

Coffee anyone?

from El Salvador to your door

by Tom Campbell

Perhaps the most important thing Baltasar Ferreiro learned during his college career at Purdue was summed up in one sentence by Associate Dean of Agriculture David Pfindler on the very day Ferreiro received his Purdue degree.

"We have simply taught you how to look for information," Pfindler told Ferreiro June 13, 1971, when he received his degree in agricultural economics.

Ferreiro has spent the rest of his life doing exactly that.

"Once you learn how to look for information, you can get it anywhere," says Ferreiro, a voracious reader and prolific letter writer.

His first "A" at Purdue was in speed-reading. Ferreiro reads everything he can get his hands on, particularly if he thinks it will help him be a better businessman.

Appropriately enough, Ferreiro's first exposure to Purdue University came in book form. He was headed to the University of Florida until he and his father took a fact-finding trip to the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador.

"They had a book that ranked all of the schools in the United States," Ferreiro remembers. "That book had Purdue as the No. 1 school of agriculture. My father talked to several people at the University of Florida, and he found out that many of them had degrees from Purdue. So it was a simple decision; I would go to Purdue University."

Like his father and grandfather, Ferreiro is a coffee producer. His grandfather (also named Baltasar) started one of El Salvador's largest coffee and rubber plantations more than 100 years ago. Ferreiro's father (also a Baltasar) enlarged the plantation to about 4,400 acres by the late 1960s.

But even while Ferreiro was studying at Purdue in the early '70s, political unrest was ripping apart El Salvador. Violence and fear ruled the country for nearly two decades.

Working alongside his father, Ferreiro had established the largest citrus plantation in Central America, implementing leading-edge technology. He utilized a drip irrigation system, a high rate of planting per area and a cold press processing system for the extraction of oil from the lemon husk.

"We were one of three producers worldwide doing it that way," Ferreiro says. "Now, 98 percent of the essential oil is extracted likewise."

But then leftist guerrillas burned farms, land-mined fields, even kidnapped employees and held them for ransom.

The subsequent government-induced agrarian reform, supported by the Jimmy Carter administration, reduced the Ferreiro's land holdings to about 185 acres.

"The leftist guerrillas destroyed everything," Ferreiro says. "I'm still paying those debts today."

Slowly, but surely, sometimes even painfully, he is rebuilding his coffee empire. Ferreiro plants, grows, harvests, processes, selects, roasts, packs, exports and delivers coffee from his plantation, located 4,000 feet

above sea level in the fertile, volcanic soils of the mountains of eastern El Salvador.

Hard work and persistence do pay dividends. Ferreiro recently flew to Paris to accept the 21st International Food and Beverage Award.

The rebuilding process has been difficult at best, life-threatening at its worst. Ferreiro himself was once threatened by a guerrilla death squad.

On a winding mountain road near the town of Santiago de Maria, Ferreiro was making his way back to his plantation, Cerro El Tigre (Hill of the Tiger), when a band of leftist guerrillas blocked the roadway.

"October 22, 1982," he recalls. "That was an awful experience." Ferreiro was pulled from his car and thrown to the ground at gunpoint.

His crime?

"My skin color was lighter than theirs," he says.

Baltasar Ferreiro

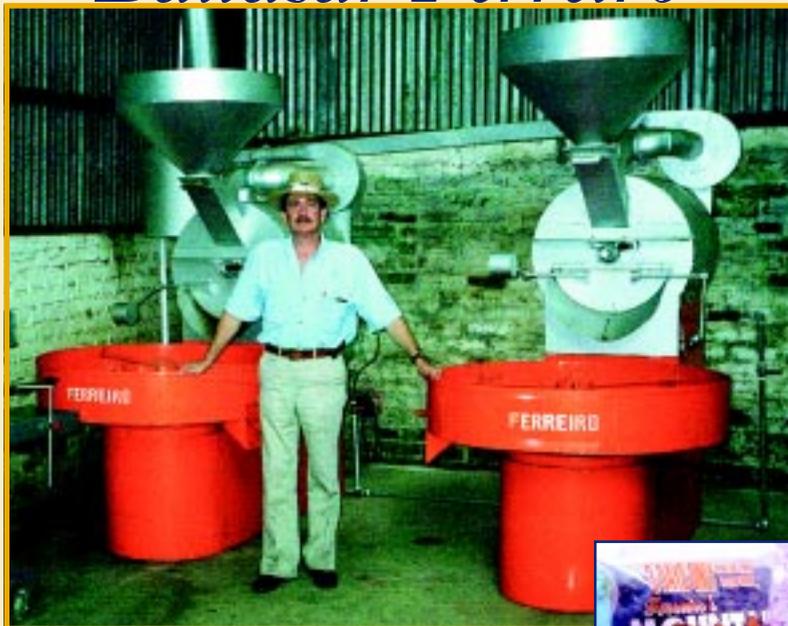


photo provided

Baltasar Ferreiro, shown here in his grinding mill, is a third-generation coffee grower from the fertile volcanic mountain fields of El Salvador.

A boot on his neck and a gun barrel pressed to his temple held Ferreiro in place for 45 minutes as the guerrillas aimed their weapons and clicked away the empty chambers, mocking their prisoner.

"At that moment, I saw the Tunnel of Tranquillity," Ferreiro says.

And in those tense minutes inside the tunnel, Ferreiro saw his life scroll out before him like living graffiti on the walls.

"I remember flying through the tunnel like the old Superman, flying like an angel," he says. "And at the end of the tunnel, I saw the silhouette of Christ. It was an experience I will never forget. Ever since that day, I know that there is a supreme being. I know there is a reason for us to be here, so let's try to be the best we can be and lead the best life we can live."

To this day, Ferreiro questions why he did not lose his life along that mountain roadway, why the rebels let him go. Emotionally, the near-death experience made him stronger.

"At that very moment, I lost all fear of death," Ferreiro says. "It is not that I go looking for it, but I am not afraid of dying. That experience gave me a very strong sense of confidence that I didn't have before."

Ferreiro's plantation is now about 4 percent of the ground his ancestors farmed. The rest was parceled to guerrillas and soldiers who fought in the war. It was the price Ferreiro paid for peace in his country.

But Ferreiro has gotten more with less by planting more coffee plants per square meter than his competitors. He developed a more productive fertilization scheme to help boost productivity.

"High quality production needs a better and more analytical production process," he says. Ferreiro designed and built the efficient coffee mill and roasting machinery used on his plantation, as well as an irrigation system that increased productivity.

When the smoke had cleared at the end of El Salvador's "Lost Decade," Ferreiro had complete control of every phase of his coffee operation, from planting all the way through air delivery of the product.

"We had to learn to be innovative," Ferreiro says. "One of the novel ways we market our product is to send it directly to the consumer. We can guarantee the freshness and quality of our product because nobody else is involved in the process."

Ferreiro boasts that his company is the only coffee producer in the world that provides door-to-door service in just three days.

After achieving success in the German market in 1997, Ferreiro recently set his sights on the lucrative Canadian and United States markets.

"We try to keep the process simple, using the KISS method, just like I learned at Purdue: 'Keep it simple and simpler,'" Ferreiro says.

"I feel that I use my degree from Purdue on a daily basis. They taught me how to open my brain and find things out there that can make me better. I am so proud to be a Purdue graduate."

Ferreiro lives his life the same as he runs his business, guided by a few steadfast beliefs that are as deeply rooted as the richly flavored coffee plants he grows.

"God, goal setting, attitude, determination, innovation and speed-reading are my principles," he says. "They are applicable at any stage in your life."

Ferreiro's Mountain Plantation Gourmet Coffee can be found at www.intersal.com/ferreiro. E-mail: ferreiro@es.com.sv or call 1-888-BUY-KAFE.



photo by Tom Campbell

Alumni Profile:

Name:	Baltasar Ferreiro
Occupation:	Coffee producer
Degree:	BS'71 Ag Economics
Hometown:	San Salvador, El Salvador
Family:	(Divorced) three children: Camilla, 18, Beatriz, 15, Christina, 6
Hobbies:	Flying

Favorite coffee treats:

1. Hot cup of coffee
2. Ice-cold coffee and cream
3. Coffee and chocolate
4. Roasted coffee beans encapsulated in chocolate (like peanut M&M's)
5. Cappuccino (for Sunday mornings)
6. Coffee liqueur (after dinner)