



# SHENANDOAH JOE

- coffee roasters & espresso bar -

## **Certifications: An Introduction**

People frequently ask about coffee certifications, whether they are looking for coffees that bear a certain mark, our want to know more about the different certifications that exist. It can be a bit of a daunting task to navigate from Organic to Fair Trade to Utz Certified to Rainforest Alliance. Ultimately all of these certifications try to accomplish different things and individually accomplish certain things very well. Unfortunately they also have their limitations. No one certification is a magic bullet that will address all of the problems within the coffee industry.



The one guiding principle that we follow in everything we do is to strive for quality. We look for the highest quality coffee regardless of certification. Certifications play a roll in the green coffee we buy, but we will never pass up an outstanding coffee because it lacks a given certification. In dealing with importers, brokers and producers we are committed to sustainability in the specialty coffee industry. We are committed to agriculture that is grown in an environmentally sound way with fair working conditions and pay for farmers. We also recognize that farmers must have sufficient yields to make a living and that economic sustainability is as important to the longevity of the specialty coffee industry as environmental sustainability. Ultimately those that make a great product are those that succeed. With that in mind we look to those that grow great coffee so that they may thrive.

At the 20<sup>th</sup> annual SCAA conference we had the pleasure to listen to the owners of Mesa de los Santos and Hacienda la Esmeralda speak about organic versus non-organic agriculture. They each highlighted what they did on their respective farms and the conditions that led them to their methods. It quickly became apparent that their farms faced different challenges and had very different situations. What worked on one would not have worked on the other, yet they both produce wonderful coffee. Price Peterson of Hacienda la Esmeralda pointed out that as a farmer one must understand one's situation and take the advantages that are most suited to them. Not every farms situation is suited to every, or any certification. Certifications are just one set of tools to help coffee farmers make a sustainable living now and into the future.



In the following sections we have taken the most prevalent coffee certifications and tried to break them down. We have tried to make a case for what they do well and where their limitations lie. Shenandoah Joe applauds the work that these organizations have done to make the coffee industry better. We hope their work continues.

## **About Organic**

The United States Department of Agriculture administers the National Organic Program (NOP) which regulates how organic food is produced and handled. Frequently you will see the USDA Organic logo. Food or coffee sold as organic is done so by farmers or producers who are certified as organic by an USDA accredited certifying agent. The regulations, policies and procedures that fall under the NOP are rather exhaustive and fill volumes. In simplest terms for the grower, organic certification requires that no synthetic pesticides, herbicides or fertilizers are used in growing coffee. The real strength of the Organic certification is in regards to environmental quality. Synthetic pesticides and herbicides used in agri-business can be hard on the environment particularly the ground water supply.

The lecture on organic versus non-organic at the SCAA focused on two major points that needed to be addressed in order to transition to growing organic certified coffee. The first has to do with yields. Increased yields has the single greatest impact in the earning potential of a particular farm. Growing coffee takes a tremendous amount of minerals out of the soil that must be replaced. These minerals can be replaced by fertilizer or compost. One hundred times the amount of compost is needed to replace the same amount of minerals as fertilizer. The access to readily available compost in addition to the labor required to spread this compost is a limiting factor on many farms. The second had to do with the prevalence of fungus in a particular growing area. Some coffee growing regions are more susceptible to fungi than others. A bad case that goes untreated can wipe out an entire crop, essentially eliminating a farmer's main source of income for the entire year.

## **About Fair Trade**

All coffee sold in the US as Fair Trade Certified is certified by Transfair USA which follows the standards set by FLO International. There is an independent audit system in place where growers are audited by FLO-CERT to ensure that these standards are met. These standards fall under categories of social, economic and environmental development as well as labor conditions. Fair Trade attaches requirements to the structure of Small Farm Organizations, i.e. Co-ops, to ensure transparency to, and participation from organization members. Any premiums that are made on Fair Trade items must reach the individual farmer and are required to demonstrate support of social and economic development. Organizations are expected to conduct impact assessments of members' operations and to reasonably limit the use of agrochemicals. They also must maintain or enhance the quality of the soil and manage the water supply with the aim of conservation and non-contamination. Fair Trade follows the guidance of the International Labour Organization in regards to standards on labor conditions. In essence Fair Trade attempts to make sure that farmers are paid fairly for their labor and that programs are put into place that will improve their standard of living and daily lives.



# About Rainforest Alliance

Through their sustainable agriculture program The Rainforest Alliance works to conserve biodiversity and ensure sustainable livelihoods by transforming land-use practices, business practices and consumer behavior. The Rainforest Alliance is the international secretariat of the Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN) and sets the standards. These standards are heavily weighted to wildlife, water and eco-system conservation. Standards also regulate soil and



pest management in addition to the fair treatment of workers. The Rainforest Alliance focus is on how farms are managed, looking to progressive farming practices to improve environmental and social outcomes.

One of the main criticisms of the Rainforest Alliance is that it does not directly have a premium paid to the farmer. This certification does not attempt to address the market in the way that Fair Trade does. However, it is worth noting that Rainforest Alliance certified coffee reaches a premium over the commodity market price, and that significant work is done to educate growers which yields



future returns. The focus is not on trying to change the market balance to better advantage the small farmer, but to work within the current market model. The other major point that critics mention is that Rainforest Alliance allows the use of its logo on products that have as little as 30% certified coffee. This has allowed large corporations to market their products in a more cost friendly way than would likely be possible if they were to market Fair Trade which requires 100% certification. Rainforest Alliance labels however do state the percentage that is certified and anything under 100% in no way diminishes the quality of the certification itself.

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