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The Caballero Ghajaleo Family of Cotito Farm

Before Los Quetzales built a cabin in Cotito, Raquel, Nicolas and their family worked the farm. They worked for a Swiss man. When he died and the land was sold to Carlos Alfaro, the owner of Los Quetzales, and yet they chose to stay. They stayed because they love the work. Although their chores are repetitive and can be a little boring, at times, this is the place they connected with. Many workers filter through during the harvest, 15-20, but only 4 families live here full time. Pedro, Ignacio, Eloy, and Nicolas/Raquel. They are in charge of making sure the coffee makes it through the rest of the process. Even though there are 4 families it is clear which one does the most work.

The Caballero Ghajaleo Family

Nicolas was the first person I met who worked on the farm. He patrols the farm but is a relatively quiet person. When I asked him if I could follow him he was very willing and wanted to show us whatever we wanted to know about. He first showed us the greenhouse and then we helped to pick out the beans. He told us that he likes his work even though it's a little lonely. He is one of 6 children, not all farmers. The rest of his family live in Tolé but he decided to move here. He is very invested in the farm and doesn't even remember the last time he left. His dedication is understandable because he does have a lot to do. He wakes up every morning, milks the cows, works with the coffee, and fixes things around the farm. It may not sound like a lot but he is constantly on the move. The cow needs to be milked twice a day and he takes the morning shift and Ignacio takes the afternoon. He works with the coffee for hours after unless he is interrupted by a broken pipe or another broken item. Even on Sunday he had to fix the piping in the chicken coop because it was not automatically filling the inside feeders. In the days before, Raquel had to manually fill buckets with the hose. When he finally fixed the pipes and the feeders filled up all the chicken fled to them. He has worked for Carlos for 5 years and I don't think he has any reason to leave.

Raquel and Nicolas have raised two children on this farm; one girl, 24, who has moved to Darien, and one son who is 12. Deyisi, their daughter, wasn't the largest fan of the mountains and wanted a different experience. Her escape came in the form of a diploma from the University of Panama in nursing. She moved to Darien to work for the clinic as a nurse, near her grandparents. It upset Raquel when she left but Deyisi just didn't enjoy it as much as the rest of them. Her other child, her son, Antonio, will have the opportunity to go to school in three years. But thus far he has only been able to study from the farm. He is learning to read and write and a little bit of math and science. Also he is starting to learn English from Carlos; he is quite excited about that. On Sunday he read to Ignacio as they sat and relaxed. He doesn't have a formal way of studying but he is learning in that form, practicing with other people on the farm. He is forced

to learn in this way because he has asthma that is aggravated when he is in extreme temperature. Because of this expensive problem Raquel and Nicolas couldn't afford to send him to school. Just because he isn't in school doesn't mean that he doesn't do anything all day; He constantly helps his mom by doing the laundry, cleaning the eggs, and by feeding the goat (5 months old). He does have a lot of down time and most of the time he spends with his family but occasionally he spends time with the other kids who live near the farm.

Raquel pretty much runs the farm. She does her chores everyday including Sundays, so while her son and husband sat and lounged on their double bed watching Elmo she was making cheese. Although she doesn't ever work with the coffee she manages the farm. She is in charge of the finances for the both the farm and the hotel. She does it all by herself so when someone doesn't get paid they have to find Raquel, most likely while she is doing one of her other chores. She also operates the store, which is open 24/7 you just have to ask. She has manned the store ever since Carlos built it when he bought the farm and ever since people who live around the farm have used it. She enjoys running it because she sees a lot of people and can have conversations with people who are not her immediate family. Raquel also enjoys when tourists come. Although we are only the third group she likes that new faces filter through. In the past two groups there have only been 2 people who speak Spanish so she was overjoyed when we came to help. Along with all her all her daily responsibilities, doing laundry for the hotel, sheets towels, cleaning the rooms, making sure the goat is walked, collecting eggs and washing them, and making the cheese from both the goats and the cows, she will start to take over running the hotel as well. Carlos has been helping her use WhatsApp to communicate with the guests so they know what time they will arrive and leave. Once the hotel is completely up and running Carlos will step back and it will be completely up to Raquel. Also when the restaurant is finished she will help there but she will not be the only cook; she will just be a soux chef. She has so much responsibility here, but it's all by choice. She moved from Darien, on the border of Columbia, to Chiriquí because she likes the work. She enjoys the responsibility and always being busy. She still visits her family in Darien by bus at times, but she would rather work here, in Chiriquí, than there. Raquel and her family don't have the most luxurious lifestyle, but they still enjoy it. The three of them live in a two bedroom section attached to the building that has the store. She cooks and cleans from there, and then makes the cheese inside as well. They eat a lot of corn, plantains, and eggs. She likes eggs but she doesn't like to eat them every day. Her son, Antonio, on the other hand can eat them every day and he pretty much does.

Their Tasks

Collecting Eggs/Cleaning Them (Raquel)



- She brings two buckets to the chicken coops
- She has to look under dirt and in all parts of the coop
- Once she has collected all of them she brings them back to her section and starts to wash them
- She mixes water with disinfectant and washes them with a wash cloth
 - The eggs can't be submerged because the eggs are porous and if they are submerged the disinfectant will get in the eggs and they will become inedible
- When she finds a cracked egg she puts it aside because she can't clean it but she and her family will eat them
- She gets about 250 a day and 1,400 are sent to the hotel per week

Chicken slaughter (Raquel)



- She collects three chickens in a white sack and carries them back near the baby goats cage
- She ties them up on a line and then cuts their throat a little to let the blood drip out
 - She holds their necks so it doesn't splatter
 - It did a little when she let go
- She then puts it in boiling water which will make it easier to get the feathers off, She holds on to the leg and wing so she can dip it in
- She then plucks the feathers, She just has to grab large chunks because they come off easily
- She puts them over the fire to singe off excess feathers and small hairs
- She washes them with water and soap and then cuts off the heads and the feet
 - She cuts the skin of the feet and then breaks its bone and then cuts the skin again
- She then takes out the organs and washes the inside too, she puts them in a bucket for the dogs
 - She also cuts a gland in the tail, meant to keep the feathers clean, because it tastes bad
 - We found an egg in one of the chicken that would have been laid later that day
- This isn't a normal occurrence but it's for our group for lunch

Milking Cow (Once A day Nicolas)



- They bring the cow over from the other side of the pasture
- They tie the cows back legs so it won't kick the person who is milking her
- They first let the calf have some milk because she is very anxious
- They then collect the milk with pots, they milk the cow by pressing in and pulling down simultaneously while having the utter between their thumb and the inside of their fingers
- They fill one large bucket and then occasionally a smaller one
- After they let the calf have the rest

Milk to cheese (Raquel)



- All the milk gets made into cheese except for what is given to the workers and the people who are staying in the Cotito Hotel
- She has to do it every day so it won't spoil
- It's from both the cow and the goat (the cows are milked twice a day and the goats once)
- She strains the milk first
- Then she puts a pill in the milk that is supposed to make it last and stand sturdy
- She lets it sit for a while (She said 15 minutes)
- She breaks it up, mixes it, and drains the water (its used for the animals)
- It sits for a bit longer and then she drains the water again
- She then uses a pineapple leaf and creates a circle by sewing the ends together
- She presses the cheese into the circle and lets it sit again
- Every week its sent to the hotel along with the eggs

Coffee Process (Quick Synopsis)



- There are 10,000 coffee plants on 20 hectares of their land
- They hire 15-20 people to come in to help with the harvest, all done by hand, November, December, January
- After its been picked it dries and ferments
- It is then sent through a machine that separates the husks from the beans
 - Its powered by a motor and water helps the beans flow through the machine
 - It essentially grinds the beans and separates them from their shells in pool of water that collects at the bottom
- They are then dried again in the green house (Stage that is happening now)
- After that they are packaged and sent to a Spanish company to be baked and packaged and then are shipped back here and to the main hotel
 - They send about 170 150 pound bags to the company
- It's pretty much only sold in the hotel

Current Coffee Stage (Nicolas)



- After all the coffee is laid out to dry in the greenhouse there are still some husks that the separation process didn't get
- Nicolas has to go through by hand and weed out all the small pieces
 - Other Companies use machines but they do It all by hand
- If he doesn't the company they send the coffee to will not take it
- Pedro, Ignacio, and Eloy help too but mainly Nicolas does it
- Once they finish a bed they bag it up and put it in storage to be sent away

Feeding Baby Goat (Antonio/Rachel)



- Raquel fills up a Sippy cup with goats milk, from when they were milked before
- Antonio brings it to the goat and sits inside of the cage
- He hold the bottle higher than the goats head so she has to stretch her neck

The word I would use to describe Raquel and Nicolas's families work is tedious. All of their tasks require a lot of patience but also a lot of love. Most of the work here is done by hand and they need a lot of dedication and enjoyment to continue to repeat them daily. The first task I helped Nicolas with was separating the leftover husks from the beans. I had to lean over and sift through many coffee beans and even when I thought the section was done I would find another one. After an hour of doing this I definitely was bored but Nicolas says that he finds it fun, which is good considering he does it every day. After leaving the greenhouse I helped Raquel clean the eggs. Once again this task is repetitive and boring but she too says she enjoys it and finds it relaxing. When I came back the next day I helped her again with the eggs but this time I helped to collect them. It was like a very real Easter egg hunt. You had to dig in the rice hull to find ones that were hiding. We carried the eggs back and started to wash again. She did talk to us though. She was very interested in what we had done in Panama up until this point and if we enjoyed it so I could see a little bit of loneliness seeping through. But she did move from Darien because she liked the work here. She told me that she wants more tourists because it makes her job interesting. Yes that does mean that she has to clean more laundry but I think after her many years on the farm she wants more to happen around here. She is very busy but her tasks also include a lot of waiting. In order to make the cheese she has to wait and for the laundry she has

to wait and even though she can fill that space with other tasks she wants to have conversations with different people instead. She was super grateful that we were helping not only because it sped up the process (only a little) but because she had someone to talk to. I believe that Nicolas does enjoy having people around because he can patrol more and have a different tasks to deal with but he isn't open to as much conversation. He's shy and wants people to call him Usted rather than Tu. Even though tourists do disrupt Nicolas and Raquel's life it provides them with something more interesting than their daily farm routines.

Coming from Pedasi, where tourists are always around, to Cotito the hotel is very different. The people in Pedasi are tolerant of tourists. By that I mean they see them every day so it's not a huge deal. Here Raquel and Nicolas have tasks that are usually done solo, so when other people come to help they are so happy. It gives them something new and different than their daily chores and their house. They work their butts off so that tourists at the Hotel Los Quetzales can have fresh cheese, eggs, and coffee. Because they are such a small farm it is expensive for them to operate the farm, and because of this they don't have much spending money. In the United States money is everything. It's such a status in towns, schools, and pretty much every community. Here Nicolas and Raquel can't have that luxury. But it's interesting because they work long and hard hours so that people who do have that status, such as tourists, can have their product. Raquel and Nicolas work very hard without much in return so that people like us can have their product but yet they still enjoyed our company.