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Coffee has been an integral part of my life since I was 14 years old. No matter where I am, my morning ritual begins with at least two cups of brew. Some of the greatest meals I've experienced end with some form of coffee—French pressed, filtered or espresso. I know I'm not alone as statistics show that it is the most popular beverage worldwide with over 400 billion cups consumed each year. The morning beverage is often a key ingredient in some of my favourite recipes. I use it to add depth of flavour to many of my chocolate recipes, and it's a key ingredient in my spice-rubbed rib-eye steaks. Considering how essential it is in my life, I was not particularly knowledgeable about the coffee "story", aside from trying new 'varieties' and blends from my local store... until recently.

I was invited to join a group of journalists travelling

to the Alta Mogiana region of Brazil, where some of the best coffees in the country were being produced. We were to spend a few days on a coffee farm—learning first-hand about the growing, harvesting, sorting, drying, and roasting of coffee beans.

After arriving in Sao Paulo, we boarded a comfortable motor coach and started out on the six-hour drive to the Octavio Coffee farms, known as Nossa Senhora Aparecida. Our hosts for the next few days are Marcelo Crescente, CEO of Octavio USA, a well regarded producer of specialty coffee, the highest classification of beans in the coffee world; and John Moore, VP of Dallis Brothers Coffee, a NYC-based roaster recently acquired by Octavio. The acquisition of the century-old Dallis Brothers Coffee by Octavio makes perfect sense. Dallis gets access to the high quality Brazilian coffee, and Octavio secures an American market and also gets access to international coffees roasted in NYC for the Brazilian market, since raw unroasted coffee from other countries is not allowed entry into Brazil. >

In search of great beans

Ever wonder what it takes to get your favourite cuppa every morning? James Moore visits a coffee plantation in Brazil and develops a newfound appreciation for the farm craft.



OFF TO BRAZIL

Brazil is actually the world's largest coffee producer, accounting for a whopping one-third of all coffee bean production in the world. Over five million people in Brazil are employed by the trade; most of them are involved with the cultivation and harvesting of more than three billion coffee plants.

Coffee beans come from the seed of a fruit called a coffee 'cherry'. It's about the size of a blueberry, growing in vibrant, colourful clusters on short, shrubby trees.

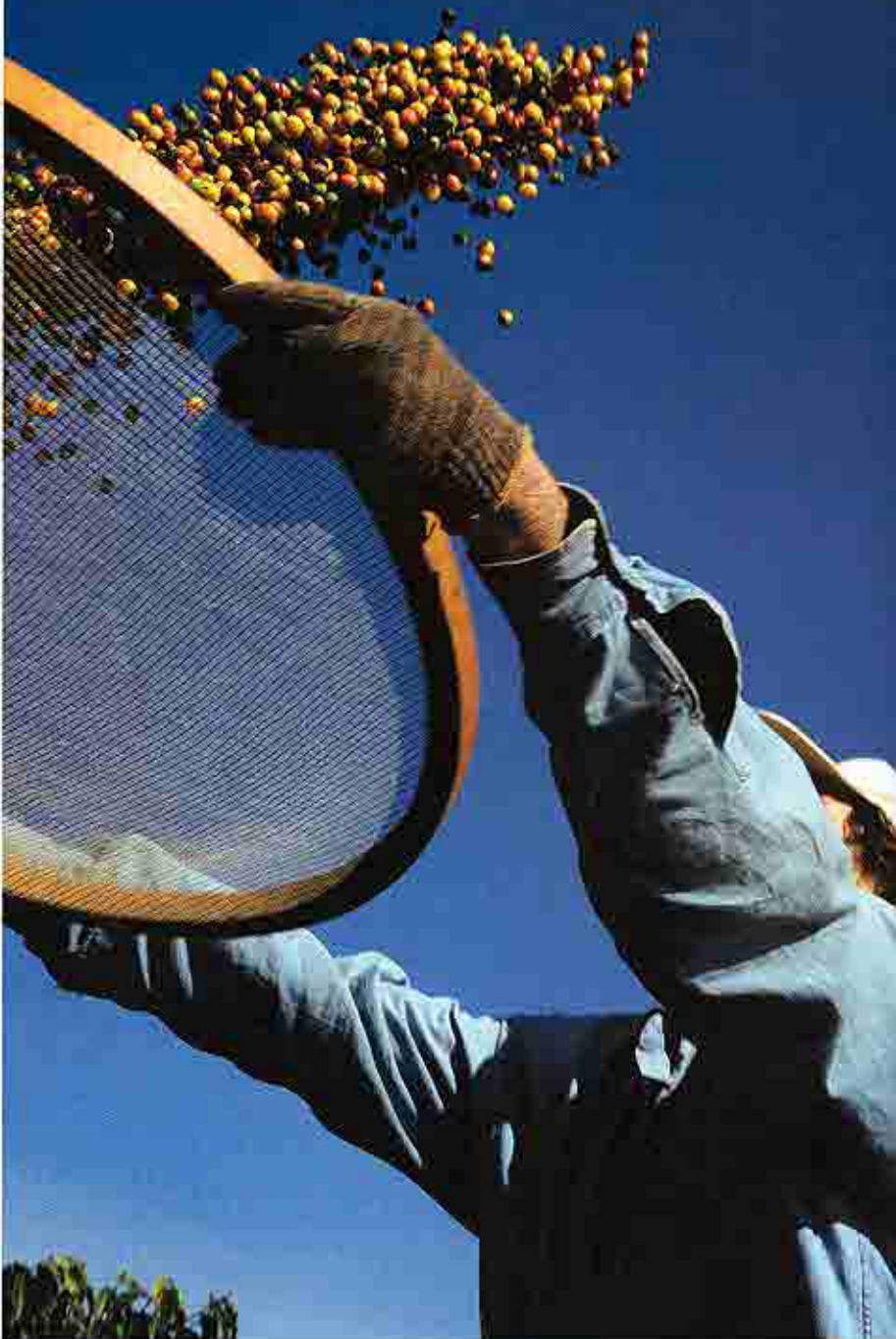
40 percent of Octavio's harvest is hand-picked, which requires workers to pull fruit from tree, in a method essentially unchanged for centuries.

Octavio's farms consist of five million trees, which stand between six and 10 feet high and sweep the landscape in long, elegantly curving rows.

Good friend and famed New York photographer Christopher Makos, who was one of the guests on the trip, insisted on seeing the coffee fields at sunrise (to capture the best light), and so I begrudgingly got up at 5.30am and rode out to the fields with him. Despite my initial resentment, I was soon enthralled by the natural beauty. The morning mist drifted through the rows of trees, and as the warm sun began to rise, the vibrant red, yellow and green coffee cherries sparkled like jewels. Over the next two days, we would witness nearly every step required to get these "jewels" into your cup of coffee.

HARVESTING WORK

Approximately 40 percent of Octavio's harvest is hand-picked, which requires workers to pull fruit from trees, in a method essentially unchanged for centuries. Wearing thick gloves and long sleeves, more than 300 Octavio farm workers focus on hauling in the crop as soon as possible. It's amazing to watch them as they methodically strip each branch, nearly cleaning a tree bare of cherries in under a minute, leaving the



unharmed branches behind. This may seem like a tedious method, but for the younger trees (which can't stand the strain of heavy machinery) or the oldest (which aren't planted in rows widely enough to accommodate it), handpicking is the only option.

While handpicking requires serious physical labour and a skilled work force, the workers at Octavio are compensated for their skill. The most productive of field workers can opt to receive training in machine-picking, vehicle maintenance, and other fields notches up the ladder. More than 50 families live on the farm itself, in small houses with gardens in the back; during harvest season, hundreds more come in



from Pedregulho. Even seasonal workers receive health benefits, and the company is active in the town—sponsoring roving medical clinics, connecting residents with government health services, augmenting the limited public education with after-school programs. By all accounts, Octavio is an insistent pro-social place. “It’s good business,” says Crescente. “The health of the town is the health of our workforce.”

Machine-picking handles the remaining harvest which is clearly more efficient, requires less labour and has a few significant advantages over manual harvest. In the fields designated for machine-picking, enormous bright orange harvesting vehicles move steadily through the fields. The giant tractor-like machines have a set of wheels in each of two rows, straddling a single line of coffee trees. Rapidly moving metal bars shake the trees enough to knock off the ‘cherries’, along with leaves and twigs; debris is shot out through the back, while the cherries are funnelled into the tractor wagon that drives alongside. They are then hauled off to the processing plant.

GETTING A WASH AND DRY

It’s at Octavio’s plant that the newly harvested coffee cherries will be processed and eventually bagged and shipped. The first step is to separate the coffee cherries from the twigs, leaves, and dirt. The cherries >

cherries are funnelled onto a continually bouncing platform with holes just large enough for them to slip through; with enough jostling (like panning for gold), they all find their way into a stream of water that washes them and carries them forward. They are then set out to dry in the winter sun of Alta Mogiana, where the daytime temperatures climb up to the seventies and rain is rare. When dried, coffee is most often spread out in rows on large patios where it needs to be raked every six hours to promote even drying and prevent the growth of mildew, in what Moore explains as “a constant battle against ferment”. Spontaneous fermentation alter the flavour of the finished coffee in a way that would render the entire lot unfit for Octavio’s ‘specialty coffee’ status.



More impressive is the density table, a precisely inclined plane that isolates the high-quality, hard and dense beans from the lighter defects that may have made it through.

The need for steady sun is another reason why the climate of this region of Brazil is so critical to the success of each coffee harvest. You need daily sunshine to dry out the beans. After a few days, the beans are sent for further drying in a giant wood-fired dryer (burning 70 percent of local eucalyptus) where the coffee beans get down to about 11 percent moisture; they’re then transferred to enormous silos and held to rest for two to three months. The final steps in coffee processing involve removing the last layers of dry skin and remaining fruit residue from the now dry coffee, and cleaning and sorting it.

First, the coffee beans are sorted by size to a level of extreme precision—a uniform roast demands uniformly sized beans, so that nothing burns or under-browns. But more impressive is the density table, a precisely inclined plane that isolates the high-quality, hard and dense beans from the lighter defects that may have made it through.

The final step in the cleaning and sorting procedure is called colour sorting, or separating defective beans from sound ones on the basis of colour rather than density or size. It’s the trickiest and perhaps most important of all the steps. With most high-quality coffees, colour sorting is done in the simplest possible way: by hand. Teams of workers pick





discoloured and other defective beans from the sound beans. The very best coffees may be hand-cleaned twice (double picked) or even thrice (triple picked).

THE RIGHT ROAST

The next step in the transformation of the coffee bean is roasting. In any coffee roasting process, the green beans are gradually heated, while kept in constant motion (as if making popcorn); the heat changes their taste, smell, colour, and feel to become what most of us recognise as coffee beans. While the characteristics of the finished coffee depend on the beans you start with, the roasting process also plays an enormous part. Generally speaking, a lighter roast lets the beans' inherent properties shine through; releasing the essential oils, and resulting in coffee's distinctive aromatics. In a darker roast, one ends up tasting the properties of the roast itself.

When stored and handled well, unroasted coffee beans are stable for at least six months. Freshly-roasted

coffee is not always the best; the day out of the roaster, John Moore explained, it can taste somewhat flat, as the beans are loaded with so much carbon dioxide that it can "block the exits" through the coffee bean pores, not allowing aromatics to escape.

Octavio roasts and grinds a portion of its own coffee crop for the Brazilian internal market, but the majority is sent to Dallis Brothers for roasting. Even when stored properly, roasted coffee beans decline in quality after just two weeks.

DOING THE CUPPING

Now that the beans have been roasted, it's time to evaluate the flavour, an elaborate ritual known as "cupping". A cupping is the coffee equivalent of a wine tasting; a deliberate, focused examination of the fragrance, flavour, body, and finish of a given brew. Cuppings start off with a good, strong whiff of the dry ground coffee. The cups are then filled with water, and it's time for another deep smell—picking up the nuances of the fragrance that come through with the steam.

After it's brewed for about four minutes, the coffee crust is gently broken with a spoon, and tasters lean over and nearly stick their noses in the cup to inhale the smell that comes up from within. After that, a sip is taken from the spoon, aerating the coffee as much as possible on the way in, by slurping the fresh coffee from the spoon. Great attention is paid to the flavour; in an attempt to measure aspects of the coffee's taste, specifically the body (the texture or mouthfeel, such as oiliness), sweetness (the perceived sweetness at the sides of the tongue), acidity (a sharp and tangy feeling at the tip of the tongue, like when biting into an orange), flavour (the characters in the cup), and aftertaste. Descriptors like caramel, chocolate, earthy, fragrant, fruity, nutty and spicy are just a few of the words tasters might note. And those very adjectives may influence your choice at your local coffee house.

The next time you're sipping your favourite coffee, take a moment to really breathe in the aroma, savour that first sip, and most of all, enjoy the ritual. As Moore is fond of saying, the reward of this intensive process "is in the cup". e