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DEEP DEVOCIÓN

A BOGOTÁ-INFUSED COFFEE SANCTUARY RAISES THE STAKES IN THE JAVA CULTURE OF BROOKLYN

HIGH IN THE MOUNTAINS OF CENTRAL COLOMBIA, WHERE THE AIR IS THIN, THE FOREST IS LUSH, AND THE ROADS LITTLE MORE THAN SCREE-LADEN SWITCHBACKS, A FARMER PLUCKS A BRIGHT RED BERRY FROM A GREEN-LEAFED COFFEE PLANT AND DROPS IT INTO a burlap sack. It's one of billions of coffee beans harvested in the country every year, but this coffee bean, of a style called borbón rojo, is special. It's destined for Devoción Botica de Café, a new roaster and café in Williamsburg that's devoted to nothing less than serving the world's freshest coffee.

But time is of the essence. According to Devoción's owner and Medellín native Steven Sutton, that little bean will soon begin to lose its rich, complex flavors, which is why he and his business partners have built a company designed to get the finest coffee in Colombia from the farm to the roaster and, ultimately, to consumers faster than it's ever been done before.

It requires a smoothly run operation. Once picked, those borbón rojo berries will make it down the mountain and across the valley by truck to Devoción's processing facility in Bogotá. There, they'll be stripped of their "parchment" hulls, yielding pea-green beans that are quickly packed and





flown overnight to New York, where within 10 days they'll be roasted, ground, brewed, and served to some of the city's most discerning coffee drinkers. In coffee terms, that's a lifetime less than even the elite roasters of today can boast, and it's what makes Devoción unlike any coffee company out there.

"The most high-end guys boast that they start roasting after only two or three months," explains Sutton, 35, as he takes a break from preparing Devoción's stylish 3,600-square-foot space on Williamsburg's Grand Street. "For me that's already old."

Sutton knows a thing or two about coffee, having studied its flavors and aromas through extensive blind tastings known as cuppings. He's even had coffee analyzed in a special food laboratory. "There are more than 1,000 organic components in each bean," he says, "and a lot of the components, the minerals, the flavors, start fading away because of oxidation."

Sutton wasn't always involved with coffee. Strangely, he can trace the origin of Devoción to the advent of music-sharing site Napster. In the mid-2000s, he was working in the United States as a sound engineer, but the proliferation of online file sharing sent the music industry into a tailspin—and Sutton into a bout of soul searching. Before long, he found himself working for a mass market coffee importer focused on buying and selling Colombian coffee as cheaply as possible, which led him to an idea.

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Left: Various teas made from the husks of coffee beans. Above: Owner Steven Sutton says speed to market is what makes his coffee unique.

"Colombian coffee had become the best coffee in the world in a general sense, but not among specialty coffees, so I started asking why," he said. "I realized that it had no traceability. Nobody really knew, bean by bean, where it came from."

Getting the backstory on every bean is a tall order in a country with half a million coffee farmers, but Sutton would soon have his chance to try. The price of coffee spiked, the Colombian peso plummeted against the dollar, and his import business dried up. "I had an opportunity to go back home to Colombia and do something meaningful," he explains. "I wanted to do something that supports my people and my country, and shows the world that Colombian coffee can be better than Ethiopian coffee or Central American coffee."

Then, in 2006, he found his inspiration. "My first partner, Nelson Vargas, who is now my manager for quality, introduced me to a coffee that I couldn't believe, one of the Tipica beans," he says. "I told him, 'This is the best coffee I've ever had in my life. This is what I'm looking for.'"

IF SUTTON IS A COLOMBIAN COFFEE EXPERT, VARGAS IS A LEGEND. With a lifetime of experience in the fields, roasters, labs, and cafés, he's come to the conclusion that the finest, most unique types of coffee are growing in Colombia's most inaccessible regions, where, ironically, decades of vio-



lence from the country's 50-year-old civil war have protected them.

"Devocción's philosophy for coffee led us in search of rare coffee genotypes that still survive in Colombia far from industrial-scale farms," he explains. "These original Arabic species of coffee plants, which are susceptible to insects and fungus, are hidden in the mountains and forests, where the same Colombian insurgency that has caused unrest has unwittingly protected them."

With the taste still on their lips, Sutton and Vargas set off to do something no other roaster had done. Armed with only a basic idea ("It was a messy process," Sutton admits), they crisscrossed the country and established a network of micro-lot coffee farmers all across Colombia to sell Devocción their finest beans at or above fair trade rates. Bouncing along back roads and carefully navigating around pockets of unrest, the two signed on more than 400 farmers who now provide Devocción with 150 tons of coffee a year for both domestic consumption and export. "We had to go into the most remote places—the most dangerous places of Colombia—where farming is far from

Above: The light-filled shop showcases its roasting equipment up front. **Right:** A wall of 2,000 plants, all of them native to Colombia.

perfect," Sutton recalls. "These aren't typical farms where you see coffee trees in a row; this is a beautiful forest."

While they were successful in establishing a reliable network of farmers, they realized that it was more than just a business arrangement. ("Devocción is based in human love," Sutton likes to say.)

To that end, as Sutton's Colombia-based business partner, Joshua Maidan, explains, Devocción sponsors rural schools and has an entire department dedicated to environmental and social sustainability that develops plans to help individual farmers. The company even brings its farmers to its headquarters in Bogotá to see the product. "We work with our network of farmers like a family," Maidan says. "We are all in it together, so we try to not only be sustainable with our business model, but help the farmers be sustainable with their business and lifestyle."

And so, after serving the Colombian market for nearly a decade, cementing their relationships with farmers and building a story worthy of a Hollywood screenplay, Devocción has landed in America—or at least in the sovereignty of New York

FAST TRACK DEVOCCIÓN OWNER STEVE SUTTON SET HIMSELF A FORMIDABLE GOAL: HE MADE IT HIS COMPANY'S BUSINESS TO GET HIS AROMATIC TREASURE FROM REMOTE COLOMBIA FARMS TO CONSUMERS' COFFEE CUPS FASTER THAN IT'S EVER BEEN DONE BEFORE.





City. Before it even opened the doors to its Brooklyn roaster, the company had secured deals to provide coffee to the upscale New York restaurant group Hillstone, as well as to Del Posto, the Relais & Chateaux venue owned by Mario Batali and Joseph and Lidia Bastianich.

As Jeffrey Katz, Del Posto's general manager, explains, the freshness of Devoción's beans puts the company on a level above even the most elite roasters. "When we went through the tasting process, Steven would bring me some of his coffee that was a bit older to show the difference, and the difference between coffee that is ultra fresh and a few weeks older is remarkable," Katz says. "If you compare it to other brands—even really good small-batch local coffees—the brightness of their coffee, and the clarity of the fruit profile, is truly special."

The light-filled Brooklyn flagship, designed by Studios Go, is a modern stunner, with its roasting equipment showcased in a glassed-in front room visible from the street and a café outfitted with tufted leather sofas and dominated by a two-story living wall of more than 2,000 plants—all native to Colombia, of course—including 150 coffee plants.

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Above left: Devoción's goal is to take coffee to a new level.
Above right: The difference is in the beans and roasting.

The food menu is modest for now, with croissants, cookies, and parfaits, but South American specialties make an appearance with *salpicón* ("in between a fruit cup and a juice," Sutton explains), *medialunas* ("like a small, honey-glazed croissant"), and *aromáticas*: "teas" of steeped fruit and mint.

Yet Devoción is all about the coffee, so how does it taste? Sutton won't pick a favorite—all eight varieties served in the café are perfect for different times and different moods, he says—but he'll allow that a coffee called *los vientos* ("the winds") is a good introduction. Served black using a French press, the floral notes hit your nose before you even take a sip. Once you do, a symphony of flavors bursts forth, from the sweet (vanilla, toffee) to the fruity (green mango, raspberry) to the citrusy (mandarin peel and orange blossom). It's robust without being bitter, smooth without a drop of cream, and mildly sweet without a grain of sugar.

It's priced very close to its upscale competitors—cups start at around \$3.50 and go up to \$8—though Sutton insists it's not about the money, but simply getting the best and sharing the love. "All I want is the best coffee, and it doesn't matter if I have to sell it at a hundred dollars a pound," he says. "I just need it to taste like a hundred-dollar pound, and to show that the farmer is getting the benefit as well." ●