



**NOT YOUR AVERAGE JOE**  
Julio Peralta tastes a selection of brews at his namesake coffee business; below, one of his top-shelf selections, Las Golondrinas

**NICARAGUA**

# HIGHER GROUNDS

*How a country with a ho-hum coffee reputation started producing some of the most sought-after beans on earth* **BY JOHN THOMPSON**

**"THE PAST 10 YEARS HAVE BROUGHT** a complete change to the way we do coffee in Nicaragua," declares Julio Peralta over a latte in a Managua café. Along with his cousin Octavio, Peralta heads up the specialty grower, wholesaler and roaster Peralta Coffees. "Before, while all the other countries in the region were selecting their best coffees and marketing them individually, Nicaragua was just bulking everything together."

But today, he goes on to explain, Nicaragua exports single-origin beans from farms like Las Golondrinas, a Peralta-represented grower that became the first two-time winner of the regional Cup of Excellence and produced the most expensive coffee ever sold in Nicaragua (\$47 per pound in 2007). "Las Golondrinas ..." Peralta's voice trails off as he smiles. "We have a waiting list of buyers. Japan wants it all!"

Although coffee is Nicaragua's main agricultural export, its reputation in that area has lagged behind that of its neighbors. Panama, for example, produces a fraction of the coffee Nicaragua does but is revered the world over for Esmeralda Special, a variety that can fetch more than \$100 a pound. ➔



➤ Nicaragua's road to coffee eminence has been a particularly difficult one. Civil war in the 1980s devastated prime growing regions near Honduras. "Our farms near the border—we had land mines there," Peralta says. "The army had to go in there in the '90s to pull them out." Then, at the turn of the millennium—just as Nicaragua's industry was finally recovering—world coffee prices collapsed.

Now, though, rehabilitated farms in places like Dipilto, in the Nueva Segovia region, and Las Sabanas, in Madriz, are producing superb coffees.



**FIELD OF DREAMS**  
Peralta at one of his farms in Dipilto, an up-and-coming coffee-growing area

Nicaraguan-born César Martín Vega, whose Café Integral in New York City roasts and sells Nicaraguan coffee exclusively, remembers well his first cup of "properly done" coffee from his homeland.

"It was a mystical experience—it smelled like home," he says. "Nicaraguan coffees are

extremely balanced, by and large. They tend to be relatively sweet and round, and then the back end has plenty of spice. The Nicaraguan *terroir*—what the soil can give the flavor—is a kind of unctuous spice note that tends toward cocoa and grain."

The next challenge, Vega says, is rescuing small Nicaraguan lots from blends and promoting them with careful roasts that reveal their extraordinary flavor. To that end, Peralta and his cousin are now building a café and roaster in Managua. "People can come in and buy wholesale if they want," Peralta says. "But we really just want to serve someone a cup of great coffee and ask, 'Can you believe this is from Nicaragua?'"

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**BRIGHT SPOT**  
The Managua bar El Tercer Ojo; inset, bartender Julio Otero

## HOME RUM

The legendary Flor de Caña meets the cocktail shaker

The Nicaraguan rum Flor de Caña is something of a national treasure. Its well-aged dark versions—which frequently place among the top rums in the world at the annual International Wine and Spirits Competition—

are best enjoyed neat or on the rocks. Its younger, light-bodied variant, however, offers the perfect base for the vibrant Macuá cocktail, like this one whipped up by Julio Otero, the head bartender at El Tercer Ojo in Managua.



## THE MACUÁ

- › 3 oz. orange juice
- › 1½ oz. Flor de Caña Extra Lite four-year rum
- › 1½ oz. passion fruit nectar or guava nectar
- › Splash of lime juice

Combine ingredients in a shaker with ice. Shake together for 10 seconds. Pour into a Collins glass. Garnish with an orange wheel and a green cherry.

## PASSION PLAY

A beloved tropical fruit gets an unlikely ally

**PASSION FRUIT AND** the Catholic Church go way back. The fruit gets its name from the plant that produces it, the passion flower, which reminded 16th-century Spanish missionaries of the Passion of Jesus: The flower's corona looked like a crown of thorns, the three stigmas like three nails, the tendrils like whips.

So it's only fitting that the church itself would get into the passion fruit game. In 2011, as part of a larger campaign to promote sustainable agriculture in Nicaragua, Rolando Álvarez, bishop of Matagalpa, signed off on using church funds to start the country's first modern passion fruit farms. "We're still getting it right," says Oscar Saenz Cantero, a supervisor at the new cooperative. "It takes a long time for our fruit to mature."

Most varieties of passion fruit—known locally as *maracuyá*—have come to Nicaragua from Colombia, Costa Rica or Brazil. The new Nicaraguan variety has an acidic flavor that balances the fruit's famous aroma. The pulpy seeds are cooked down to create the sweet nectar found at restaurants and street stands in Managua, which is consumed undiluted, but with a little sugar and salt. Of course, many locals also enhance it with a shot of native Flor de Caña rum.

"Someone brought me a bottle from the city recently," Cantero says. "I can't wait to enjoy it with juice." —J.T.



**SEEDS OF GREATNESS**  
The venerable passion fruit



## French Dressing

A homesick chef gives Nicaraguan cuisine a Continental twist

"Let's be clear: I am *French French*," says chef David Dafonte. Sitting in the lounge of his swank *Restaurante Azul*, inside Managua's *Hotel Contempo*, he is keen to emphasize that he was born in France and grew up cooking French food—which, naturally, he believes to be superior—but after visiting his uncle here, he decided to stay.

Though it was far easier to run a restaurant in Managua than it was back home, Dafonte found the local diners harder to please. "I just cooked traditional French food, but it was not easy for Nicaraguans to appreciate," he says. "They are very attached to rice, beans, plantains." So Dafonte went multicultural, and the result is some of the most exciting food in Managua today.



### STREET SMART

Gussying up a fast-food favorite

*Quesillos*—in which soft farmer's cheese is topped with pickled onions, wrapped in a warm white corn tortilla and doused with cream—are usually sold



**SAY CHEESE** Enjoying a traditional *quesillo* at *La Trenza*

along the highways that connect Nicaragua's major cities, and eaten out of plastic bags. Managua's *La Trenza*, however, brings *quesillos* in from the street to the diner—or, more properly, the shrine.

At *La Trenza*, *quesillos* are served eight ways. The restaurant's namesake dish presents



**ARROZ BY ANY OTHER NAME**  
From left, chef David Dafonte; a table at  
Restaurante Azul; *moules au Roquefort*

Dafonte frequently combines Nicaraguan flavors with French techniques—adding sauces, say, or cooking with alcohol. A simple dish of shrimp and avocado is reimagined as a salad with tomato coulis, while his version of *moules au Roquefort* features mussels flambéed in rum. The most extravagant touches, though, are reserved for dessert: Witness *dulce de leche* crème brûlée.

"There was nothing I liked about Nicaraguan food when I came here," Dafonte says. But his local sea bass, pan-seared and topped with citrus salad, suggests he's coming around. —J.T.

the cheese as a thick braided brick. The "Pepe" is more balanced: The cheese is flattened to fit the area of the tortilla. The "Madre" combines one of each.

While each dish can be served in the traditional to-go style, it's better savored open-face on a plate while you people-watch from La Trenza's shaded patio. Besides, tableware is recommended for eating something like the "Super India": two extra-large braids (a half pound of cheese) with all the fixings. —J.T.

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