

Profiles in Sustainable Agriculture: *People Before Profits at Guatemala's Finca Ona*

FOR MANFREDO LIPPMAN, WHOSE FAMILY HAS OWNED Finca Ona since 1966, coffee farming is as much about people and the environment as it is about growing the aromatic bean. His estate farm in northwest Guatemala provides employment, education and basic healthcare to hundreds of families, whereas the streams that run through it supply drinking water to the city of Coatepeque, and its more than 1,000 acres (405 hectares) of protected forest are home to an array of wildlife. Lippman's commitment to community and ecology were essential for getting Finca Ona Rainforest Alliance Certified, which distinguishes farms that comply with a strict social and environmental standard. The Rainforest Alliance, an international organization that works to protect ecosystems and the people and wildlife that depend on them by transforming land-use practices and consumer behavior, has certified thousands of coffee farms in a dozen countries together with its partners in the Sustainable Agriculture Network.

During the four decades since the Lippman family purchased Finca Ona, which was founded in 1850, Manfredo and his daughter, Margaret de Vila, have introduced a series of innovations to make the farm a better place to work and live. They built and support a school with six teachers and a health post with a full-time nurse. They also maintain four soccer fields and provide uniforms and transportation for the local team, which has won 40 trophies.

The most obvious innovation, however, is the modified ski lift that Lippman imported and had installed on the farm to make it easier for workers to get around on its precipitous terrain. It is powered by the farm's hydroelectric plant, which also generates electricity for the coffee mill, offices, schools and 120 homes. The lift, which runs a loop around Finca Ona's 5,400 acres (2,200 hectares), takes one floating over a forest of shade trees, under which grows the coffee, and in which live warblers, parakeets, magpie jays and countless other animals, which thrive in the pesticide-free environment.

"The cost of producing this coffee is higher than that of other farms, but otherwise you destroy the water, you destroy the communities," says Lippman. "When you keep nature in balance, you know you're doing things right."

According to farm manager Mariano Leon, the lift allows workers to pick more coffee than they could on other farms, since they spend less time schlepping sacks of coffee, and since pickers



On Finca Ona, coffee is grown under a forest canopy, and the rivers are protected so communities downstream have pure water to drink.

are paid by the bushel, they earn more money at Finca Ona. He notes that most of the people who work on the farm during the harvest come from the same indigenous communities in the country's highlands.

"People have been coming back here to work for years, some families for generations," notes Leon.

Investing in Education

Finca Ona is the principal employer in its area, with a workforce of nearly 1,000 that swells to 4,000 during the September-to-January harvest. All permanent workers have health insurance, whereas the farm clinic attends basic problems and people with serious ailments are transported to the city of Coatepeque. Drinking water is treated with ultraviolet filters and the farm collaborates with the Guatemalan Ministry of Health to vaccinate the children of workers and coffee pickers. The Lippmans' most notable investment, however, has been in education, since the family built a school on the farm, purchases supplies and pays the salaries of six teachers.

Farm manager Mariano Leon and his brothers are a testament to the quality of the education provided at Finca Ona. All of the brothers, who were raised on the farm and educated in its school, went on to complete university studies. Mariano studied agronomy, one of his brothers studied accounting, another is a teacher, another is a lawyer and another, a doctor.

All six of the teachers at the Finca Ona school are the children of farm workers who studied education and returned to the farm. Brenda López, one of them, studied at a regional university but returned to Ona to work.

“I am very happy because I am able to contribute to education in my community,” she says, explaining that the area has a shortage of schools, and the ones that exist lack supplies.

“The neighbors admire this farm for the level of education it maintains and its collaboration with the community, notes López.

Sustaining Tradition

Finca Ona has long played a vital role in its area, maintaining local roads and bridges and injecting money into the economy that the small businesses of a dozen communities depend on. The farm’s steep volcanic slopes are drained by streams that supply water to Coatepeque and other towns to the west, which makes its efforts to prevent erosion and cut agrochemical use



Manfredo Lippman is a Rainforest Alliance Certified farm owner committed to growing coffee with an emphasis on safeguarding workers’ health and safeguarding the environment.

extremely important. Farm workers have planted living barriers to prevent erosion and use machetes to weed rather than applying herbicides. Instead of using pesticides, they combat the insect pest broca with 5,000 traps made from old plastic soft drink bottles, which they got from surrounding communities by paying school children 15 cents per bottle to collect them, which also helped alleviate the area’s garbage problem.

But things haven’t always gone so well for Finca Ona. In the 1980s, agronomists convinced Lippman to cut down the farm’s shade trees and plant new sun-resistant coffee bushes, in order to increase production. But he found that the sun system exacerbated erosion and required large amounts of agrochemicals, which became unaffordable when coffee prices were low. He soon started replanting shade trees and looking for ways to reduce agrochemical use and combat soil erosion.



Finca Ona provides a school for workers’ children, a health clinic and four soccer fields.

The Rainforest Alliance sustainable agriculture standard helped Lippman and his daughter make Finca Ona more efficient and environmentally friendly. Another important innovation is the grafting of high quality Bourbon and Caturra coffee varieties and the hardy Liberico, which has an extensive root system that prevents erosion and requires less fertilizer.

“It took us 15 years to get the production back to the level where it was before we switched to the sun system,” laments Lippman.

That process was complicated by the crash in world coffee prices in the late 1990s, which drove many of the region’s farms bankrupt and caused Finca Ona to lose money for five years in a row. Lippman explains that some friends and family members suggested he abandon the farm, but he refused to.

“How could we leave all these people without work?” he asks. “I never even considered not staying in business. In an enterprise of this size, closing down is not an option,”



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New York . United States . Mexico . Costa Rica . Guatemala . Indonesia . Spain . Bolivia . the Netherlands
665 Broadway, Suite 500 . Nueva York, NY 10012-2331 . Tel: 212/677-1900 . Fax: 212/677-2187
www.rainforest-alliance.org