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Humility, intellect and taking charge

Tuesday, November 8, 2005

By **JONATHAN NELSON**, Columbian Staff Writer

GUA AZUL, PERU -- A dinner honoring coffee roasters from America, Canada and Australia brings dozens of farmers from this remote village to the town's two-room schoolhouse.

Before the meal of guinea pig and potatoes, several men who belong to a cooperative of coffee farmers deliver fiery speeches, reminding others that producing quality coffee is critical in the face of increasing competition. By the light of a single kerosene lantern, one man bangs his fist on the table. The forcefulness draws applause from other men.

Maria Sabina Hernandez Queva sits quietly against one wall and looks on.

An outsider would have a difficult time identifying Queva, 45, as a key leader in this community. Her style is much softer than the bravado of the men.

It is something she learned in 13 years of marriage to 46-year-old Luis Queva Vega, and she explains it like this when other women ask how she gets Vega to share in the household duties.



An early morning cup of coffee made using a highly concentrated form poured into a cup of hot water. (Photo by Troy Wayrynen/The Columbian)

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"I didn't force my husband to change," she says in Spanish through an interpreter. "I did it using my intelligence, trying to find lovely moments to try to talk to him and try to make him change his way of thinking."

Queva's intelligence has taken her from a guest at meetings of the 2,500-member farming cooperative to election as the group's secretary. She parlayed that into an appointment on the advisory board for the local bank. Most recently a group of women within the cooperative formed a unique all-female coffee association and chose Queva as their president.

Those accomplishments have made Queva a celebrity among the coffee roasters who buy Cafe Femenino, the coffee produced by those 750 women.

Eight roasters from places such as Guelph, Ontario; Melbourne, Australia; and Logan, Utah, spent 11 days in July touring the Cafe Femenino-growing villages. The trip included a stop at Queva's farm.

The group made the trip at the invitation of Gay and Garth Smith, owners of Vancouver-based Organic Products Trading Co. The Smiths are the sole importers of Cafe Femenino, bringing the beans to coffee houses in Vancouver and across the globe. The Smiths hope to replicate the advancements in Peru through the Cafe Femenino Foundation, a nonprofit, international organization the Smiths created to improve the lives of women and children in coffee producing countries.

For these small-business owners, the Cafe Femenino story came alive with their introduction to Queva. The visit confirmed to the group that by purchasing this coffee they are giving women the chance to take charge of their lives.

The journey to Queva's farm came at the end of the trip.

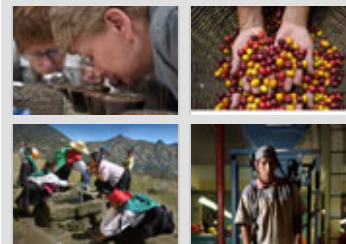
The roasters arrive as the morning sun spills onto the surrounding mountains. Queva is inside her kitchen finishing a cup of coffee and a breakfast of boiled potatoes and goat cheese. She played host to two roasters who are filming an independent movie on cooperatives.

Queva lifts the cup to her lips as a video camera at the other end of the table films an interview. A simple gold wedding band encircles her ring finger. Her black hair is pulled into a pony tail, accentuating her high cheekbones. Gold glitters from dental work on her front teeth.

As in large meetings in which the group encountered Queva, she says very little, spending words like they are her last dollar.

The questions end and Queva clears the table before greeting guests in an outside courtyard.

The attention from so many strangers leaves Queva wondering what these people see in her.



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Gay Smith says Queva's humbleness is a trait that helps explain why she has been embraced as a leader. Smith considers the woman everyone calls Sabina "a very kind, sweet person who truly, genuinely wants to help. But there is also a drive to succeed. It's veiled, but it's there."

Before Queva shows the roasters her farm, she waters a nursery of starter plants, then leads the group into the 2-acre field adjacent to her house. They walk beneath the trees in groups of two and three.

The countryside lacks the soundtrack of a modern world no traffic, airplanes or televisions. The only sounds are a few hushed conversations, birds chirping from the trees and dried leaves crunching underfoot.

Despite being billed as a tour, Queva isn't about to stand around chatting. The muscles in her forearms grow taut as she deftly plucks red, ripe coffee cherries from the trees.

Childhood work

The coffee roasters talk about Queva's farm, the quality of the beans and her accomplishments. Queva keeps picking. It is work she has done since she was a little girl on her parents' farm and work her two children began at an early age.

But Cafe Femenino has allowed Queva, like other mothers, to send their children to better schools in Peru's bigger cities.

Sandra Queva Hernandez, Queva's 23-year-old daughter, studied in Cajamarca and Lima, Peru's capital and largest city, before joining a religious organization and moving to Mexico in August.

Alvin Queva Hernandez, her 18-year-old son, is finishing high school in the coastal town of Chiclayo, a 10-hour drive from Agua Azul. She said once her son graduates he plans to remain in the city and find a job driving a taxi or truck.

The thought of sending her children to school in another city never occurred to Queva until the Cafe Femenino income arrived. It comes with unintended consequences, though, since Queva doubts either child will return to the family farm.

Queva, in fact, thought she left a life of farming behind when, as a 16-year-old, she moved to Lima and worked as a nanny for a college professor. Just before she turned 18, the professor got a contract to work in Venezuela. The family wanted Queva to come with them, but her parents refused to let her leave Peru.

Without a job, Queva returned to the family farm and worked there until her 1979 marriage to Vega. Queva's father gave the young couple a half-acre farm as a wedding present.

The newlyweds grew coffee and bananas on the land until 1983 when they sold that farm for the one they currently own. CICAP, a nonprofit group that provides technical assistance for farmers, visited Agua Azul in 1992. Vega, her husband, was the only one to join the group.

Not long after Vega became a member of the cooperative, he sent Queva to a meeting he couldn't attend. That decision changed Queva's life.

"Before (joining the board) the concept of most of the women was that the woman had to be home doing the housework," Queva said. "Since I started to participate in the different training and courses, that's when my mind started to change."

Queva came to believe a woman's place was as much on the cooperative's board as in the kitchen.

Vega pushed for Queva's appointment to the cooperative, a decision that was approved in 1999. That event gave Queva entrance to other leadership positions, including the presidency of the Cafe Femenino association.

Breaking barriers

The appointment also broke a barrier for women who once considered it taboo to talk about their personal problems. Now they seek Queva's advice on dealing with abusive husbands, husbands who aren't supportive and husbands who don't share in the household duties. Queva concedes even she deals with similar problems, saying Vega "likes drinking a little bit."

Queva counsels women to pick the right time to talk to their husbands, a "lovely moment," she calls it. She tells them to be sensitive when broaching the subject and to move slowly rather than pushing for a big change.

The discussions are not only reshaping individual homes, but rapidly changing roles of men and women in the hinterlands of Peru.

The tour of Queva's farm finally ends and the group readies for an hourlong drive to La Florida to witness the Sunday coffee market. During the harvest, farmers bring their beans to the region's central town for shipment to a larger facility in Chiclayo.

Queva rushes inside the house to change out of her sweat pants and returns in a pink dress shirt and gray skirt. The bus bounces and bumps its way down the one-lane road. It stops once so everybody can get off while the driver traverses a treacherous pass.

Once in La Florida, Queva bids goodbye to the visiting coffee roasters and greets other farmers with hugs and kisses. She disappears into a market.

On the street, a bare-chested Wilton Rivasplata Sanchez tosses a 110-pound bag of coffee beans over his left shoulder and walks toward a flatbed truck. A red T-shirt is tied around his head to soak up the sweat. Sanchez dumps the bag onto a growing pile of beans.

Gay Smith watches Sanchez from the street. She smiles when she sees the pink stitching that ties the black bag closed. That twine signifies the beans as coming from a Cafe Femenino farm. Bag after bag adorned with pink ribbon piles up in the truck.