

# INTEGRAL IMPORTER

*Through his coffee ROASTING and retail BUSINESS – which buys beans directly from farmers – César Vega is HELPING change the PERCEPTION of Nicaragua around the WORLD.*

**G**rowing up, César Vega, 29, felt like a Nicaraguan in every way except for his residency. His first language was Spanish, and he lived in a Nicaraguan community. It's just that his community was in the US city of Miami, instead of his native Jinotepe.

Born in the historical coffee-growing region of Carazo, Nicaragua, César was exiled to Miami with his family at age three. From then on, Nicaragua was the subject of stories, the source of recipes, and the recipient of phone calls to uncles and cousins, but not a real, tangible place until César revisited it at age eight.

"I was so excited to eat, see and do the things that I'd been hearing about," says César. "It was like a homecoming." The one thing he wasn't quite prepared for, however, was the poverty in Nicaragua – the poorest country in Central America – which he witnessed most frequently in the capital city, Managua. "You'd get to a stoplight and it was just droves of

children banging on your window asking for change," recalls César. "That was weird, especially because I was about their age."

Fast-forward 21 years and César is now helping Nicaraguan children and families through his specialty coffee company, Café Integral. Since 2011, he's been buying the best Nicaraguan coffee beans he can get his hands on and importing them to New York, where they're roasted in Brooklyn and brewed into memorable filter and espresso coffees at his Manhattan cafe and other US outposts.

"I also thought that if Nicaragua could be jogged in peoples' minds, if they would think positive thoughts about Nicaraguan coffee and Nicaragua as a place, it would be a good thing. It was that silly, like maybe people will think about Nicaragua when they're booking a flight to Costa Rica."

In early 2011, at age 23, César took a trip around the coffee-dense northern regions of Nicaragua with his mother and grandparents, knocking on the doors of second- and third-degree connections to pitch his new coffee business. The goal was to purchase 100 pounds (45kg) of beans from five to seven producers each, which was a bit naïve, César now admits.



PHOTOGRAPHY: HANNAH SCHNEIDER CREATIVE

"You'd say, 'Oh we're looking to buy 500 to 700 pounds', when they want to hear 5000 to 7000 pounds," he says. "Some people were like, 'Are you kidding? That's personal consumption volume!'"

César caved, buying 1050kg (2300 pounds) from just one producer, Olman Valladares, who farms under his father's name, Luis Emilio Valladares. Six months later, the coffee was shipped to Newark, New Jersey, and then delivered to César's second bedroom, in uptown New York. "We bit off a lot more than we were ready to chew," laughs César, "and that was a hysterical amount [to them]. But I still had to eat and pay rent, and then I had 2300 pounds of coffee in the next room. I was like, 'Well, I can't just drink all that.'"

He bought a small sample roaster and, while working as a photographer, roasted coffee for friends to taste and

gave out samples of unroasted beans to other roasters; the business grew from there.

Today, César works with 15 producers across nearly 50 lots of coffee, and he visits Nicaragua for several months each year to plan, taste and make adjustments to achieve the kind of quality he's after. There are two main links in his processing chain in Nicaragua: the farmer who picks and washes the beans, and a government-licensed exporter, who sorts and bags the coffee, books the pick-ups and loads the shipping containers. In César's case, the exporter also does the drying – cutting out the centralised dry mill that usually comes in the middle – thereby creating more

transparency and traceability. "We realised that coffee can only be as good as the exporter or dry mill is trustworthy and careful," he says. "The hard part is finding a great exporting partner." (César once received beans that weren't perfectly dried, which he then used for charity events and training. "When you're obsessive about it, serving something that's 90 per cent what it should taste like is really devastating," says César. "But, realistically, the world will spin.")

Things are more straightforward on the US side, where a customs broker admits the coffee into the country. (Prior inspection in Nicaragua is valid under US law). Then it's trucked to a

coffee-specific warehouse in Edison, New Jersey. The biggest challenge facing the business, emphasises César, is financing. Buyers are required to commit to a year's worth of coffee all at once and pay in full upon delivery, so César's out-of-pocket expenses jump exponentially as the company grows. "We're always chasing our tail, since every year we need more."

Olman Valladares, who supplied Café Integral's first 1050kg, has worked with César ever since. César now buys between 11,340 and 13,600kg (25,000 to 30,000 pounds) for up to US\$5 per pound for the best stuff. (In general, Nicaraguan farmers are regularly paid less than US\$2 per pound and the

Fairtrade minimum is even less than that.) You know who else is buying from Olman? Starbucks, for their Reserve line. "If you ever see [the name] 'Nicaragua Maracaturra,' that's him!" beams César.

He says more and more people are coming to Nicaragua these days as well, from surfers to prospective buyers checking out the coffee farms. "When we first opened Café Integral, it was a very niche person who'd been to Nicaragua," says César. "But now, who hasn't been to Nicaragua? Maderas Village is a great example of that. That place exists, and I know so many people who have been. I've been. Who hasn't been? That wasn't a reality five years ago. So it was amazing to watch it happen all at once, though it had been cooking for a while." ☑

*I still had to EAT and PAY RENT and I had 2500 POUNDS of coffee in the next ROOM.*

