

VISITING THE SOURCE

A Private Tour of a New Brooklyn Cafe's Colombian Coffee Farms

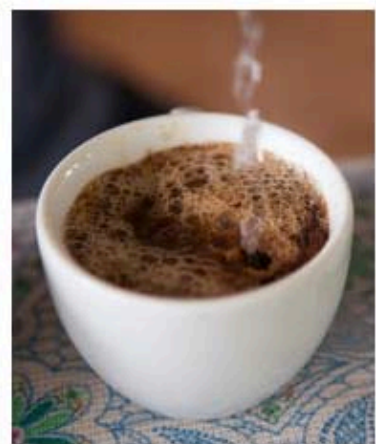
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A first look at Devoción's new Brooklyn roaster and coffee house, which opens on Grand Street in Williamsburg on November 16.

Since opening its first roaster in Bogotá in 2006, the Colombian company Devoción has sourced and roasted what its owner Steven Sutton categorizes as “third-wave coffee,” a term he reserves for the highest-quality artisanal beans. Now, Sutton and his business partners sell 150 tons of coffee each year in the United States and Colombia. And this fall, in anticipation of its first stateside outpost, a flagship roaster and cafe that opens in Brooklyn’s Williamsburg neighborhood on November 16, Devoción invited T onto its coffee farms for a peek at where it all began.

Colombia is the only country in the world that can harvest coffee crops all year. Devoción’s quality-control manager, Nelson Vargas, typically spends 60 hours a week driving through the country’s lush mountain regions like Tolima, Valle, Caldas and Amazonia to check in with more than 400 remote farms to document and track the progress of their crops. He and Sutton work exclusively with farmers whose lands look like they have been abandoned and left to grow wild, as they believe the coffee produced on such untouched plots have more character — a depth of flavor that mirrors the environments in which they grow. Many of the farms are in former conflict zones controlled by the FARC and paramilitary groups. “For us, big farms don’t work,” Sutton explains. “We get better flavors from these farms, in our opinion, because we’re collecting beans that are organic, naturally occurring in nature and not cross-bred to produce higher yields.”



Tawfick Espriella



Sutton examines a Geisha coffee plant, a rare and prized Ethiopian coffee varietal brought to Colombia via Panama.
Tawfick Espriella

One such farm, Don Alfredo Cano Horje's coffee plantation, where Devoción buys a varietal called Red Barone, takes nearly eight hours to reach. The dirt roads to get there, just outside the village of Venecia, are mostly mountain switchbacks that cut through banana groves, widened in parts to accommodate roadside arepa stands.

The coffee fruit of the Red Barone is roughly the size and shade of a ripe cranberry. Unlike bigger farms that clear-cut mountainside plots and plant coffee hybrids in long, neat rows, Horje's plantation grows wild on steep hillsides beneath a grove of old clementines. "The more fruits and flowers growing near the coffee, the more complex its beans will be," explains Sutton, who argues that because coffee has an abundance of aromatic and flavor compounds, it offers a larger range of tasting notes than wine.

Below, Devoción takes T on a tour through the process of making its coffee, sales of which benefit nearby indigenous groups like the Karmata Rua Antioquia and help rehabilitate communities through the sponsorship of local schools. Sutton believes that without building up these communities, the future of his business hangs in the balance. "It's easy to make big profits on bad ingredients at the expense of others," he says. "I am just so happy to say that that's not what we're about."