

Fair Trade Coffee

The phrase "fair trade coffee" has become ubiquitous in some circles, especially among co-op shoppers, but in the spirit of Fair Trade month, what's in the bottom of that cup? What does it mean to say that those beans got there "fairly"?

The answer to that question is two-fold: first, there are the basic fair trade standards. Those are the elements of making the coffee trade just a little bit more fair for the little guys, farmers who, in the behemoth global commodity trade, get the short end of the stick time after time. For coffee, that means that a minimum price is paid to democratically-organized farmer coops for each pound of coffee regardless of where the commodity market roller coaster is at. If it's riding high (as it has been lately), all coffee prices are up and the fair trade price provides a premium above that market price. When the market is low, farmers still have the assurance that they can at least get that minimum price from their fair trade buyers.

The small security that that minimum price provides is perhaps the most discussed element of what fair trade does for farmers, yet it's only one piece. Part of the fair trade price includes a premium that is to be allocated to development projects as determined by the co-op's membership. That means different things to different co-ops, but over the years, some of the farmer organizations that we buy from have put it towards schools in Ethiopia, clinics in Indonesia, pickup trucks in Mexico - all projects deemed of critical need by their communities. Coffee is often grown by small farmers in remote parts of the world where a variety of factors mean that these clinics or schools can be some of the only options available. Far up in the mountains, pickup trucks to collect farmer's coffee mean the difference between selling coffee at your own gate or spending a day trudging washed out paths to the co-op's buying station. The co-ops also provide crucial infrastructure by which small farmers are able to achieve economies of scale. That's not just a dry economic concept, but the ability for small farmers to own their own processing equipment, adding more value before selling it up the chain. Thus the co-ops provide more than just a price for coffee; in marginalized communities, they can be the best option for doing work that in our own communities we take for granted.

Here at Peace Coffee, we've been doing fair trade for a long time; as we like to say, since before it was the flavor of the month. We look at those minimum standards as the basics, the building code as it were of our way of doing business: they lay out all the most basic requirements, but fair trade minimums alone don't describe how we want to run our business.

We are co-founders and member-owners of a unique importing model - we're part of a co-op of a handful of other fair trade coffee roasters throughout North America. Together we're able to buy direct from farmer co-ops, cutting out a lot of the standard importing overhead, and making direct connections with the people who grow the beans that we roast. Those connections are more than one-time business transactions - we've been buying from most of the same producers for years. For example, the beans in our flagship Guatemalan Dark Roast come from the Apecaform co-op who we've been buying from for 10 years! We recently took those connections one step further and launched an interactive website, <http://www.mapmybeans.com/>, where coffee lovers can see the faces behind their favorite brew.

As roasters, we take our spot in the middle of the supply chain very seriously. In addition to the work we do at home, caffeinating and motivating coffee drinkers, we strive to create similar opportunities for community-building and education at the other end of the supply chain. Our regular travel schedule means that we've seen a lot of coffee growing in a lot of different places. We often work with newer producer partners as they learn the process of importing, sharing the best ideas we've seen around the globe and offering our perspective on the challenges of their local market. And, while we think fair trade coffee is a fabulous thing, we're realistic that a small plot is not going to be enough to provide a farming family with a stable income for generations to come. Many of the co-ops that we work with have started various income diversification projects including roasting their own coffee for sale in domestic markets, starting ecotourism projects, and facilitating skill-building internships and trainings. We see our support of these projects as an aspect of our work as fair traders that's just as important as the fair, stable price that we pay for the coffee since they advance our overall hope: that one day, small farmers won't always get the short end of the stick.

Sharing roasting skills, providing input on eco-tourism projects, facilitating farmer-to-farmer information sharing, and paying a fair price over the long-term: those are just a few of the ways we are working daily to create a more just trading system, one that strengthens local communities and brings better, fairer coffee to your cup.