

Equal Exchange

CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN COFFEE CONSUMERS AND COFFEE FARMERS IN CHIAPAS, MEXICO

by Amy Wisheart

I traveled to Chiapas, Mexico last year for an interfaith delegation with Equal Exchange, the Fair Trade worker cooperative where I work as an Interfaith Program Manager. It was my first trip outside the U.S.

We visited coffee farmers, met with activists and farmer representatives, and learned to pick coffee, experiencing what arduous, backbreaking work it really is. Most coffee farmers live in isolated, rural areas with limited access to markets, and so they are forced to sell their product to middlemen who offer them prices vastly below conventional market prices. But the farmers we met are part of the Fair Trade system and, although their lives are far from perfect, they have much more control over the fruits of their labor. They are democratically organized into a cooperative, which provides much-needed infrastructure and organization, and they are paid a guaranteed minimum price for their coffee.

To spread awareness of the reality of the lives of small-scale coffee farmers Equal Exchange organizes several delegations to Latin America every year for grocery store managers, consumers, activists, and faith-based groups. Our commitment to Fair Trade relationships extends to fostering personal connections between the farmers we buy from and the people who in turn buy from us. It is one thing to believe that Fair Trade is a good model, and quite another to meet producers face-to-face in their own communities, understanding their struggles in a way that leaves an indelible impression.

Coffee is grown primarily in remote, mountainous regions, far outside the colonial city of San Cristobal de las Casas, which served as our base. We made our way by van, slowly winding through the mountains on narrow roads. The vistas were breathtaking, with lush green mountains surrounding us on all sides. This was the dry season, and so the sun was always shining.

The first of the two farming communities we visited was Mercedes Isidoro. The

farmers there belong to the Fair Trade co-op CIRSA, which was founded in 1992, not long before the Zapatista uprising. Equal Exchange began buying coffee from them in 1996, and this is now the fourth year in a row that we've visited their communities. We use the organic coffee from CIRSA's members in our two Mexican coffee roasts as well as in our "Mind, Body & Soul" blend.

The entire community gathered in front of the church to greet us with banners and streamers. A different family hosted each of us for lunch. I speak very little Spanish, and many of the people we met spoke only Tzotzil, a local indigenous Mayan language, which made one-on-one communication very difficult, if not impossible.

I was led up a dirt path to a one-room house. There were two chairs and a small table, and sunlight angled through a small window that faced a yard with chickens. Because I could not communicate, I waited in silence for our host to bring our meal, while Hilario, an organic expert from CIRSA, spoke with him. We shared a simple but delicious meal of black beans and scrambled eggs that we ate with fresh, warm corn tortillas. The family did not eat with us, but a

woman carrying a small child entered the house and sat in a corner, watching us. I smiled at her, and she laughed quietly and smiled back.

We stayed for two days with host families in the next community we visited. La Pimienta is an isolated community about an hour's drive from Simojovel, the closest town, and the co-op's headquarters. The poverty there was extreme by U.S. standards—no running water, and limited access to food or medical care. And yet, compared with others in that region, they were doing well: the community had a school, and many houses had electricity and concrete floors instead of dirt floors. Most importantly, the coffee farmers had a stable income through the Fair Trade system. Increasingly, in recent years, Mexican farmers unable to eke out a living through farming have been forced to give up their farms and move their families to cities to work in factories. Not only are these farmers losing their land, but their culture and way of life is also disappearing.

During our first day at La Pimienta, several farmers led us up to one of their coffee plots on the mountain, so that we could see coffee harvesting first hand. Thirteen of us labored up the moun-



Filiberto Mazariegos, CIRSA's general manager, explains coffee processing to Equal Exchange delegates and coffee farmers in La Pimienta, Chiapas; Equal Exchange interfaith delegates Carol Smith and Hope Kolly stand with Diego Perez Lopez, a CIRSA member. photos courtesy of Carol Smith

tain, picking our way past branches and exposed tree roots on a narrow dirt path. The ascent was steep, and the midday sun hot. We paused to catch our breath and wipe the sweat from our foreheads, drinking copious amounts of water.

Three miles and two hours later, we reached our destination, exhausted and aching. It had taken us almost three times as long as it would ordinarily take the farmers, who walk this path every day for several months during growing and harvest season, even when the path becomes slick and muddy during the rainy season. The coffee trees were five to seven feet tall and shade grown, scattered on a steep, grassy hillside, among other plants and taller trees. Hilario showed us how to gently twist each coffee cherry off the branches, careful not to pull out the stems so that new cherries will grow next year. The ripe ones are bright red berries, and the pit inside is the coffee bean. Despite my best efforts, I yanked some of the stems off along with the cherry and silently berated myself.

The community threw a party for us that evening, with dancing and live music. Families prepared black coffee and warm tamales wrapped in banana leaves. The festivities lasted well into the night, and by the time we made it to our host family's home, the family was asleep. We quietly made up our sleeping bags on the floor and woke early the next morning for our return to the city.

While we were welcomed warmly in each community we visited, we were also challenged. The cost of living in Mexico is high in relation to many of the other countries with which Equal Exchange trades, and the predominant message was that even the Fair Trade price for their coffee "is not enough."

Coffee farmers—all farmers—are struggling these days, and while Fair Trade helps keep farmers on their land, there is still a tenuous nature to their lives and livelihoods. We were charged by the farmers to bring their message back to our communities, to raise awareness about the plight of small farmers all over the world. There is still much work to be done. ■

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FOR MORE INFO

To learn more about Equal Exchange and its work with small-scale coffee, tea, cocoa, sugar, and rooibos farmers around the world, go to: www.equalexchange.coop. To get more involved, go to: www.equalexchange.coop/get-involved and www.equalexchange.coop/careers.

Readers interested in this story should also check out two new documentaries on the coffee industry: **Black Gold** (www.blackgoldmovie.com) and **Birdsong & Coffee: A Wake Up Call** (www.olddogdocumentaries.com/vid_bsc.html).

OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRAVELERS

The following small-scale, mostly organic, coffee farmer co-ops, which work or have worked with Equal Exchange, operate eco-tourism projects:

NICARAGUA: Mirafior, www.mirafior.org. **Cecocafen**, www.equalexchange.com/profile-of-cecocafen-in-nicaragua/index.php.

Contact the Project Coordinator: Fecility.butler@gmail.com.

PERU: Copicafe, www.copicafe.com.pe. Contact Santiago Paz at cepicafe@cepicafe.com.pe.

TANZANIA: KNCU, situated at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro: www.equalexchange.com/profile-of-kncu-in-tanzania/index.php.

Contact: Emilson Malisa, Manager of KNCU's Fair Tourism Project; kncu@kilinet.co.tz.



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