



Santuario = Geisha =

C O L O M B I A

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Ever since a Geisha coffee from Panama took the world by storm almost eight years ago, the variety has been coveted by growers throughout Latin America looking to capitalize on the phenomenon.

It has not always worked. These days you can find tiny plots of Geisha coffee at a handful of farms in nearly every producing country in Latin America, but in many

cases the coffee trees do not adapt well to the new environment. A large percentage of these transplants do not produce coffees that fully express the powerful floral and papaya traits that are the hallmarks of the variety. Although Geisha's genetics alone give it massive potential, there is growing evidence that it needs a certain climate to thrive and yield a coffee with transcendent flavor and intensity.

Colombia happens to have near ideal conditions, and the Santuario farm situated in the department of Cauca just out-

side of Popayan, is just the place where Geisha can really strut its stuff. Still, simply having a favorable environment is not enough to guarantee great results. The role of the farmer is critical and Camilo Merizalde is a very special grower. The work he has done at Santuario since he founded the farm in 1999 in an effort to discover coffee's uppermost quality potential is nothing short of inspirational. We have been working with him for almost a decade and our lineup over the past few years has featured some exceptionally beautiful coffees that became instant favorites of both our staff and our customers. Most were *Bourbon* and *Typica* cultivars from sections of the farm called Heliconias, Micay, and Mirador.

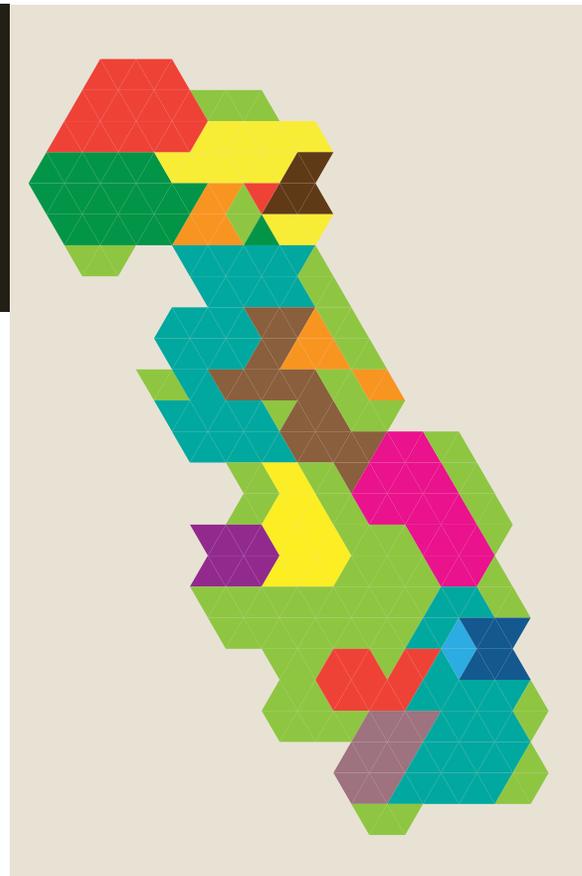
Camilo Merizalde
PRODUCER

Cauca
REGION

Geisha
CULTIVAR

1700-2100
ELEV. (MASL)

Jul - Aug
HARVEST



This season we have something even more exciting: a small Geisha lot that our sourcing team rewarded with some of the highest scores they have given a coffee in years. Camilo planted this coffee six years ago on a small plot within the Santuario farm and we have tracked the cupping results ever since the trees began bearing fruit. The verdict? It just keeps getting better. He started with a few kilos of seeds back in 2006 and is now producing just over 30 bags of coffee per season, a very small amount of which over half is sold overseas in the Japanese market. We have only 670 pounds to sell, so it will only be available for a short time.

GEOFF WATTS | GREEN COFFEE BUYER



SANTUARIO: **THE DESIGNER'S FARM**

The story of the Santuario farm is a blueprint for the creation of exceptional coffees. It is also a place that almost never was.

The unlikely history of Santuario starts around 1997. Camilo Merizalde, born and raised in Cali, Colombia, and educated at both Purdue University and the University of Florida, decided that he wanted to build a coffee farm and began working on it in 1999. It was a startling decision, in part because he had already had successful career in product development, but most especially given that the global coffee market was just entering what would become the most serious and sustained depression the industry has ever seen. Prices for coffee by the end of the decade were far below even basic production costs in most cases. Farmers throughout Latin America were beginning to fear for their futures. When considering options regarding where to devote resources, coffee production would not even have appeared on most economists' lists and most investors would have laughed themselves silly at the mere suggestion that building a boutique, debt-heavy coffee farm in a somewhat insecure region of Colombia was a good idea.

Fortunately, Camilo happens to be an optimist who enjoys taking risks and he decided to build a farm anyway, despite the long odds of success. After years spent traveling back and forth between Colombia and the States, he was curious about why—since Colombia was so famous for coffee—it did not enjoy a tremendous reputation for quality among specialty roasters as compared with coffees from origins like Kenya, Ethiopia, and Guatemala. He spent two years studying the industry, visiting roasters and attending coffee conventions and made the decision that he would try his hand at producing something that could represent Colombia's top potential.

His wife's family had some land in the department of Cauca, just outside of Popayan. With elevations starting at 1820 and reaching past 2000 meters, this land was ideal for growing coffee in Colombia. At the time he developed the farm idea the land was being used for grazing cattle and was nearly barren with no vegetation but some



occasional patches of grass. Intent on getting things right from the beginning, Camilo spent another year investigating the factors critical to quality coffee production and sustainability. After consulting with agronomy experts from Colombia, Central America, and Japan he slowly developed a design for his farm. There would be wide spacing between rows of coffee to promote good productivity and discourage diseases. He would plant a variety of leguminous and other types of trees and vegetation to provide shading, protection from winds, organic material for mulch, moisture retention, and encourage overall soil health. This biodiversity, while initially more expensive, is the basis for long-term sustainability on any farm. Creating an environment where nature can work its magic in the form of interdependent biological systems that support plant and animal life is critical to maintaining a healthy farm environment.

Camilo approached the layout of the farm as a good architect would, plotting it out meter by square meter and making arrangements that made sense based on the



existing environment. He created a map of the farm that detailed every tiny parcel with precise demarcation of all the various types of trees and shrubs planted there. He chose to plant specific varieties after studying the specialty coffee market and consulting with friends. Rather than pick the high yielding, easier to grow varieties widely available in Colombia (*Caturra*, *Variedad Colombia*, *Castillo*), he chose varieties known for their ability to produce sensational tasting coffee seeds. Old *Typica* and *Bourbon* stocks, including the original *Bourbon Pointu* (a.k.a. *Laurina*) from Reunion Island, are generally less productive and more fragile than the hybrids that are often being planted these days, but they have a much higher ceiling when it comes to cup quality. He then planted them separately, keeping each lot restricted to one type so that the different varieties could be easily segregated during harvest.

To provide options for the future he created an experimental garden, a gorgeous little plot with twenty-six different coffee varieties planted in neat rows that could be studied and tasted for consideration down the road. Many research facilities around the world would be extremely jealous of this tiny garden. Among the many varieties there are *Mocha*, *Purpurescens*, *Sudan Rume*, *Mibirizi*, *Eugenoides* and many other interesting coffee types, some of which are now being planted in larger volumes at Camilo's new micro-farms because they've shown so much potential in the cupping trials.

Once the farm was up and running, he built a nursery to cultivate future trees, rehabilitated the wet mill and began planning for state-of-the-art facilities for drying. Since that time he's been working various parts of the farm using a number of different approaches in order to see how the coffees would respond, taking soil and leaf samples regularly and treating each parcel in accordance with its specific needs.

To say this is an impressive farm is understating the facts. This is a dream farm, built by design based on the best information available in 2000 and maintained with the attention to detail and passion that can only come from someone truly obsessed with the idea of achieving something great. It has given rise to two new farm projects that Camilo started recently in Valle de Cauca, which will undoubtedly take quality even beyond what has been achieved at Santuario.

The impact of Camilo's work extends beyond the cultivation of world-class coffee; in creating the farm he has successfully reinvigorated land that had long been dormant, creating a biologically diverse ecosystem that was not there before. His efforts have helped those around him as well—there are dozens of small-scale farms surrounding Santuario and Camilo's example of what can be done has been an inspiration to others farmers from countries throughout Latin America. The fact that the use of boutique varieties, careful management of the technical aspects of plant husbandry and methodical process control invariably improves quality outcomes is a lesson that every farmer can take advantage of and use to pursue premium quality as a means of securing higher incomes.



AND FROM AMONGST THEM,
ONE SHALL RISE:

A GEISHA STORY

Sometimes mild curiosity brings forth extraordinary developments. History has shown us over and over again—both in culture and in nature—that things sometimes considered ordinary or oddly esoteric can turn out to have a beauty or value that was either obscured or simply not recognized because we did not have the right lens at the time we were looking.

The Geisha story is one of both revival and of progress. It is a bridge that connects a rich history to a bright and quickly changing future in the world of coffee. This tree, and the beans it produces, is at once a beacon pointing the way towards a coffee landscape we all want to see and a deliverance of sorts—a cup of Geisha can provide something as close as we’ve seen to perfection in coffee, a sensory rapture that is nothing short of inspirational.

But enough (for now) with the histrionics. Let’s get to the facts. First I would like to define two important terms:

1. VARIETY: this term when used in coffee refers to a distinct type of coffee tree, as characterized by specific botanic or genetic traits. It is a morphological subgroup within a species. In our context the species is *Coffea Arabica* (member of the Rubiaceae family of flowering plants) and Geisha is a variety. This is not to be confused with “cultivar,” which is like a variety but is the result of deliberate plant breeding rather than natural mutation.

2. SELECTION: in Botany, refers to the isolation of a particular strain of a variety based on traits displayed by the plant that make it distinct from its brothers and sisters.

The story starts in Ethiopia, the birthplace of Arabica and the only place on earth where the species grows wild. Back in 1931 a group of botanists made an expedition into the forests of Southwestern Ethiopia (called Abyssinia at the time) to collect coffee seeds in an area that was referred to by locals as “Geisha” (or “Gesha” if you

prefer—the local language is written in symbols, so all translations to English are done phonetically and both spellings are used interchangeably). Those seeds were taken to Kenya and planted in a nursery to grow. After five years the trees were bearing fruit and at that point several selections were taken from the healthiest, most vibrant trees and brought to other gardens in Uganda (Kawanda) and Tanzania (Lyamungu).

Nearly two decades later, in 1953, some Geisha seeds from the Tanzania garden were taken to Costa Rica to be added to the collection of varieties being studied at CATIE, the world-renowned agricultural research center. Then in 1963 a farmer by the name of Pachi Serracin brought some of these seeds to Panama and planted them at high altitude in the volcanic soil of Boquete.

At this point they were nothing but a curiosity—a “why not?” proposition—and after a few years of cultivation it seems they were basically abandoned due to their low yields and lack of sturdiness. Soon after they were all but forgotten, becoming nothing more than a bunch of weak looking trees growing amongst the legions of Caturra and other common Latin varieties. But in 2003 something changed. Daniel Peterson of the Esmeralda Estate had noticed this patch of trees that were distinctly different than everything else. Up until that point they would generally been harvested together with the other coffees and mixed into other lots. But the Best of Panama competition was coming up and Daniel was looking for something special to submit. After harvesting the coffee separately and tasting it in his lab he and his family recognized that it tasted dramatically different than anything else they were producing. Funny thing was, they were not at all sure whether people would like it or whether it would be dismissed as an aberration from what was then considered the typical “profile” for Panamanian coffees. After considering for a while they decided to throw it in out of curiosity and see what happened.

What occurred next was nothing short of a coffee revolution. I had the privilege of being on that jury in 2003 and can remember distinctly the reaction of all of the judges. Amongst the 25+ finalist coffees we tasted, all of



which were of very high caliber, there was one that had us all simultaneously delighted and confounded. You could smell it from across the table—beautiful jasmine, lemongrass, coffee-blossom, sweet lime and white peach aromas drifting through the room. At first we thought someone was playing a trick on us—had they slipped an Ethiopian coffee onto the table? Had someone doctored a sample? All of us had cupped thousands of coffees from Central America and not once had we tasted something like this.

The competition was over before it began. This coffee had enchanted everyone on the jury, and from round one onwards it was clear that it was going to win by a landslide. Once the results were revealed we learned from the Peterson family that it was a variety that had been growing on their farm for several decades and that they called it “Geisha.” In the subsequent auction the coffee sold for \$21.00 per pound, a staggering price at the time. A new legend was born. What followed was a series of performances that helped the Geisha cement itself as more than just a flash in the pan. Take a look at the record:

- 1st Place**, Best of Panama 2003
- 1st Place**, Rainforest Alliance cupping 2004
- 1st Place**, Best of Panama 2004
- 1st Place**, SCAA Seattle Cupping Pavilion 2005
- 1st Place**, Best of Panama 2005
- 1st Place**, Rainforest Alliance cupping 2006
- 1st Place**, SCAA Charlotte Cupping Pavilion 2006
- 1st Place**, Rainforest Alliance cupping 2007
- 1st Place**, SCAA Long Beach Cupping Pavilion 2007
- 1st Place**, SCAA Coffee of the Year competition 2008
- 1st Place**, Best of Panama 2009
- 1st Place**, Best of Panama 2010

With rare exception, this Geisha coffee has won every competition it has entered for almost a decade. It has set and then broken five records for most expensive auction coffee in the world, topping out at whopping \$170 per pound in a recent auction. It has become the most talked about coffee in the industry, and caused producers from Mexico to Bolivia to scramble to try to get their hands on seeds so they could get involved in the phenomenon and try to reap some of the windfall profits before Geisha gets too widespread. Time will tell how this works out and how it impacts the pricing once there is a bigger supply to feed the appetites of the world's most obsessive roasters and baristas. Will it grow well in other microclimates?

Will something else come along and replace Geisha as the most revered varietal in the industry? Perhaps. But until that day comes, Geisha will continue to sit alone on the throne as the reigning champion varietal in the Latin American coffee landscape.

For coffee lovers there are few more exhilarating experiences than playing around with a well-grown, high-altitude, well-roasted, carefully brewed Geisha. The beans themselves are pretty—oblong, elongated, and relatively large. The aromas begin to release the moment the coffee is ground, at first in a teasing way. Gentle lime, light floral notes and a whisper of sweet tropical fruit waft up and float away. Once the water is poured the experience intensifies: sweet candied lemon and delicate, perfume-like jasmine notes become more pronounced and vibrant. The first sip can almost take your breath away with its complexity and sweetness, but that's just the start of a ten minute sensory indulgence that continues through to the last tantalizing drop. As the coffee cools more flavor notes become evident and by the end it leaves one wondering—how could coffee possibly be any better than this?

