



Photo courtesy of Katelyn Piedl, Hungry Hollow Co-op, Chestnut Ridge, NY

Early in March, I had the opportunity to travel to Chiapas, Mexico to view firsthand the intricacies of fair trade coffee production. Our group consisted of three representatives from Equal Exchange, a worker-owned Fair Trade coffee cooperative, and seven food co-op employees from around the country. We set out on a bean-to-cup adventure to observe the methods of growing, harvesting, milling, and roasting coffee in Chiapas and to witness the positive effects that the cooperative business model and fair trade practices have on indigenous farming communities in this area.

Beyond learning about coffee production, I got so much more out of this seven-day trip than I could have imagined. What I got in Chiapas was educated; educated about global trade policies, the plight of small farmers in Mexico, and the inadequacies of a food system that serves to obtain the cheapest food at the cheapest prices, no matter what the human cost. What I learned and experienced on this intense journey more than convinced me of the importance of fair trade policies and the cooperative supply chain in creating a more just economic system in the world.

## Saving the World, One Bean at a Time: My Trip to Chiapas

*Stephanie Catlett, Catalyst Editor*



Chiapas is the southernmost state in Mexico, a land containing areas of vast geographical interest such as the El Triunfo Biosphere Reserve (home of the mystically beautiful “cloud forest”). Mexico produces more than 60% of the world’s coffee, with the majority being grown in Chiapas and Oaxaca, but despite this abundance, these areas continue to be some of the poorest in the country. If you don’t read any further, exit here with this bit of knowledge: Producing coffee is incredibly labor intensive and there is a reason that fair trade coffee from cooperative growers costs more—it is because the farmers are getting paid a realistic wage for their work.

The “cheap food policy” that our government has espoused and supported for decades has destroyed the economy of our neighboring countries. Farmers in Mexico are even worse off than farmers here. There are no subsidies or tax incentives to help keep farms in business, and without organizations like Equal Exchange, small farmers would be at the mercy of corporate conglomerates whose only care is the bottom line.

Our guide and translator Phyllis Robinson put it to us like this: “We [Equal Exchange] want to deepen the message of fair trade in the consumer world by educating consumers about the realities facing small farmers, their hopes and aspirations, and the challenges they face.” Fair trade means paying farm-



Photo courtesy of Nick Reid, Equal Exchange Coffee Cooperative

The women of Las Pilas survey their “chicken project” funded by their cooperative distributor, CESMACH.



Photo courtesy of Rita York, The Merc, Lawrence, KS

Rita York from the Merc in Lawrence, KS and Steph with bags of pergamino, ready to move from the warehouse to the mill.



Photo by Stephanie Catlett

Workers carry 100+ pound bags of pergamino (green coffee beans) to the warehouse where each bag is quality-checked. Each 60+ kilogram bag of pergamino is inspected by CESMACH employees to ensure that it is free from defects and at the perfect moisture level for shipping to the mill.

ers a more accurate value for the “true cost” of production; and when you combine fair trade and cooperatives, the additional social benefits of your purchase are increased.

After the first two days of meetings in San Cristobal, our group travelled south to Jaltenango to the offices of CESMACH (Ecological Farmers of the Sierra Madres of Chiapas). CESMACH is an important partner to Equal Exchange. Incorporated as a co-op in 1994, this distributor represents over 365 farm families. They guarantee pre-harvest financing to farmers who might otherwise look to *coyotes*, predatory coffee brokers who pay the lowest prices to growers, to attain immediate payment for their crop. CESMACH also works to create community projects as part of their social mission. Projects focusing on food security and diversification of diet have lead to the creation of programs such as a women’s chicken project and a new nursery containing endangered indigenous plants like pacaya, xate palm, and tree tomato. Other projects funded by the co-op include organic gardens, fruit orchards, and training workshops.

Our trip continued as we traveled further into the “buffer zone” of the Biosphere and deeper into the Sierra Madres, to the isolated village of Las Pilas. I was struck during our visit to this indigenous community with how alike farmers are even when separated by thousands of miles and borders. The men of Las Pilas wore reserved expressions on their weather-worn faces. When they spoke, they spoke briefly but passionately of their gratitude for our visit and their hopes that by meeting and learning about each other we could open up a greater understanding between our two worlds. Their passion for their land and commitment to the cooperative movement was

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evident; they reminded me of so many of our own small farmers in Iowa, earnestly tending the land and caring for the soil that sustains their families and communities.

But the more I learned in Chiapas, the more I questioned: How can my awakening understanding of the way the Fair Trade movement transforms the lives of small farmers be translated to you, a busy, economically-burdened Co-op shopper?

I've often spoken with New Pi General Manager Matt Hartz about New Pi's perceived "high prices", as it is a topic that is brought up by both customers and employees again and again. Matt's perspective is this: "What people need to understand is that New Pi's prices represent *the true cost of food*." Many people view New Pioneer as an expensive place to shop, and I won't deny that some things in our store do cost more as compared to conventional items. But rarely does the average shopper look beyond



Photo courtesy of Don Pierce, Harvest Coop, Boston, MA

Nick Reid of Equal Exchange harvests coffee beans in Las Pilas.



Photo courtesy of Rita York, The Merc, Lawrence, KS

Left: A basket of ripe coffee cherries is ready to be sorted, fermented, pulped, and dried. A tree tomato hangs in the corner of this photo. Tree tomatoes are indigenous to the El Triunfo Biosphere Reserve and are being cultivated in the nursery in Las Pilas.

Below: Steve Stroup of Blooming Foods Co-op runs ripe coffee cherries through the pulper to remove the outer layer of flesh from the two inner beans.

*“Doesn't being a socially responsible member of a community, be it local or global, indicate a responsibility to all of the members of that community, including the farmers and producers and the consumers?”*



Photo courtesy of Nick Reid, Equal Exchange Coffee Cooperative

the price tag to the real "cost" of producing an item. According to the Family Farm Alliance, Americans spend less than 10% of their annual income on food. In 1933, the figure was more than 25 percent. As we spend less on food, farmers are paid less for their labors.

New Pi's mission statement states: "We are an environmentally and socially responsible member of the community we serve." Doesn't being a socially responsible member of a community, be it local or global, indicate a responsibility to all of the members of that community, including the farmers and producers and the consumers? Doesn't being a "socially responsible member of the community" mean paying fair wages and offering employees incentives like health coverage? By shopping at the Co-op and spending a little more on your groceries, you are making a statement that says, "I care about my community. I care about the livelihood of Co-op employees and the welfare of the farmers who grow my food."



Photo courtesy of Nick Reid, Equal Exchange Coffee Cooperative

It is overwhelming to try and communicate with you all the things I learned and experienced in Chiapas. Pictures help. Words help. But there is an underlying feeling inside of me that I won't ever be able to fully articulate the lush beauty and isolation of Las Pilas, perched on the side of a mountain accessible only by fearless drivers on treacherous roads. How can I hope to illustrate the commitment and pride the farmers have for their land and their crop? To communicate the hope that is generated when a small group of farmers is paid fairly for their backbreaking labor and has access to funds for education and community projects? It's beyond me to fully convey the gratitude expressed by the families of Las Pilas in the hospitality and generosity they extended to us during our stay. It was as though we, me, us, food cooperatives, were somehow responsible for the betterment of their condition, their lives. And in small but powerful ways, by shopping responsibly and conscientiously, we are.

Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*, puts it best when he says, "Meaningful change ... isn't going to come from the top. It's going to come from people who realize that there's a direct link be-



Photo courtesy of Don Preece, Harvest Co-op, Boston, MA

tween the food they eat and the society they inhabit." My hope is that these words can at the very least lead you to consider the faces and places, the toil and effort, the story and the people behind the food you buy. ☺

*Above: Coffee beans are dried in the sun prior to being sent to the warehouse for quality checks.*

*Left: Farmers in Las Pilas take a break from the harvest. Equal Exchange purchases 146 containers per year from CES-MACH. Each container holds 38,000 pounds of coffee.*



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