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FINEWINE & FOODGUIDE

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**Paolo
Tullio
on coffee**

PLUS

The Marco Pierre White interview



A DROP OF THE BLACK STUFF

PAOLO TULLIO VENTURES TO HONDURAS AND NICARAGUA FOR AN EYE-OPENING TRIP ABOUT COFFEE AND LIFE IN THESE TWO CENTRAL AMERICAN COUNTRIES.

Coffee is an international commodity traded on the New York commodities market, so you can look in the paper and check the current global price per pound. What that means is that there's not much difference in price between the very best and the most commonplace coffees, which if we were talking about wine instead would be very bizarre. Imagine if wine was a commodity and there was a world price for it. A bottle of

Chateau Latour might cost 10 per cent more than a commercially produced Chilean Merlot. The idea is unthinkable.

Treating coffee as though it were rice or soya beans means that little allowance is made for quality and it gives producers almost no incentive to strive for better. After all, if they're going to get the same price for their beans no matter how much care they take of them, then why bother?

A recent trip to Honduras and Nicaragua was an eye-opener.

These are the two poorest countries of Central America and coffee is a major export earner for both of them. I was there with Paul O'Toole, my Irish namesake, who is the chief buyer and taster for Bewley's – Ireland's longest established coffee roaster and still the dominant player in the Irish market.

The best coffee is grown on high ground at upwards of 1,000 metres above sea level and much of Central America is mountainous and covered in rain forest.

There's a clue embedded in the name

'rain forest' that tells you what sort of weather to expect. In ten days we travelled over 2,000 kilometres of rough roads and most of the time it rained in the mountains. After a while you cease to notice or care, you get wet and within moments of the rain stopping, you dry out again in the tropical heat.

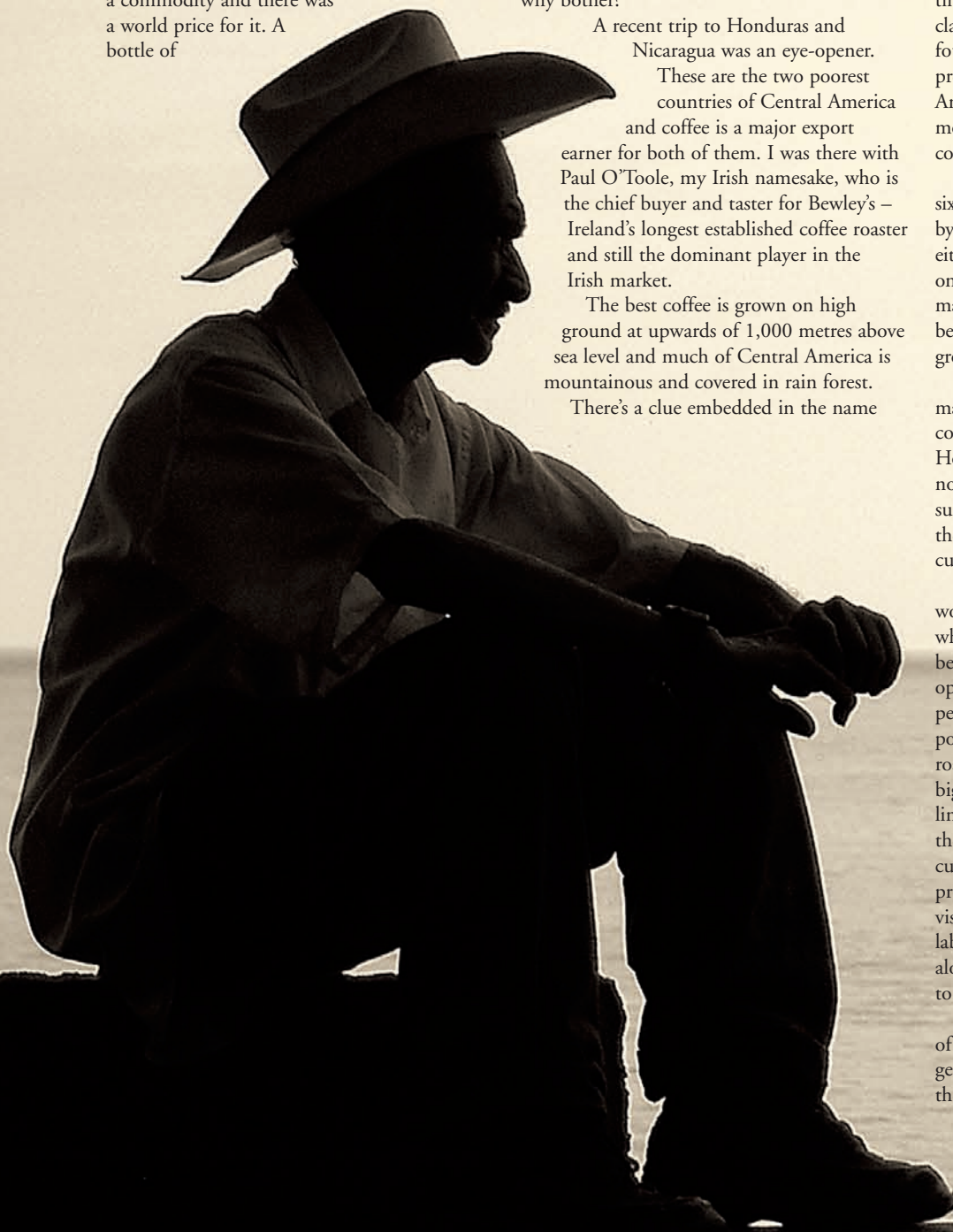
Apart from the main roads which link the major centres of population, the rest of the time you're on unsurfaced roads with world-class potholes. We travelled in double cab four-wheel drive pickups, which is the preferred means of transport in Central America. These took us into the high mountains to the plantations where the coffee plants grow.

The trees are kept short by pruning, about six-feet high, so that the berries can be picked by hand. When the berries mature they are either a cherry red or a bright yellow, depending on the variety and inside these berries is a nut made up of two halves - what we call coffee beans. These are what end up roasted and ground to make your morning coffee.

What's slightly disturbing is that the vast majority of these small growers don't drink coffee, they just sell their crop. All over both Honduras and Nicaragua a cup of coffee will normally be instant coffee, which rather surprised me. Slowly I began to realise that they may be producers, but there's no coffee culture there as we know it in Europe.

That's changing little by little. After the world slump in coffee prices a decade ago, which really hit the small growers hard, they began to organise themselves into co-operatives. These small co-operatives of perhaps 100 members gave them the possibility of selling their coffee directly to roasters like Bewley's rather than to agents of big multi-national corporations. With a direct link to the market and to the consumer, they're beginning to understand what it is the customer wants and what they need to do to produce it. Many of the co-operatives we visited now have their own tasting laboratories, where they can taste their coffee alongside coffee from neighbouring countries to see how they compare.

Another function of this growing knowledge of the coffee trade is that they're now able to get better prices for their crop. Bewley's were the first to bring Fairtrade coffee to Ireland





The main road in Subirana

and since I've seen the effect on these poor communities of what Fairtrade deals do, I'll make sure from now on that that's the only coffee I buy. Fairtrade prices have allowed these small co-ops to grow, to build schools and health centres, which up to five years ago they didn't have. In the countryside the annual incomes are around \$400 a year. Given that, even a small increase in the base price they're paid for their produce can make a huge difference.

Like many countries where labour is cheap you find some very odd jobs have been created. The most visible of these jobs are the armed security guards who are everywhere. Outside of hotels, on filling station forecourts, in city shopping centres, you'll see them with their weapon of choice - a pump-action shotgun.

You can find yourself in some very odd situations. Late one night we stopped to urinate at a shopping mall. All the shops were closed and the car park was deserted, but the loos were lit and open. We pulled up outside them and suddenly an armed guard was at the window. 'You can't park here,' he told us. 'Where then?' we asked, surveying a completely empty car park. 'There,' he said, pointing to a spot about two metres away. You don't argue with an armed man.

Another time we were in a restaurant and two waiters came to take our order, one to ask us what we wanted, and the other to write it down. You could have combined these jobs, but that could lead to unemployment. Most cash registers are manned by two people, one

to operate the till, the other to read out what needs to be entered. Just about everything needs your passport number and all forms are filled out in triplicate. God knows what happens to all that paper.

Both Nicaragua and Honduras get violent hurricanes, which rip across the Bay of Mexico and do untold damage. Managua is still recovering from the last one. Combine the assault by the elements with a long civil war between the Sandinistas and the CIA-backed contras and it's not hard to see why the economy is struggling. Right now the Sandinistas are in power and there are huge posters of Daniel Ortega all over Nicaragua, with slogans like 'Poor of the world unite!', 'Together we can win!', and 'Power to the citizen!' It may look unsophisticated to our eyes, but there is a sense that after so many years of disquiet a change for the better is on the way.

Coffee from Central America is recognised as 'premium' coffee, because it's not produced in vast commercial plantations, but rather by small farmers tending a couple of hundred trees. They may not all be certified as 'organic', but to all intents and purposes they are, as finding the money for herbicides, pesticides and chemical fertilisers is beyond the means of small farmers.

I left Central America with a sense of hope. Fairtrade and rising world commodity prices will give these people a better life. After years of war, exploitation and profound poverty, things are looking up.



One of the local Honduran farmers examining his coffee plants

GOOD COFFEE IN DUBLIN...

Finding a good cup of coffee in Dublin isn't the hard work it used to be. That's not to say they're always good – most of the time espressos are served headless, which if it was a pint of Guinness, you wouldn't accept. We may be used to paying three times the European average price for an espresso, but we really shouldn't accept poor quality as well as high prices.

The journey from bean to cup is a long one, there are many stages in the process and each one is carefully controlled before the ground and roasted coffee gets to your coffee shop. In those last twenty seconds a poor barista can undo all that work by making you a bad espresso.

This year for the first time ever an Irishman is the world Barista champion. Stephen Morrissey just took the title in Copenhagen, so hopefully other Irish baristas will be encouraged to excel at their profession.

Here are a few places where the coffee is good:

Obviously Bewley's outlets use their own coffee, so they're a good place to start.

Café Bar Deli in Grafton Street makes good coffee, and

The Bridge Bar and Grill served me a terrific espresso recently.

On the north side Il Fornaio serves good coffee Italian-style.

If you want to try coffees from Central America then The Sugarloaf Lounge, Ritz Carlton Powerscourt serves three origins of coffee – Nicaragua, Columbia, and Honduras.