



THE COLOMBIA SENSORY TRIAL
A Coffeelands conversation with Intelligentsia's Geoff Watts

COFFEELANDS: WHY did participating in the Colombia Sensory Trial appeal to you?

GEOFF: This trial was important (and exciting!) to me on many different levels. We'd been grappling with this question--how does Castillo compare with Caturra in the cup--for nearly a decade but had yet to locate any empirical evidence to help us understand the differences, or even begin to quantify them. Everyone's got opinions, but they are mostly based on anecdotal experiences and to date there was nothing we could look to that would give us enough confidence to make decisions with.

Our business is built on the premise that we can compete by providing our customers with coffees of exceptionally great taste. Coffees with 'acceptable' taste, or 'decent' taste, or 'OK' taste are relatively easy to come by these days. We need to have access to coffees that are much better than that in order to compete effectively in our market. That's precisely the reason why we spend so much time working with farmers; it is only by being *active* participants on the supply-side in the production of coffee that we can be sure we'll have the ingredients we need to go out and accomplish our goals on the consumer side.

Knowing that without great quality green coffee we cannot succeed gives us an acute interest in outcomes of the decisions that farmers are making about what to plant. I get asked all the time by farmers about varieties, usually some form of the question, "Which variety is best for quality?" That's a huge, gaping black hole of a question, with nothing resembling a clear answer. As buyers we directly influence the decisions farmers make, since we make decisions about how and when to put premiums on coffees based on the way they taste. If the decision to plant a particular variety lessens a farmer's ability--or even *probability*--of producing coffee with the kind of quality we need, it would impact our ability to work with them in the future. That's alarming, given that we have built our operating model around the idea of long-term commitments with specific growers. For that reason, understanding the implications of these decisions is absolutely necessary, and we cannot understand them if we are sitting on the sidelines awaiting an answer that may never come. At the very core of our strategy to develop partnership with farmers is a requirement that we take an active role in figuring out how to achieve mutual, long-term success. That means planning ahead and ensuring that choices made today will result in positive outcomes down the road.



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COFFEELANDS: HOW did it compare to other sensory processes in which you have participated?

GEOFF: It was very professional, which was good, *and* highly enjoyable, also good. The panel of cuppers took the job very seriously, probably because everyone involved had a real intellectual and emotional interest in the results. This was not a frivolous exercise—it was an important step towards getting some answers that had been eluding us all for quite a while. It was both well designed and well executed, and the panel was comprised of people who had a great deal of experience working with nuance in coffee. It was enjoyable for most of the same reasons—the discussions after each round were thoughtful and substantive, largely because the individual cuppers were very invested in the work and the process was controlled in a way that enabled good focus and good sensory analysis.

COFFEELANDS: WHAT did you learn from the process?

GEOFF: My initial reaction to the results was relief. I wouldn't have ventured to predict the outcome, but if pressed I'd probably have guessed that the Caturra samples would have yielded better scores, both on average and at the top end. When it turned out that they were somewhat similar by both measures I was slightly surprised but mostly just relieved because, like it or not, there have been more Castillo seeds showing up in the coffees we buy every year.

What has been happening in Colombia is unprecedented—Castillo has spread through the country at what must be a historic rate, and in a few short years has displaced a huge percentage of the Caturra that was there, becoming the dominant variety in almost the blink of an eye. Castillo is in the ground all over Colombia, that's a reality, and we all can breathe a little bit easier knowing that it doesn't completely suck. I'm relieved for the farmers who have planted it, because they stand to benefit most if their trees can resist rust, reduce need for fungicide, *and* produce high quality.



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COFFEELANDS: SO, WHAT? What implications, if any, does the experience have for each of you?

GEOFF: The immediate implication is that I won't have a small feeling of discomfort every time I have to type "Castillo" onto the label of our packages. That is more meaningful to me than you might realize. It is encouraging, and it bodes well for the future of coffee hybrids. The results of this trial did a little something to validate the work of the plant breeders who have spent decades working on getting this right. That said, we need to be very careful not to walk away from this trial thinking we've got answers. We are a long way from having answers. It is important to keep this in perspective--it was a single snapshot of what happened during one harvest, on a handful of farms, in one small part of one department in a very large country. These results cannot be extrapolated to other regions or other Castillo types, and cannot be considered conclusive in any way. In fact, they don't really mean much at all on their own. What I can take away from this is just that Castillo is indeed capable of producing a very delicious cup--I think it demonstrated that pretty clearly. If that were the only question we wanted to answer then we could all go home.

But that's not it, and it would be a grave mistake to focus too much on the question "which is better, Caturra vs Castillo?" That's the wrong question. The relevant question is, as Tim suggested, "What should coffee farmers be planting?" And the answer to that question, as we have been telling farmers in Nariño throughout the Borderlands project, is almost certainly not any single variety, nor is it the same answer for every farmer. The right answer is: It depends. It depends on where the farm is, how big it is, and what kind of resources the farmers have at their disposal. It depends on their personal goals, and their ability and willingness to aggressively pursue opportunities in specialty or invest in farm management. It depends on their level of connectivity with the marketplace. It depends on their tolerance for risk, and desire for reward. The best answer for some farmers in Nariño in 2015 may indeed be Castillo. For others it may be something else--another variety, a combination of varieties, or even a different crop altogether. On a global or national scale the best answer is surely to diversify, and to reduce reliance on any single coffee type. If agricultural history has taught us anything it is that monoculture is a bad idea.

For me, the most important thing to come from this is not the result but the very fact of the trial itself. It is a good first step towards developing a viable template that can be used again to continue this kind of research. The hope is that this kind of trial can be replicated on a larger scale for future harvests in Nariño, in other regions of Colombia, and in other countries. That would be truly meaningful.