

KNOW YOUR MADISONIAN | MARIA CLARA RUIZ ZAPATA

Estación offers Colombian coffee, traded fairly

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To Maria Clara Ruiz Zapata, owner of Madison's Estación Coffee, sharing an espresso with loved ones is an act of savoring the moment versus consuming caffeine to rush and get the day started.

The ritual also represents supporting one's community, Ruiz Zapata said, which is the backbone of her online subscription-based coffee business that launched two years ago to financially support 45 families in Colombia with their small-scale coffee farms and the selling of their product directly to consumers.

Ruiz Zapata hails from Colombia and frequently travels back to her home, which happens to be one of the world's top

exporters of the aromatic brew. The country also has a rich and extensive history surrounding coffee but it's a history that's not without economic challenges for growers of the popular bean – and that's why the business came to fruition in the first place.

The UW-Madison graduate is a veterinarian by trade, who when travelling the Colombian countryside years ago discovered just how much the coffee farmers that lived there struggled – sporadic coffee bean sales that turned up minimal profit to support high labor, production and equipment costs. In 2022, farmers also face a changing Colombian climate amid global warming.

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For Colombian native Maria Clara Ruiz Zapata, owner of Estación Coffee, enjoying a cup of the beverage is about savoring the moment and supporting one's community.

Madisonian

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As many as 500,000 farmers were not getting the bang for their buck back then as they farmed coffee beans, Ruiz Zapata said she found out as she established the precursor of Estación Coffee back in 2012 — a tourism organization called ZoOming.co that dissolved amid the COVID-19 pandemic as the company's industry experienced major financial blows.

Now, Estación Coffee is able to add 30% on top of what coffee farmers make on a regular day, but that figure is dependent on several factors — weather, environmental conditions, hands to help and more. Whereas a typical farmer could make just under a dollar per hour on a typical workday — hours can vary — Estación's support bumps that up to roughly \$5 per hour, Ruiz Zapata said.

According to 2018 data from The Borgen Project, a nonprofit in Washington, Colombia is a "poverty-stricken" coffee sector, with farmers living on less than \$2 a day.

It doesn't help that growing coffee is a complicated and time-consuming feat requiring a few harvests per year, Ruiz Zapata said.

As the business moves to commercialize, the hope is



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Maria Clara Ruiz Zapata's online subscription-based Estación Coffee supports 45 families in Colombia with small-scale coffee farms.

to one day be the sole purchaser of beans from the 45 families Estación works with, Ruiz Zapata said. Currently, the company makes up only a portion of that. The direct buying of coffee beans from farmers has been a trend, even among large corporations like Starbucks, to better support impoverished growers.

Working out of Synergy Coworking on the West Side, Estación has 2,500 subscribers from across the country buying its beans. Shoppers can choose three

places in Colombia from which to purchase their brew, and for prices starting at \$13.90 up to \$58.99. All coffee growers that work with the business have their fair trade certification, Ruiz Zapata said.

In order to market herself, Ruiz Zapata hosts what she calls "experiences" in which attendees can taste, touch and smell Estación's product. Ruiz Zapata demonstrates how the coffee is brewed, and even has participants undergo mindfulness exercise as they sip

their beverage.

Tell us more about what you observed during your travels in the Colombian countryside.

Once I met the coffee growers 10 years ago, I was completely touched by what they do. They always have a smile. It's easy to portray them as having hard jobs. But they love their land, birds, water, forest and view. They know they are fortunate to have that. (Some farmers would carry their coffee product) down on mules every six months to

sell it in nearby towns. Others would walk five hours to access their crop.

What's so unique about how Colombian farmers cultivate their product?

Colombia is the only country where the coffee is grown by the people that own the land. The country has a lot of fresh water resources.

When you picture Estación Coffee a year from now, or even five years from now, how do you see the business operating?

I see people going to Colombia with us at least twice a year, and getting involved in the project. I see the coffee growers coming to the U.S. to see where their product is and to get a sense of what that means. There are many things that can connect us in that way, and that is our main goal.

What does coffee represent for you as a Colombia native?

It represents my family, for sure. We started drinking coffee when we were really young — a little bit of coffee with a lot of milk and panela (unrefined whole cane sugar). We don't drink coffee alone, and take it in small cups with something sweet. It's sharing and thinking about how you are drinking the coffee in such a beautiful place with landscapes you see every morning. It's about slowing down.