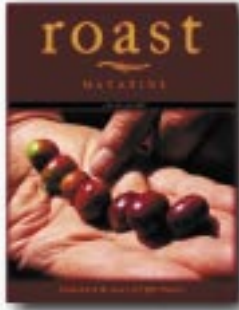


ARTICLE REPRINT



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TITLE Café Femenino: Empowering Women & Strengthening the Coffee Industry

AUTHOR Karen Foley

GAYLENE SMITH ISN'T AFRAID to take a leap of faith. In fact, that kind of daring is precisely what inspired the creation of Café Femenino, an ambitious project created last year to connect and empower female coffee growers in origin countries that have traditionally offered few rights to women. For more than a decade, Smith, co-owner of Organic Products Trading Co. (OPTCO) in Vancouver, Wash., has been importing coffee from co-ops in remote areas of northern Peru, a country where a shocking number of women suffer from daily oppression and physical or emotional abuse.

Over the years, Smith became more aware of and concerned about the subjugation of the women in coffee-growing communities with which OPTCO worked, and she felt a need to address the problem, particularly since she herself had overcome profound personal challenges in the past that tested her strength and courage as a woman. Smith was especially disturbed by how stripped of basic decision-making rights these women growers were; they weren't even able to help decide how the money coming into their co-op would be spent. But changing generations of deeply ingrained social morés would be no easy task.

Organizing the women seemed like the logical first step, so in partnership with PROASSA, the local exporter; CICAP, a Peru-based NGO; and CECANOR, the 2,500-member co-op with which OPTCO worked, the female coffee growers decided to gather as a group to share their experiences and brainstorm about how to improve their lives. In 2003, the women convened for the first

time, and out of that meeting came the idea to separate their coffee from the rest of CECANOR's production. Smith vividly recalls the women approaching OPTCO to help sell the coffee. "My heart said, 'It's my job to do this,'" she says. "I just knew it was a responsibility

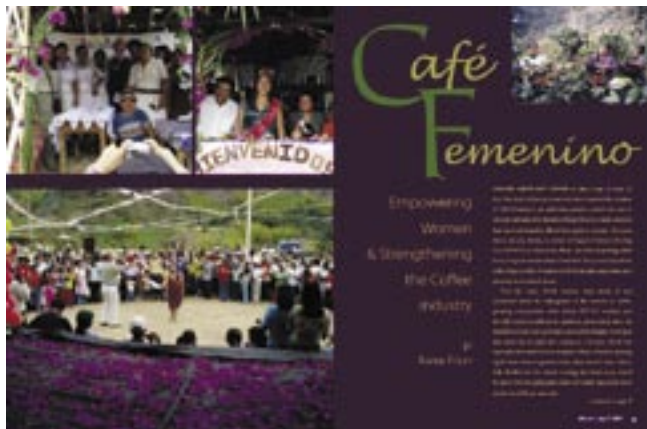
I was supposed to take on."

OPTCO agreed to sell Café Femenino as a fair-trade coffee, even committing to pay an additional two cents per pound on top of the fair-trade price. This additional premium provides extra income that goes directly into the hands of the women producers, and they are in charge of choosing what to spend the money on.

From Concept to Reality

Over the next year, the women growers continued to gather for small regional meetings, sharing stories and developing a unified vision for their future. Smith worked with the women on developing a name and logo for the project—hence, Café Femenino—and she and the women created guidelines for roasters who wanted to sell the coffee. First, whenever possible, a woman at a roasting company is asked to sign the contract and participate in the sales and marketing of the coffee. Second, the name Café Femenino must be used in the labeling; third, the coffee cannot be blended and must be sold as a single-origin; and finally, a minimum of \$.01 per pound must be donated to a women's crisis program in the roaster's community or back to the Café Femenino project for programs for the women growers.

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In September of 2004, the farmers gathered for their second annual meeting, and this time, they invited Smith to speak to the group. Again, Smith took a leap of faith. “I did not have a clue what I was supposed to say,” she recalls. “But faith told me that the words would be given to me and therefore I did not have to worry about it. Then, on our family vacation in the first part of August, I woke up one morning and the speech was in my head. I got up, asked for a pen and paper, and wrote the words down.”

During her speech, Smith told the women they were embarking on a shared dream. “It’s frightening and, at the same time, very exciting,” she told them. “We will need to depend on each other to work very hard and be very committed to the success of Café Femenino. The quality of the coffee must be superb, because that is the kind of women we are. This dream will bless us in ways we don’t yet know, except that we all believe in it and know that only together can we make it come true.”

There are currently 464 women growers involved with the Café Femenino project, and in producing their special coffee, they participate on all levels, from working the soil to harvesting, depulping and drying. “It’s unprecedented to have women involved in all aspects of production, buying and selling,” says Stacy Marshall, co-owner of Grounds for Change, a roaster wholesaler and retailer in Washington State that sells Café Femenino coffee.

Smith says the hope is that changing the roles of women will help improve the quality of life in these communities while building a sustainable economic system. “We are working to raise self-esteem and to change the view of women’s roles,” she says. “We are working to start economic activities that generate sales the women can control.”

Smith adds that even men in the co-op and the community are supporting the project. “The men have to be part of the healing process,” she says. “It doesn’t mean everything has changed, but it allows us to create pressure for the change.”

Gaining the men’s support



has been easier because the Café Femenino project focuses on communities as a whole. “We were worried about bringing attention to women in areas where that might backfire and make things even worse,” says Randy Wirth, co-owner and roaster for Caffè Ibis, a roaster wholesaler and retailer in Logan, Utah. “That’s why we want to show that this is not just about recognizing women farmers—it’s about supporting the entire community.”

An Easy Sell

Since Café Femenino debuted last fall, Smith says roasters across the United States have enthusiastically embraced the project, and as of early January, 18 had purchased the coffee. “It gives roasters an opportunity to compete against the Starbucks of the world because they have something so special,” she says.

Marshall was immediately drawn to the coffee and has been humbled by the response from her customers. “We’ve had tremendous support above and beyond what we ever thought would happen,” she says. “I just had three wholesale orders come in within the last three hours, all of which ordered Café Femenino.”

Marshall adds that Café Femenino has rapidly become one of her top-selling coffees. “We’ve been carrying it for a couple of months, and it’s really up there in terms of being one our most popular roasts. I think it’s because of the cause it supports and that we’re giving back 25 cents on the pound to the co-op in addition to what OPTCO is doing.”

At the same time, she says the coffee’s flavor—which she describes as rich, full and chocolaty—has been generating glowing reviews from customers. “It’s become extremely popular for its taste,” she says. “We have a number of local customers who only want Café Femenino because of the flavor.”

The positive response is heartwarming to Marshall because Café Femenino



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perfectly dovetails with the company's mission to support sustainable and socially just coffee. "Grounds for Change was built on the premise that we would do as much good as we could through coffee," she says. "Café Femenino works into that model because it allows us to directly give back to and support this collective of women producers in Peru."

Like Grounds for Change, Caffè Ibis viewed Café Femenino as a natural addition to its line of triple-certified coffees. "I think the most important thing is that the coffee underlines something that has always been a core value of our business: tying our personal values and business values together," says Wirth. "Café Femenino not only addresses the issues we've focused on for years—shade-grown, organic and fair-trade—but it goes a step further in dealing with a very important social situation."

Wirth says he's seen notable interest from many of the niche markets within Caffè Ibis's customer base. Recently, for instance, a large fundraising group called Higher Ground signed on to use Café Femenino exclusively as its fundraising coffee, and Caffè Ibis also

sealed a deal to provide coffee for a four-day celebrity event during the international Sundance Film Festival. "The promoters were totally off the wall over the Café Femenino story," he says.

While many customers are drawn to the story of Café Femenino, Wirth is always quick to emphasize the quality of the coffee. "People will buy for a cause once, but if the quality isn't there, they won't come back," he says. "So it has to be sustainable in terms of cup quality."

In addition to Café Femenino's benefits at origin, Smith says an unexpected outcome has been the way the project empowers women on the purchasing end. "Women in some of these roastery companies are coming forward in a position they've never had before," she says. "So we're changing their perception of themselves and their company."

The Café Femenino Foundation

Once the seed for Café Femenino was planted, the project quickly gained momentum, and by last December, Gay and her husband Garth took things a step further by establishing the Café Femenino

Foundation.

"We never anticipated that we would need to move forward so quickly," says Julie Olson, the foundation's executive director. "We already have commitments from people to provide funds. I made my first deposit on December 30, and in February or March we will begin accepting our first grant applications."

According to Olson, the foundation's mission is to enhance the lives of women and children in coffee-producing communities around the world. "We do this by providing grants to worthy programs and projects in coffee-producing countries," she says, adding that the women coffee growers will write the grant proposals themselves. "One of the exciting things is that the projects and programs are generated based on their needs in their communities. We work within the existing socioeconomic structure to help them, but they decide between themselves what type of projects they need funding for."

Olson says the foundation hopes to begin endowing grants in the first quarter of this year to communities in the coffee-growing areas of Peru. "The abuse rate there is horrific, so we want to start providing funds to help them as soon as possible."

The foundation had also planned to apply the Café Femenino model to coffee-producing communities in Sumatra, where women's rights are equally bleak, but the tsunami disaster presented more immediate and urgent needs. "A grower's co-op in Aceh was heavily hit—several farmers died and many children were lost," Olson says. "So we have been working to provide relief."

Long-term, Olson says the foundation would like to assist many other coffee communities around the world. "I think the issues we're dealing with in coffee communities are not limited to Peru or Sumatra," she says. "We hope to be able to provide grants to any coffee-producing community in the world that has legitimate needs."

Smith says her dream is that the foundation could help establish a crisis center in each coffee-producing community. Her vision is to provide leadership training to women so that they can help other women and learn to generate alternative income for their families. At the same time, she would like to provide spiritual healing for women who have endured years of abuse.





To help ensure transparency and reliability, part of the foundation’s mission will involve regular trips to the communities seeking assistance, and members of the organization’s board already have plans to travel to Peru this summer with Garth and Gay Smith and several of their roaster customers. “I expect that to be an ongoing part of what we do,” says Olson. “We have a responsibility to ensure that the funds are spent appropriately. We want to make sure that the money gets to the right people in these countries.”

So far, Olson says most of the financial commitments have come from roasters and retailers, but she expects the support base to gradually expand beyond the coffee industry. “Because of the humans rights issues being addressed, I think it will have a broader appeal in the long term. But it gives me goose bumps to think about the phenomenal response we’ve had so quickly.”

The Road Ahead

Based on the initial response to Café Femenino, Marshall and Wirth both plan to support the project on an ongoing basis. “Given the volume we’re selling, I anticipate that we’ll be purchasing even more than we might have initially thought,” says Marshall.

Likewise, Wirth expects his company’s stake in the project to grow dramatically, adding that he is committed to investing in the education and marketing necessary to make this coffee a top seller. “We don’t pick up a product without making a serious long-term commitment,” he says. “You can’t spend the kind of money we’re spending without having a long view.”

Now that she has been able to gauge the industry’s interest, Smith plans to purchase more Café Femenino coffee and get additional

women growers involved. “Not knowing what the market reception would be, we only ordered three containers, but I’m not sure we’ll get through the needs of everyone this year,” she says, adding that as more women growers transition their crops to organic, they will become involved in the project. “Next year we will have more coffee available, probably about six containers. It’s a step-by-step process.”

Ultimately, Smith believes the work of Café Femenino is endless and that by applying the model around the world, the coffee industry will become stronger as a whole. “We believe that if we begin to empower women throughout these countries, we will see a change in coffee prices, and a change in economics,” she says. “We want to make the industry aware of what a huge problem the abuse of women is. Once they understand, I know we can effect tremendous change.”



KAREN FOLEY is a freelance writer and editor in Portland, Ore. She can be reached at karen@krfcreative.com.