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## Brazilian Coffee, For Brazilians

Inside one of the premier coffee shops of the Fourth Wave, Lucca Cafés Especiais.

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Lucca Cafés Especiais (<https://web.archive.org/web/20210625051349/http://luccacafesespeciais.com.br/>) appears a typical coffee shop, if a very cool one.

On a quiet residential street in the metropolis of Curitiba, Brazil, sunlight illuminates a sprawling patio where conversations hum and laptop keyboards click. Inside, a team of young tattooed baristas in leather-strapped aprons crank out espressos, Aeropress carafes, and cups brewed via seven different filtration methods. A roasting machine with wooden handles and a gleaming silver belly sits at the bottom of a staircase making the whole place smell like the best morning of your life.

It's all familiar, maybe even expected. But by your third visit, you spot cheerful ruby berries on the trees outside and realize that these are coffee plants, drooping with fresh cherries—a hint that this place is a little different.

Georgia Franco de Souza and her husband Luiz Ótávio opened Lucca in 2002, and it became the first coffee shop in Brazil to roast the country's specialty coffees (those beans awarded points by the Specialty Coffee Association for minimal defects and distinctive flavors). In the early aughts, specialty coffee represented only a tiny segment of the industry, and, despite Brazil being the world's largest coffee grower and exporter, there was virtually zero market for it there.

But Franco didn't care. She'd grown up visiting her grandfather's coffee farm during summer breaks, making little fires to cook vegetables taken from the fields. "I liked that very much," she remembers. "But in Brazil, 30 years ago, to be a cook," she trails off, shaking her head. Aspiring to be a chef wasn't considered respectable by any stretch.

Franco's chestnut hair and deep-set eyes testify to her Italian heritage, and she moves with patient, careful slowness. She sits on a leather sofa across from the roaster, shifting her weight a bit anxiously, as if she would prefer to be standing next to the machine, in her usual spot. She pauses to think before answering questions, and when she does, her quiet measured English camouflages the boldness that fuels her work.

Instead, she says, she pursued civil engineering. But what happened next is a familiar refrain: her love of food drew her back in, and its siren song eventually convinced her to study pastry in France.

Meanwhile, her friends were making high-quality coffee in Paraná, Curitiba's state (Curitiba is the eighth largest city in Brazil, but it has more coffee shops per capita than São Paulo, which some say is thanks to its young, literary population and cool climate). They'd taken their beans to a coffee show in San Francisco and discovered cafés that roasted, brewed, and sold coffee in a way that highlighted the singularity of each one. Franco saw an opportunity to fuse what she loved now and what she knew from those childhood summers.

"When I came back, I said, 'I want my coffee shop,'" she says with a shrug. She traveled back through Europe studying the market, then trained in coffee technology and roasting in Brazil. She's since been dubbed the "Coffee Hunter" of Lucca, for the way she unearths the country's best producers and beans for their exclusively local menu. "In countries that have a good production, the better coffee doesn't stay in the country," Franco explains. Brazil produces about 50 million bags of coffee every year, and she estimates that one percent of that is specialty. Only one percent of that one percent stays in Brazil.

"We are doing our best to keep some [coffee] in Brazil," she says. "It is our job to teach and educate our people about the amazing product we produce."

Lucca boasts the most awarded barista team in the country—all trained by Franco—with championship titles for brewing, latte art, and tasting. She receives about three job applications a week, most vying for one of 12 coveted spots.

In Lucca Lab, Franco hosts classes on roasting, brewing, and tasting—even how to write a coffee shop business plan. These classes exist in the U.S. from roasters like Four Barrel, Counter Culture, and Heart, but Lucca's are special because they educate Brazilians about specialty coffee, not just professionals in consuming countries.

"There are several former employees that have their own coffee shop after working for us and learning from us," she says proudly. "We will always be training."

Roasting is an art and a science. Franco determines the ideal roasting time and temperature for each coffee through a series of initial tests, then uses a sophisticated technology to achieve consistent results: A gauge inside the roaster measures air and bean temperature and maps it back to a dynamic program on her laptop, so she knows when to adjust the heat or start the cooling process so beans don't burn. (It all works thanks to a Bluetooth system Franco invented herself, which links the roaster to the software – her engineering background at work.) A Roasted by Georgia stamp designates bags she touches, along with a scannable barcode with descriptions of the farm they came from.



ORIGINAL PHOTO VIA FACEBOOK, ART BY CHEFSFEED

Coffee plants arrived in Brazil in 1727, and by the close of the 19th century, the country supplied 70 percent of the world's coffee. But what Brazilian coffee had in quantity it lacked in quality; a government dictatorship in the 1900s controlled all exports and distribution and set sell prices for coffee, so beans were all thrown together regardless of origin or growing technique. Farmers had no incentive to improve quality, and Brazil became synonymous with inferior, bitter brews.

When the dictatorship fell in the late 1980s, growers could sell their beans directly to consumers and set prices for themselves. Aware of an increasingly sophisticated global market, producers wanted to venture into lucrative specialty segments. Some farmers began looking for better processing methods and developing systems to separate the best beans from the bulk. In 1999, Brazil launched an annual Cup of Excellence competition to showcase and rank the best coffees from producing countries, further mobilizing farmers to prioritize quality.

"When I started 15 years ago, most of the farmers, I think, didn't care about specialty coffee because of the money," Franco says. "Now, you see those guys on the bags?" She points to a burlap sack on the café floor, where an illustration of one farmer's face smiles back at her. "Now they are having fun [being] the winners of contests. It's not a matter of money. They want to be the best."

Coffee is still largely a family business in Brazil. Today, younger generations see transforming family farms into specialty coffee producers as a way of boosting their profits. Marco Cravo is one of them.

Cravo met Franco in 2008, just months after he took over operations at his father-in-law's coffee farm, Fazenda Pilar. The farm rests on a field of burnt orange soil at the northern tip of Paraná state, a five-hour drive from Curitiba. On a dry day, the earth will stain your shoes, car, even your skin.

Cravo carries himself with a polite, polished demeanor. The hair around his temples is just beginning to turn silver. He wears a hard hat with his name on the front and a collared shirt that never seems to wrinkle. His pickup truck stirs dust as it rocks back and forth, climbing the hills alongside the trees.

A long dirt road leads to an electric gate, which opens onto a mini-golf course, a church, and 22 houses—enough to lodge 50-something employees who live and work there year-round. Workers sweep coffee cherries into piles to dry under the sun, slouch over computers in offices, and drive harvesting machines that rake coffee cherries from treetops while their children play along manicured landscaping. Wild monkeys tumble between tree branches on the property's edge.

Cravo didn't know anything about coffee—"I used to only drink coffee with milk," he laughs—but he knew about business. After hearing Franco give a presentation at a networking event, he introduced himself and asked her to help him produce better coffee.

“Since then we’ve started a healthy partnership,” Cravo says. “Our relationship is important because we’ve exchanged many technical experiences and consumer trends.” Franco visits Fazenda Pilar a few times a year, and Cravo is a regular guest at Lucca.

About 250 acres at Fazenda Pilar are planted to coffee trees. Each of Pilar’s plots tells its own story: drought, frost, harsh weather, insects. Cravo has seen it all. There’s the twice-replanted, still skeletal section, and the tornado-stricken area they replaced with grains. As they stroll through the trees, Franco picks cherries, pressing them between her fingers.

She peppers Cravo with questions about the crop, the weather, and the success of his new insect traps. (So far, promising.) He addresses Franco in clear, elegant Portuguese, punctuated with warm laughter. They lament Brazilian politics and share stories of family, but the conversation always circles back to coffee.

“We are very proud to see a long-time partner improve so much in quality,” she says of Cravo. “His coffee was known to be basic and easy to drink, but now it is as complex and exciting as our best lots.” In a post he authored for the Lucca blog, Cravo and Franco stand next to her café’s roaster, beaming, a sack of “Criatura Georgia”—a new coffee at Pilar named in honor of Franco—wedged between them.

Cravo employs workers to harvest his best micro-lots manually and uses machines for the rest. He realizes machinery doesn’t deliver the romantic image of workers in the field with heavy sacks slung over their shoulders. “That’s exploitative and dangerous,” he says in emphatic Portuguese. Instead, cherries are sorted by ripeness, then, after drying in the sun, machines take over: first, a temperature-controlled machine dries them further, another takes off skins and membranes, then one separates them by size for even roasting, and finally, two weed out beans with defects.

At the end Cravo can sell each group of beans according to its quality, unlike many big coffee producers who never sort at all, processing the good and bad all together. Cravo and Franco have attained an unprecedented level of precision for Pilar’s coffee—they can trace a cup back to the exact trees it came from.

Since Pilar earns money from more predictable crops like wheat and corn, Cravo can afford to invest in coffee experimentation. His margins on specialty coffee surpass those on commodity beans, but he never knows if he can label his coffee “specialty” until after it’s roasted, tasted, and awarded points. It’s an uncertain business, but working with Franco pushes him closer to high scores.

Although Franco buys coffee from Pilar, she bristles at the suggestion that their relationship is transactional. If the Third Wave of coffee trumpeted single-origin flavors and brewing techniques, direct trade and latte art, the Fourth Wave celebrates experts and farmers working together to create the specific profiles coffee drinkers want.

Thanks to that Fourth Wave, Brazil is poised to become a market with a robust supply and demand for specialty coffee. Brazil’s internal specialty coffee market recorded double-digit growth last year, a surge Franco attributes to education. She trains this new generation of Brazilian connoisseurs, baristas, and café owners in order to introduce the country’s coffee farmers to new and better practices. “With the growth of quality we can charge more and make the market more economically sustainable,” she says.

When Franco talks about the coffee industry in producing countries, she uses the word “movement.” She has little patience for a rivalry between producing regions. Everyone, she says, should work together to boost respect for Brazilian coffees.

On the drive back to Curitiba, Franco points out a hulking grain mill on the side of the highway, shiny and imposing against the rolling hills and rust-colored dirt. She plans to test varieties of Paraná wheat in this mill, in hopes that her team can showcase it in the bread at Lucca. Currently, they import flour from France and other countries, she says.

She’d prefer to buy from Brazil.

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