

Sustainable Harvest's Story of Origin

by David Griswold, President and Founder

I sat at a rickety desk in the small, spare office in the middle of Mexico City. One window looked east over crowded Avenida Insurgentes, where hundreds of green and white Volkswagen Beetle taxis raced by trailing the acrid exhaust of diesel fuel. Through the open window near my desk I smelled tacos al pastor being sold by vendors on the sidewalk below.

It was a late afternoon in October 1989, and I was a volunteer for the National Coordinating Body for Coffee Farmer Cooperatives (CNOCC). I planned to return to the USA to get my Masters in Business Administration. In doing so, I hoped to answer the question I had been pondering for some time: What work could I do to make a difference in the world?

There was a knock at the door, and I opened it to find a man with deep lines etched in his leathery face. He introduced himself as Pedro and immediately thrust a plastic bag of coffee into my hands. "I have come from a pueblo in the state of Guerrero," he began, "on behalf of 40 families who grow coffee. It is very good coffee." I invited him to sit on the wooden chair across from my desk, and he continued, "Can you help us find a way to sell our coffee?" There was a note of cautious optimism in his voice.

The coffee coop was a fledgling organization, trying to support small family farmers at a time when the world was changing greatly. In the uncertain and glutted commodities market, coffee prices were falling fast. Prices that had been stable for decades at above \$1.20 per pound had dropped to below 50 cents per pound. Farmers in Mexico, who knew little about what happened to their coffee once it left their farms, were suffering serious consequences.

Meanwhile, in Mexico then-President Carlos Salinas had embarked on a process of privatizing and disbanding government institutions, including the Mexican Coffee Institute. The sudden end to this national system that had provided agronomy, financial, and sales expertise to Mexico's 250,000 small-scale coffee farmers for over 40 years created a vacuum. And there, in the middle, sat Pedro along with many other unprepared farmers. With no access to potential buyers, they were at the mercy of intermediaries who kept information about the market secret, so as to keep their own profits high.

Pedro came to my office asking for help. I looked down at the plastic bag of coffee Pedro had given me, and saw that the beans were still covered with golden parchment. Though I was new to the coffee industry, I knew two things: first, to sell their coffee, farmers needed to send samples to potential buyers in

North America or Europe; and second, Pedro's sample could not be sent in its current form with the parchment still surrounding the green bean – the golden husk had to be removed. But no one had ever explained that to Pedro.

Looking at Pedro, I felt the enormity of the challenge he faced. Not only did farmers like Pedro need access to markets that would pay them a fair price for their coffee; they also needed an enormous amount of training and education to understand and succeed in the global export and sale of their coffee. There were hundreds of thousands of other men and women like Pedro, in Mexico and the other coffee-growing countries around the world, who depended on coffee for their livelihood but had no idea how to sell it.

As I thought about Pedro's question, I realized two things. One was that, sadly, I had no answer ready to give to him. The other was that I had found my life's work. In asking his question, Pedro had answered mine. I knew then that I would spend my life helping farmers find a sustainable market for their coffee, and teaching them to succeed in supplying that market.

That was 20 years ago. I began working to form a new kind of business, a coffee company that could bring together everyone in the supply chain and use its earnings to provide training and education to farmers like Pedro. Though I considered forming a not-for-profit organization, I knew their limitations having worked for several and felt that a for-profit social enterprise business model would allow us to give back a greater portion of revenues to farmer training.

In the years since that afternoon, Sustainable Harvest has grown into a company to become a leading voice for change in the industry, moving specialty coffee far beyond the exploitative model I saw in 1989. In the process, we have helped create sustainable livelihoods for tens of thousands of coffee farmers while bringing their high quality beans to thousands of consumers around the world. It all began that afternoon in Mexico City with a single question from Pedro.