



COLOMBIA SENSORY TRIAL

A Coffeelands Conversation with Luis Fernando Samper of the *Federación Nacional de Cafeteros*

COFFEELANDS: The Federation did not participate in the design of the Colombia Sensory Trial, but you have told me that you thought it was necessary. Why?

LUIS FERNANDO: When we began our policy of suggesting Castillo to coffee growers, we were confident that this was a good decision for the sustainability of coffee growing in Colombia because we had all necessary information in terms of its yields, quality and resistance to rust. But it is one thing to design a policy and quite another to implement it.

We knew from experience that the process of adopting new technologies (in this case a new variety) can be difficult. People have a natural resistance to change. From our experience delivering extension services through the FNC, we know that some growers are open to innovation and willing to take risks; however, others are slower to innovate, more skeptical, and have to be sure that the new variety has worked before they will plant it in their own fields.

What we did not anticipate was the resistance to change from certain segments of the industry, and this is why this study is particularly important. Of course we had gotten feedback on Castillo's sensorial quality from industry allies before we released it, and they gave Castillo great reviews. These results were not public, however, and myths were created about Castillo's quality so there was great resistance from some people in the industry. We tried to provide scientific information to show Castillo's quality potential through our Colombiancoffeehub.com and visits to Cenicafé, but the evidence we drew on was taken from our studies. The great advantage of the Colombia Sensory Trial is that it was independent. We did not do it. It was needed to clear the air and it certainly has done that.

COFFEELANDS: Can you explain why Cenicafé did not conduct similar research sooner?

LUIS FERNANDO: You have to remember that for many years rust did not attack at elevations higher than 1600 meters. So at higher elevations in places like Nariño the penetration of varieties resistant to rust was a lot lower than in other areas of the country. Many cuppers made the mistake of comparing resistant varieties grown at lower elevations to Caturra, which was generally grown at higher elevations, and attributed the quality differences to variety and not the environmental conditions in which the trees were grown. In our Denomination of Origin work we showed that the growing environments play the dominant role, but many cuppers did not have the opportunity to do this apple-to-apple comparison of different varieties from the same growing environment.

It was not until recently that high altitude resistant trees started to produce in significant quantities to do this comparison from same farms. This is why this exercise is so important.



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SO, WHAT? What implications, if any, does the Trial have for Colombia's varietal policies?

The first thing that I want to underline is the importance of the research being done in coffee-growing countries. The coffee community should appreciate the work of Cenicafe's scientists, their decades-long record of success and their in-depth knowledge of the Arabica coffee tree. We are very confident in Cenicafé, its procedures and protocols.

The second thing I would like to say is that we are already developing new varieties more resilient to climate variability and climate changes. We cannot guarantee that conditions for coffee production are going to remain the same, and one of the most significant tools we have to confront this challenge is plant breeding and developing new varieties. We will continue this work, and we will all have to be more ready to accept change—good change, scientifically based change that will help coffee growers to deal with climate change.

Finally, I want to underscore that what we suggest to growers is based on what we believe is the best interest of the vast majority of Colombia's 560,000 producers. Of course, some of them may want to stick to Caturra or other varieties, and they are free to do so. There is no such a thing as a "variety police" in Colombia, looking to uproot trees that we do not recommend. If buyers want to buy a particular variety and want growers to grow something else, they should compensate them for the long-term risks of doing so. We will continue to innovate and hope the international community will continue to accept our scientifically based arguments. We need to answer to growers and help them respond to their needs.

If we had listened to the most vocal opponents of Castillo in the industry we would probably have failed coffee producers. I am reminded of the famous quote from Henry Ford, who said after building the Model T, "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said, 'faster horses.'"