

Juan Valdez

Juan Valdez doesn't own this coffee shop. But his face is pictured here as it is all over Colombia. His emblematic figure complete with blanket across his chest, Colombian sombrero, and manicured mustache adorns the better neighborhoods. The sturdy burro by his side remains nameless.

From the humble years of leading his burro up the treacherous mountain trail to tend eleven coffee bushes, to today's thousands working the fields. It is unlikely that Valdez strolls that path anymore. Perhaps coffee's icon is decrepit from back bending labor, or ensconced penthouse style in Sun Valley. Burro-buddy is likely stuffed bending toward eternal grass on a lane that leads to corporate headquarters.

In tropical Juan Valdez-Santa Marta, a panoramic photo sits in the counter revealing a crowd of Juan Valdez look-alikes with shoulder blankets, broad mustaches, colorful hats, and running shoes. Their only encounter with field-work involves monthly inspections of Juan Valdez stores in Colombia.

The Juan Valdez place of café looks out on an esplanade under re-construction. Only the granite Simon Bolivar remains. The brick and stone walkway has been turned under and carted away by men melted in the tropical sun. Backbreaking doesn't quite cover it. As with many workers in Colombia, they wear uniforms. These are royal blue pants and long-sleeved shirts. Gloves keep their skin from wooden handles; dark glasses from glare, and around their forehead tied rags slow the sweat. From cardboard, each man has fashioned cutouts for their heads. Once placed, above the sweatband there are exceedingly long brims that jut far forward and far backward. Hardhats crown them. A

woman adorned with a white hardhat supervises with impressive authority, evidently proud of extensive belly,

Weathering the heat and wind, and occasional rain, like Bolivar, the Juan Valdez spot is all outdoors. Meandering trees, ferns, flowers, and short palms provide more than shade. Coffee shop isn't the right moniker. Coffee Garden? Caribe Café? Oasis? In the center, a fountain appears refreshing, more so if it functioned. Bare feet enjoy the cool of dark red tiles. Several square and rectangular retaining walls stable the green growing plants and splashes of color. Tables and chairs are situated on three levels of patio. The breeze up from the sea rarely reaches the garden because it is blocked by the walls of two building at right angles to the open streets. The wind is stymied.

Café calor sweats. Café frio refreshes.

Momentary stillness occurs, but all is not peaceful near Juan Valdez's. The backhoe across the way accelerates with diesel blares. Unceasing taxis and moto-taxis ply the streets with staccato blares from their horns. This is the accepted mode of communication: potential fares are hailed; polite warnings are issued to donkey carts, bicycles, motorcycles, other taxis, to be aware of a quicker presence; and certainly not least, a token toot in admiration of a pretty Colombian woman. A block a way, the noisy market that is San Andreas offers whatever one needs or doesn't need at bargained prices. There the sidewalks fill with vendors along skinny broken sidewalks; they swell with walkers and hawkers alike. The din rises with the swarm.

Suddenly, a half-a-block a way a striking figure stands and looks up and down the crossing streets. No one pays attention. If he's lost no one cares. Loose fitting pants are covered to his thigh with a smock. They are of purest white. The man's hair is wavy and

the purest black to his shoulders. His sandals are handcrafted. The cochila, made in his mountain village, hangs across his shoulder. His people are indigenous to Colombia. Some conjecture these native Colombian's (the majority population calls them "Indians") stretch back to the Inca's. They are not the synergy of Spanish, African, Caribbean, and Middle-Eastern of Latin America. They are their own, mysterious. They're people cupped in mountains of the Sierra Nevada.

Barely perceptible, a passer-by's glimpse admits curiosity.

The Juan Valdez Garden Café begins to stir, not with sea breeze, but with the passionate lovers of café and conversation. The long shadows of afternoon bring an illusion of cool.

Juan, you planted one hell of a bean and look what happened.