brazil produces about a third of all the coffee in the world. Just as South Africa's history is tightly woven with diamonds and gold and the Middle East's is tightly woven with oil, the story of Brazil is all tied in with coffee, as well as sugar cane and other things, but primarily coffee. The market for coffee has developed across the world in

a variety of ways. For example, when you go to the USA, the first thing you might notice is bad coffee. Americans drink bad coffee for the most part, but, if you go to the East Coast or the West Coast, there you find that they drink very good coffee and that there is a very vibrant market for what is called speciality or 'gourmet' coffees. The UK also has a very vibrant market for speciality coffee. This speciality demand is small, a tiny fraction of the total market and what that means is that when you drink in one of the big coffee chains or your local coffee shop you will usually be drinking coffee without any characteristic. It will be a blend of perhaps four or five types coffees, possibly from various areas of the world for that matter. You may be served, say, Columbian coffee but it can be from many regions in Columbia and many different coffee beans blended to produce a standard flavour. So time after time it is always the same flavour. It is the equivalent of you going to the shop and buying a five-litre box of wine that just says 'white' or just says 'red' with many different grapes having gone into it. Yet the speciality coffee industry is relatively old; it was the original coffee industry and it has been lost, but now, in a small way, it is being rediscovered. Whilst historically tea, especially in England, was the drink of the wealthy classes, it was in the coffee shops around the world that social change has happened, or social change was planned and discussed over cups of coffee. Look at Paris, Vienna or even in London in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and you find that the coffee shops were the places where people met to discuss social change. Gradually that culture then became lost to just one of drinking coffee purely for the sake of the narcotic in it.

Nowadays many people will drink a cup of coffee and not know where it comes from, nor know how it was made, they know very little about it. I like to contrast it with wine, because people have developed a culture of wine, whereby they understand it – not everybody, but certainly wine lovers now contribute a much broader spectrum of people in, say, the UK. They understand the difference between various types of wine, but very few people would understand the difference between a coffee from Brazil and a coffee from, say, Rwanda. They would also have no idea what is meant by a 'washed coffee' for example and they just have no conception of the different products and experiences that they could have.

When you buy a cheese you want to have a certain experience, so if you eat, say, a Manchego cheese from Spain you know what to expect, you know the range of flavours that you can expect and if you then have a good British Stilton cheese, you again know what to expect. It is the same with speciality single-origin coffee, you are looking for certain flavour characteristics rather than just a blended, nondescript, coffee taste. There is an interesting aspect to the chemistry of the coffee; if you are going to drink a good coffee then you want to drink a *freshly* roasted coffee, not something that has been roasted and has been sitting on the shelf for six or

seven months before you even buy it and take it home. This is because after a period of time, perhaps two to three months, the flavour profile of the coffee starts decreasing. When you drink a freshly roasted, good quality coffee it releases certain enzymes as it comes into contact with your mouth that then cover your taste buds and palate giving you the taste sensation of a very 'clean' cup of coffee, whereas, when you drink a coffee that is not good quality, you can taste a bitterness that lingers for a long time in the mouth.

There are many different gradings for coffee just like there are for wines. One of them is the 'Cup of Excellence', which is basically an award given purely on material quality and quality of flavour. Different aspects of the coffee, such as aroma, sweetness and cleanliness of the flavour, are graded through a process called 'cupping'. This is a standard procedure that establishes a set of parameters stipulating such things as the degree to which coffee should be ground and the time it should be left in water of a certain temperature. It is very similar to the process of wine tasting and people who do cupping will say this has 'chocolatey' taste, or has a strawberry flavour and so on. The cupping expert will have developed a palate able to identify the differences between coffees and be able to designate a grade and a flavour profile.

The speciality market, for the most part, looks to sell coffees that have come from either a single farm or potentially a single region. The biggest challenge



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