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Café de Apante's Rich Nicaraguan Heritage

Café de Apante's rich history is rooted in the company's family farm in Nicaragua. Recently, Café de Apante expanded their operations to America in Seattle, Washington under the guise of Katie Arguello and Joe Sinclair. Amie Hoffner reports on how this couple became involved in producing one of the preeminent above-grade specialty coffees available on the market. (By Amie Hoffner)

Katia Arguello was born two hours south of Matagalpa, Nicaragua; one of the three main coffee regions in the northern part

of Nicaragua. As a young child she visited the family's second-generation coffee farm owned by her father, "Ever since I remember

being little, I grew up going to the farm on the weekends. I grew up playing in the coffee fields with my brother Edgar in the mountains," explains Arguello.

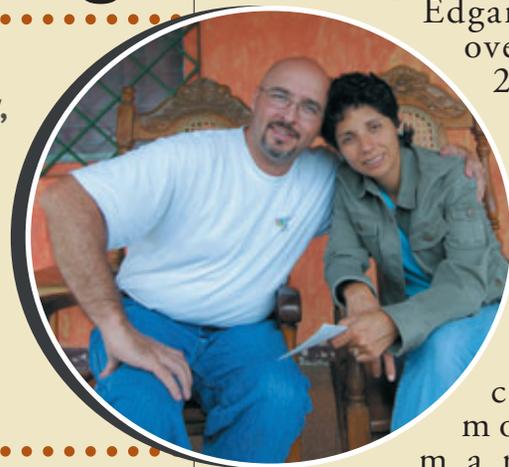
At the age of 17, Arguello left Nicaragua to attend the University of Washington in Seattle. While her plan was to finish college and go back to Nicaragua, she met a young man, Joe Sinclair, whom she married the day after Arguello's 21st birthday. She and Sinclair were married in Nicaragua and returned to Seattle.

Arguello often heard from her family about the endeavors at the coffee farm.

Eventually, Arguello's brother Edgar took over the

200 acre farm and continued to sell coffee into the commodities market.

"Although Edgar was very proud of the coffee's quality, Katia and I didn't know what we really had, because the coffee was just being pushed into the



commodities market,” explains Sinclair. “Then Edgar started submitting coffee in regional cupping competitions, and ‘lo and behold’ [we] started winning competitions for the past few years.” Sinclair adds, “When we knew we had a great specialty coffee, we set up a corporation and got the coffee imported and profiled in the Seattle area.”

A Rich History

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Named after the Apante mountain region in Matagalpa, on which the family farm is located, Café de Apante started its U.S. business in 2006 selling its estate coffee Nicaraguan Gold. Sinclair explains, “We are in our first year and everything on this side of the coffee business is new to us. What we do know is that we have an exceptional coffee.” Arguello adds, “All of our beans are organic and shade grown at high altitudes between 3,000 and 4,500 feet. Only the ripe beans are picked by hand through multiple passes of the same trees. The coffee is washed and screen processed in clean, natural spring water from the mountains.” Sinclair continues, “We ferment for 36 hours religiously with the



natural spring water. Most coffee producers ferment for 12 hours. For us, it's all about showing off this attention to detail on each

cup, as the cup never lies.”

According to Sinclair and Arguello, Nicaraguan Gold is in exclusive company with its grade-one coffee.

“Approximately less than 1% of the world’s organic coffee can be called grade one. Nicaraguan Gold is in this category, and yet we believe we are blazing the trail for a new standard above grade one. We call it our Double Pass Gold Standard,” Sinclair stated.

While most grade-one beans go through a single pass to remove defects and impurities, Café de Apante conducts a double pass by hand to ensure a superior coffee. “With the Double Pass Gold Standard, we are becoming known for an exceptionally smooth body and a very clean finish on our coffee,” adds Joe.

After clearing customs with the first beans in April 2006, Café de Apante worked with Caffé Lusso Coffee Roasters in Redmond, Washington for profiling and cupping. Philip Meech, roastmaster general, says starting with a good bean of origin is the first step and the second is to find the proper roasting temperature, heat and air-flow. “We roasted that coffee at least 18 different ways. We worked out all the profiles and blind tasted it during cupping. During the blind tasting, we independently reviewed the coffees and the cuppers unanimously picked the same cup. There were several very, very good cups of coffee, but we selected the exceptional cup that became Nicaraguan Gold.”

Meech adds, “There is no oil or sheen on Café de Apante’s coffee. We’re leaving all the flavor in the



bean. You taste a lot more of that origin character, which makes it so distinct.” Meech continues, “Having a clean heat medium, our specialized roast profile and by stopping the process where the sugars are perfectly balanced with the acids makes this coffee distinct.”

Meech says working with the right equipment is also imperative. “For all of our hand-crafted, custom work, we use a Diedrich IR-12. We roast 25 lbs per batch which is pretty micro-level which is quite exclusive. I’ve been roasting on Diedrich roasting equipment since 1997 and Diedrich has amazing quality.”

Packaging Made Simple

When it came time to package Nicaraguan Gold, Sinclair and Katia searched for elegant and distinct packaging. “We wanted to present to our coffee connoisseurs a

sense of elegance, class and something rudimentarily organic about it,” says Arguello.

As a small business, Sinclair and Arguello decided to print product labels in-house with Primera Technology’s LX810 Color Label Printer. The LX810 prints short-runs of full-color, photo-quality labels. Sinclair adds, “The LX810 makes small business look big and professional. Most people know about Seattle and its ties to the specialty coffee business so, needless to say, this is a scrutinous town about coffee and its packaging. Our customers tell us the packaging looks amazing compared to other products they see on the shelf.”

Sinclair and Arguello initially saw the LX810 at Coffee Fest and purchased it, because it was easy to use. “It was up and running in 10 minutes, literally. In

the first 10 minutes, I already printed labels and I have no background in printing.” Sinclair and Arguello use the LX810 to print about 500 labels per month for coffee bags and are also considering printing box-end and shipping labels.

Coffee Online

Café de Apante sells most of its coffee online on a fresh roast-to-order basis for \$13.95 per pound. “Well known Kona and Jamaican estate coffees are anywhere from \$40 to \$50 per pound and we believe our coffee is comparable,” says Sinclair. “We believe we’re selling our coffee at a very good price.”

Café de Apante’s customers are mostly specialty coffee drinkers who are now joining their coffee club. “To club members, we ship two pounds per month for six or 12 months. It helps us keep loyal customers happy until the next harvest,” Sinclair added. Because this is Sinclair and Arguello’s first year in business, they are not certain of demand. “We brought in a limited harvest this year,” explains Sinclair. “All of the club members are guaranteed to receive coffee throughout the year and we give them a dollar per pound discount.” If the supply runs out, customers will have to wait until next year’s harvest to receive Nicaraguan Gold. Sinclair

adds, “This actually fits in well with our whole focus on freshness: freshly harvested, freshly roasted and freshly ground by the customer all to ensure a very fresh cup of coffee.”

Coffee with a Conscious

Selling Nicaraguan Gold is not always about personal financial gain. Sinclair and Arguello will donate at least 15 % of their annual profits to those in need around the family farm in Nicaragua. Funds will be donated to invest in the lives of the people in the Nicaraguan farming community. Arguello says, “Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the western hemisphere just above Haiti.” Sinclair expounded, “We’re trying to help break the cycle of poverty.”

Sinclair and Arguello

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have focused their efforts on four projects: a free mobile medical clinic staffed by North American medical mission teams, a small hospital for more advanced procedures like surgery, improving working conditions, and increasing employment of

farm workers by reinvesting in Café de Apante’s farm production to enable year-round hiring; rather than seasonal employment.

In just a few short months, Sinclair and Arguello have sold more coffee than expected. “We really are in our first month of roasting. We are very encouraged by the response so far. It is above our initial expectations and we are getting the response we were looking for with the quality of the coffee,” said Joe. “In the next year, we plan to optimize our site for search engine organic results and blogging while building the brand. We are not in a hurry, but plan a slow and steady approach.” ☕

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