3-20-2014

Cuba Aims to Increase Coffee Production After Harvest Levels Plummet

Daniel Vázquez

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/10143

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Cuba Aims to Increase Coffee Production After Harvest Levels Plummet

by Daniel Vázquez
Category/Department: Cuba
Published: 2014-03-20

Cuba aims to increase coffee production this decade after harvesting 6,200 tons of beans during 2013-2014, a low figure compared with the 60,000 tons achieved in 1959. Coffee remains the most popular drink on the island and has been ingrained in the country's culture since the Haitian Revolution in the late 18th century.

The Cuban coffee industry had its most difficult moment in 2012 when the harvest was a mere 4,000 tons, considered to be the worst in more than a century. That harvest forced the government to import coffee from Vietnam to meet the needs of a population that seems to be able to do without everything but the tiny cup every morning.

Neither tea nor fruit juice, also popular on the island, have managed to displace the predilection for strong coffee, consumed in small cups and prepared as an Italian espresso. It is the beverage offered to visitors as a welcoming gesture. Eighty-nine percent of the Cuban population consumes coffee, more than twice the international average of 42%.

The government has maintained a subsidized coffee ration of about four ounces per month per person that allows the preparation of about eight cups. It is coffee powder mixed with roasted and ground peas, which impairs the original flavor of the infusion and occasionally causes the pressurized moka espresso makers to explode.

The decline of coffee production in Cuba is the result of decades of neglect, poor remuneration for the farmers, few technical improvements, and mismanagement. Now, President Raúl Castro's government wants to take a turn at improving the industry. Cuban coffee is an excellent export item and, therefore, a way to offset expenditures on the island, which imports 80% of the food consumed by its 11.3 million inhabitants.

A century-old industry

Coffee cultivation was established in the mountains of the extreme eastern tip of Cuba and in the western province of Pinar del Río early in the 19th century when the French and Creole settlers left Haiti after the revolution (1791-1804). Other coffee growers arrived from Santo Domingo and the US, while others were of German, English, Italian, and Catalan origins.

Coffee production was in decline until 2012 when it reached its lowest point in a century, and the government imported US$38 million of the product from Vietnam to meet local demand. That distressing harvest was attributed to Hurricane Sandy, which struck the province of Santiago de Cuba on Oct. 25, 2012, destroying the coffee plants and the trees that were planted to shade and protect them (NotiCen, Jan. 30, 2014).

Recovery plans began in 2009 after a government study identified 18,500 farmers producing an average yield of 14 tons per hectare. That year, the government imported about 30,000 tons of coffee...
at a cost of US$45 million. The Castro administration aims to reduce spending on food imports that can be produced domestically.

The turnaround for coffee development on the Caribbean island is based partly on the state leasing the abandoned coffee plantations, increasing investments in fertilizer, and tripling the price paid to farmers. The low earnings by farmers selling their coffee to the state has contributed to some of the crop being diverted onto the illegal market where prices are much higher.

Coffee is one of the most prized commodities on the black market despite the hard times brought on by the authorities who search private vehicles and public transportation that crosses the island from the east into the capital for hidden coffee beans and other products coveted by the population such as cheese, eggs, lobster, and beef. The amount of coffee diverted onto the black market has reached between 10% and 20% of the harvest, according to local analysts.

The government asserts that there is a program in progress to rejuvenate plantations by replanting 34,000 ha, which should be completed by 2015. In addition, traditional processing facilities are being upgraded with pulping machines from Colombia. The program's goal is to reach 28,000 to 30,000 tons per year, as was achieved in the 1970s. Until 2000, coffee exports were reportedly worth approximately US$20 million to the island, but falling prices and declining production reduced earnings by 75%.

The Cuban Ministerio de la Agricultura says the decrease in production is the result of the aging of the plantations, in which more than 70% of the coffee plants are between 30 and 40 years old and unproductive. In some caballerías, a 50%-60% reduction in plant numbers has been recorded. Therefore, coffee production does not correspond to the surface area allocated as coffee plantations. (In Cuba, a caballería equals 33.2 acres.)

Eight of the 15 Cuban provinces produce coffee in commercial quantities. Coffee production is concentrated in the eastern provinces of Santiago de Cuba, Guantanamo, Granma, and Holguín, but it is also grown in smaller quantities in the central and western zones. The revival of coffee farming in the eastern mountain areas could help stem the exodus of its inhabitants to the cities in search of better wages working in the services, tourism, or construction industries.

**Exports and tourism**

The European market is and will continue to be a destination for the island's coffee. At the beginning of this year, Philip Oppenheim, former UK exchequer secretary to the treasury, signed an agreement between his company, The Cuba Mountain Coffee Company, and the Cuban government to invest in coffee farming and to buy Arabica coffee from local growers and distribute it on the British market under the Alma de Cuba brand.

In the next five years, the British company will invest US$4 million in improving farming techniques and purchasing fertilizers and tools for farmers in the eastern provinces of Guantanamo and Santiago de Cuba, said the London press. The Arabica coffee, considered to be high quality, is marketed at US$49 per kg.

Another objective of the Cuban authorities is to increase the cultivation of cacao, a traditional crop in the eastern mountainous regions. Currently, cacao production is around 2,000 tons but is anticipated to increase to 4,000 tons, as was achieved in the 1960s. Eighty percent of the Cuban cacao
production is grown and harvested by campesinos while the rest is grown on estates and state-owned farms. Exports of chocolate from the island are destined for the European market.

French officials presented the project Los Caminos del Café earlier this year, which will renovate the ruins of coffee plantations founded by the French in eastern Cuba, where the original, massive stone houses, roads, planting and industrial areas still remain, and which was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000. The project has funding from the French Malongo Foundation and the European Union (EU).

Los Caminos del Café aims to restore the Fraternidad hacienda and other coffee plantations founded by French colonists in the most eastern part of Cuba. The project will contribute to the historic preservation of the area and to economic development for the rural population who live in the economic and social areas historically designated as the most disadvantaged.

Other archaeological projects aim to rescue hundreds of coffee plantations built early in the 19th century in the Sierra del Rosario (80 km west of Havana City), designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, and where tourism facilities have been built in the village of Las Terrazas that feature attractions such as nature walks through the forest and bird watching.

-- End --