What Makes Peruvian Coffee Special?

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Three factors enable Peru to produce some of the best quality Arabica beans in all of Latin America: **1) Micro-Climate and Terroir 2) Variety 3) Harvesting and Processing**.

1) Micro-Climate and Terroir

Perhaps the most important prerequisite for coffee quality is the location of the farms and the micro-climate and terroir in which the coffee trees grow. Peru is one of the most bio-diverse countries in the world, with 84 of the known 103 ecosystems and 28 of the 32 climates that exist on earth. Running north-south through Peru, the Andean Mountains create impressive valleys on their eastern slopes that dip into the Amazon Jungle. Coffee farms there reach all the way up to 2400 meters (7850 ft.) above sea level, altitudes unseen in the rest of Latin America and rivaling the highest in the world. Soil composition on these slopes range from fertile black loams to dark red or brown clays, and in some regions volcanic basalt. This diversity promotes a rich variety of potential coffee aromas and flavors. Humidity and precipitation vary depending on the specific micro-region and annual weather fluctuations. The high altitudes and neighboring snow-capped Andes create intense diurnal temperature variation that stress the coffee trees and prolongate the maturation of the beans, factors which result in denser more concentrated coffees.

2) Variety

Coffee Leaf Rust (Roya) has dramatically affected production in Peru over the past five years, with many farmers at low altitudes abandoning coffee growing altogether or replacing Roya-devastated plants with disease resistant varieties such as Catimor (a hybrid with some genetic content of Robusta). These Catimor varieties may provide a reliable crop, but in my opinion they generally produce less interesting coffee. The great potential of Peruvian specialty coffee results from the vast swaths of land planted with the traditional Typica coffee variety. Many farmers also have the high-quality Bourbon (yellow and red), Caturra (yellow and red) and to a lesser extent other varieties such as Mundo Novo, Pache, Maragogype, Pacamara…etc.

The extreme altitudes, cold temperatures, and shade-grown plantations create micro-climates in which these traditional varieties of Typica, Bourbon, Caturra and the others can develop fine aromas, bright acidities, and complex flavor profiles.

3) Harvesting and Processing

The fact is that most Peruvian farmers harvest under-ripe, ripe, and over-ripe cherries at the same time. Selective harvesting, whereby the cherries are gathered at optimum ripeness, is critical to preserving quality. With little incentive to harvest in this fashion, few farmers maximize the quality potential on their lands. Those who do harvest properly are increasingly finding specialty buyers interested in the high quality coffees they produce.

The vast majority of Peruvian farmers process their coffee cherries on their own farms using hand-cranked wet mills. These farmers generally have access to crystalline mountain spring water with which to wash their coffees after fermentation. An increasing number of them are dedicated to their craft and engage in best practices: using clean fermentation tanks; carefully monitoring fermentation; washing parchment coffee and using water channels to separate densities; and using raised African-style drying beds below greenhouses to gently dry their beans. Part of the reason I've spent so much time helping improve and incentivize high quality coffee production is that most farmers do not follow these practices.