

The Secret Life of Juan Valdez

How Colombia's most famous coffee picker is challenging Starbucks.

By **Daniel Gross**

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Remember Juan Valdez? In a long-running series of **television ads**, the iconic Colombian coffee farmer and his donkey were the embodiment of Colombia's legitimate cash crop.

Until the emergence of **Shakira**, Valdez, who was **played by two different actors**, was the Colombian celebrity most known to Americans. My *Slate* colleague John Dickerson recalls that on a trip to Colombia with President George W. Bush, the press corps was sequestered at the airport, and "Juan Valdez" was brought out to pose for photographs with reporters. "People took a few and then he hung around smiling at all of us typing on our laptops for the next seven hours." (Dickerson doesn't remember whether the donkey was present. After all, when you're traveling with the White House press corps, it's tough to keep track of the precise number of asses on the premises.)

In the past decade, Colombia has undergone a transformation—it's safer, more prosperous, and, while still poor, much more integrated with the global economy. Exports tripled between 2002 and 2008. Juan Valdez has also undergone a transformation. The stock character is gone, but the name lives on. In the past decade, Juan Valdez has shifted from being a person who traded on a stereotypical, pre-modern image of Colombia—lilting Spanish, peasant garb, farm animal—into an international brand and consumer experience.

As I learned from my visit to Colombia last week, where I was traveling with a group of journalists and attending the **World Economic Forum Latin America**, **Juan Valdez** is now a brand, not a guy. In 2002, Colombia's **National Confederation of Coffee Growers** (here's their **English site**) launched an ambitious plan to turn **Juan Valdez** into a sort of Colombian Starbucks. It set up stores to sell beans by the bagful to tourists and began to open coffee bars. Outside Colombia's borders, expansion has been relatively slow. Juan Valdez has opened stores in New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. (though it **closed one of its New York stores in February**), a few in Spain, and several in Chile and Ecuador. (Here's a **store locator**.)

In its home country, however, Juan Valdez is beginning to gain Starbuckian scale, especially in Bogota, home to at least 60 Juan Valdez shops. It's capitalizing both on nationalism and the significant advances of the Colombian economy. In recent years, as the domestic security situation has improved, Colombia has benefitted from rising global demand for commodities—oil and metals—and steady growth in foreign investment. In the World Bank's most recent **Doing Business rankings**, which rate countries on how easy it is to do business there, Colombia scored 37th, the highest ranking of any Latin American country. One of the biggest items in the Colombian news this week was the fact that inflation is running at a meager **1.84 percent annual rate**. Growth in extractive industries has spurred growth in banking, transportation, engineering, professional services, and information technology—the type of jobs where you need to pop out for a jolt in caffeine to help you **survive the next PowerPoint presentation**.

Starbucks hasn't figured this out yet. Starbucks sells **Colombian coffee** at its stores in the United States and in Peru, Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. But it doesn't have any outlets in the land of Juan Valdez. In the base of an office building in Bogota, Colombia, the Juan Valdez cafe is very similar to a smaller Manhattan Starbucks. The décor is modern—a red color scheme, with no kitschy weavings or hats. Professionals in smart casual sip caffeinated concoctions, generally ignore the wafers, and peck away at smart phones. And, like Starbucks, Juan Valdez tries to infuse its caffeine-delivery vehicles with dollops of off-putting connoisseurishness. At the airport in Bogota, I picked up a pound of Juan Valdez's Amazonico. This bean, the package tells us, hails from the Amazon Basin and is "clean, with a strong hint of the wild and a rich residual flavor." Whatever. This morning, I whipped up a double shot, sat down at my desk, turned on the computer, and looked out the window. There were squirrels and deer in the yard, but no donkey. Still, Juan Valdez was definitely in la casa. "Bueeenos Dias."

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