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Being Juan Valdez

A "Colombian idol"-style search transformed a humble farmer into the 21st century version of TV's coffee icon. Meet the man behind the mule.

By Matthew Fishbane



Carlos Castañeda, the new face of Juan Valdez, visits Andes, Colombia, where he was born, on July 8, 2006.

Photo: Reuters/Albeiro Lopera

Oct. 16, 2007 | You know Juan Valdez: He's been the rugged, mustachioed icon of Colombian [coffee](#) since 1960. That's when a Madison Avenue [ad](#) agency, realizing the potential of campesino cachet, invented a name even gringos could pronounce, and hired an actor to play the role of a humble coffee grower. The TV commercials asked, "Where do the beans come from?" and Juan Valdez would answer, strolling through lushly planted hills, "I hand-picked them myself."

Last year, in a passing-the-poncho ceremony widely publicized in [Colombia](#), the National Federation of Coffee Growers of Colombia introduced the new, improved Juan Valdez: a 38-year-old farmer from the village of Andes. Carlos Castañeda was the real deal, a third-generation coffee grower with a seven-acre farm and two cows. He was chosen after an elaborate, [reality TV](#)-style search that involved competitors in a variety of games and tests -- a bizarre mash-up of "Colombian Idol" and "Survivor."

Now Castañeda spends half his time on his small coffee farm, and the other half jet-setting around the world as Juan Valdez, a fictional creation. In fact, the federation doesn't like Castañeda speaking to the press about his life before Juan: "He's a character, not a person," the media office told me. When I asked the New York advertising agency that now handles the coffee account about Castañeda's English, I was told, "It's pretty nonexistent. He doesn't really *talk* for us, more just makes appearances."

I couldn't help wondering how Castañeda's life had changed. I wanted to know if, in becoming the thing he was supposed to represent by staying true to himself, he had in fact become something else.

But I quickly found that it isn't easy to get to the real farmer behind the symbolic one. Since becoming Valdez, Castañeda had largely handed over farm duties to his wife and two teenage children. For his safety and convenience (this is Colombia, after all), he had been moved from his village to an "undisclosed location" closer to an airport. He now had handlers.

I submitted a request in writing to the federation's director of intellectual property. "I'd like to talk with Carlos Castañeda," my awkward note asked, "not as the spokesperson he has become, but as the man you discovered one year ago."

For 37 years, the poncho-wearing, mule-driving Valdez character was played by one man, an actor named Carlos Sánchez -- in building-size ads, in personal appearances at the White House, in "Bruce Almighty" -- until Sánchez, Juan Valdez and the 560,000 small coffee farmers he represents merged into one. Together, they became the face of the \$1.7 billion Colombian coffee industry and its growing chain of Cafés around the world. Still, even icons get old.

In October 2004, Gabriel Silva, who had been brought in to steer the National Federation of Coffee Growers of Colombia -- the largest agricultural non-government organization in the world -- out of near-bankruptcy after the coffee crisis of the 1990s, decided it was time to breathe new life into his brand. He had launched North America's first Juan Valdez Café in Washington, D.C., with big plans to expand into Starbucks territory in Seattle and New York. Colombia was still the world's third-largest coffee producer behind Brazil and Vietnam, providing more than 12 percent of the superior-grade arabica beans consumed. But after years of belt-tightening neglect, the image needed refurbishing -- it needed a new Juan.

A multinational talent-search agency failed to produce more than a few desperate actors. Then Silva's colleague Luis Fernando Samper, the federation's director of intellectual property, had a crazy idea: Why hire an actor to *play* authentic when you could get an actual coffee grower to *be* it?

It was a risky proposition for so precious a brand, and a bold experiment in authenticity marketing. Some 4 million Colombians, nearly a tenth of the population, depend today on the successful export of Colombia's legal stimulant, and on the federation's financial support, political prowess, technological know-how and marketing savvy. What began as a casting problem became a massive search for the purest, most distilled representative of the humble farmers of Colombia.

Samper and Silva knew they needed a man with a good mustache, but they were also looking for three qualities they felt identified the Colombian coffee grower: authenticity, proud humility, and the ability to be convincingly rural. Juan Valdez was not just a branding tool for foreign markets; he was also (closer to home) a symbol of national pride and industry.

The search committee they put together was led by events producer Juan Ángel. In the 1990s, Ángel had starred in a hugely successful Colombian soap opera called "Café: Scent of a Woman," playing the scheming director of a coffee exporter. His team included a pair of psychologists, a local design guru, advertising executives from New York and Bogotá, the outgoing Juan Valdez and "El Profesor Yarumo," a popular public TV personality who makes on-air visits to coffee plantations to teach agricultural technique. They also brought in David Altschul, of the Portland, Ore., brand-management firm Character, who conceded "any vaguely Hispanic-looking guy with a costume would do" to fill the role of Juan Valdez. But Altschul also saw an uncommon opportunity to deepen the back story of a well-established brand -- and to reintroduce the story of the "real coffee growers Juan Valdez represents" to the all-important upper-middle-class Starbucks customer.

Ángel sent dozens of scouts (with a film crew) into the coffee-growing regions to photograph and identify Valdez look-alikes in the town plazas and rural cooperative meeting houses, with patter about making "a documentary on coffee culture." Back in Bogotá, assistants pored through the personnel files of 380,000 pickers, growers, agronomists, social workers and field managers on the federation registry to cull 406 men, aged 30 to 45, with photogenic mugs. At regional "fairs," Ángel and his evaluators interviewed candidates, weeding out the alcoholics, vegetarians and dropouts, the products or causes of broken families, and the high-strung. Or, as one of the evaluating psychologists put it: "If he's even half a depressive, he's out."

In April 2006, a short list of 30 men were invited, first, to sign strict confidentiality agreements and, second, to stay incognito with the federation handlers for 25 days. They were also encouraged to start growing a mustache, if they didn't already have one, and to dye existing ones black if any of the whiskers showed gray. To avoid premature press, Samper and Ángel kept proceedings secret and moved the contest from hotel to hotel to avoid speculation about the concentration of affable men with similar facial hair.

Over the next three weeks, the producers prepared all kinds of theatrical and improvisational games to assess the self-possession, tranquility and charm of the candidates. Actors tempted each would-be Juan Valdez with seduction, lewd drunkenness, heckling and crying babies. They played traffickers asking Juan Valdez to be a "drug mule." Professor Yarumo crammed coffee-growing history and technology in grueling study sessions. Contestants cleared brush on a coffee farm, attended a brewing and tasting course, toured the federation agricultural labs, and faced Rafael Pombo, the Tim Russert of Colombia, in a simulated press conference.

Since the greatest demand placed on whoever plays Juan Valdez -- besides the burden of permanent and unflappable likability -- is overcoming boredom, Ángel's team went to great lengths to simulate the unglamorous reality of hotel rooms, convention halls and greeting lines. One test roused the contestants out of their farm bunks at 4 in the morning, threw them on the earliest flight to Bogotá, and then locked them on the set of a TV studio, where a crew had been instructed to botch every attempt to film a commercial.

Ángel began handing out colored badges: Anyone wearing a blue one at the end of the week was given a parting gift of traditional thatch slippers and told he hadn't made the cut.

When they got down to 10 finalists, the judges set up events designed to replicate the culture shock and high-society demands of the job: the presidential visits and gala soirees. The organizers flew the finalists to the Caribbean resort of Cartagena and allowed them to wander freely, but watched to see what kind of indulgence might tempt them (apparently, none: All the contestants stuck together and retired early). In Bogotá, they were taken to a Japanese restaurant where obscure food had been chosen for them. The would-be Juans were loaned black tie attire and invited to a cultural evening in Bogotá's Colonial Theater, attended by

dignitaries -- an event that prompted one teary-eyed coffee grower to confess that it was the first time he'd ever worn a tie, and the first time he'd "ever felt so special."

For Samper's team, it was akin to the search for a Tibetan Lama: There was talk of avatars and icons, and a humble, unsuspecting man elevated out of his rural mountain setting into a position designed to radiate joy; then there was the coterie of businesslike priests who coddle the chosen's image and care for his needs. It was *that* serious.

Everyone wanted something different from Juan Valdez. The ad guy in New York just wanted someone photogenic to put in his posters. The federation needed someone who wouldn't quit, and whose story would be believably authentic. "For us," Angel says, "that meant the ability to say, 'I wake up, I weed, I drink coffee, I milk the cow, and that's it.' If you give me that line I can say it, but somehow it just won't sound the same. We want the story to become the mythology. It's like seeing tigers in the zoo. They represent all the tigers in the wild that people can't see."

The judges soon agreed that one man stood out. When a mule was brought in to be posed and photographed, one coffee grower "managed the mule, the rig, the event the way any of us would have stepped into a car," Altschul says, "and put everyone else to shame." His friends and neighbors back home in coffee country had always called him "Mr. Tranquility." He showed patience and emotional control, family stability and, as Altschul points out, "the looks of a Hispanic Tom Cruise."

The man thought of himself as "normalito," certainly no movie star. In the Japanese-restaurant test, he let himself be taught how to use chopsticks for the first time, then thanked the teacher, put the chopsticks down, picked up his fork and began to eat. In the mule test, he tightened Conchita's sagging load by sticking a boot in her haunch, yanked the rein under her chin, snapped her head back and forth a few times, and said, "So, who's going to be the boss here: you or me?"

After weeks of negotiation, Samper finally arranged for me to speak to Castañeda by phone. But even then, I was prohibited from discussing anything irrelevant to coffee promotion. Castañeda wouldn't be giving his opinions on politics, violence, drugs or free-trade agreements. He would be available solely to discuss his experience playing Juan Valdez.

And so, I talked to Carlos Castañeda -- in Spanish, by phone to the undisclosed location where he lives -- in the first interview he has ever given *as himself*. Apparently no one else had ever wanted to interview Carlos Castañeda before, and why should they? After all, he's just a coffee farmer from rural Colombia.

In fact, what you learn by talking to him is that he appears to be so genuine there's no need to interview him. He really is Juan Valdez. Like over 90 percent of Colombian coffee growers, Castañeda worked a small farm, where he keeps his two cows and sundry "farmlike things." He purchased the land where he was born by selling off a new Renault 12 he won in a village raffle one day. He says his favorite thing is the sunrise over the hill there. His parents, who raised him on the farm, had taught him to "never stop being what you are."

Castañeda refers to himself, as do others in Colombia's rural class, using an antiquated plural pronoun, the royal we, as in "we've been blessed with this responsibility," or "we've been chosen," which conveys humility. His sentences tend to begin with an amused little chuckle and tend to end with "todo muy rico, muy lindo," which translates poetically to "Groovy!"

The new Juan Valdez had never -- "NEEEEEvver," in his singsong phrasing -- been out of his local region, let alone out of the country, until his crowning sent him to Japan, Russia, Spain,

France and the U.S. in just the first year. His previous life had him occasionally leaving his farm, riding down to the village market on a Willy's Jeep share-taxi, returning to the farm, occasionally venturing to the capital on business, but only once in a while. How was Tokyo, in comparison? "Japan was groovy," he said. "They even *walk* orderly there."

Castañeda has told Silva that, "if the Virgin so chooses," he has every intention of outlasting his predecessor Carlos Sánchez to carry Juan Valdez into 2044, and beyond.

The federation has been cautious in its first year with Castañeda. It wants him to adjust to his new life, and make sure that the attention doesn't go to his head. Long lines of older women form wherever he stands, and some confess to him their platonic love for the figure of Juan Valdez, and how pleased they are that he has rejuvenated the icon so handsomely. Colombians overseas, and federation growers back home, are uniformly moved to see their country represented in him.

This fall, Castañeda will be deployed to prod the hearts and buying habits of the American 18-to-34 set in a campaign being called the "Feel-Good Factor." It will be followed by the socially conscious "Do-Good Factor," which may bring Castañeda out of the shadows: less character, more person. The first half of the campaign has already appeared in *People* and *Us Weekly*.

By 2009, the federation hopes to have opened its 300th Juan Valdez Café around the world. The trick, as Starbucks knows, is to turn a pleasurable purchase into the perception of a good deed. For purveyors of premium coffee, that's the serious business of "free trade."

Selling the authenticity of Juan Valdez to the world is crucial to the whole Colombian coffee brand. That is the mantle Carlos Castañeda has taken up, from the hilly groves of Colombia, where, when he can, he still hand-picks his beans.

"Life on the farm is hard," he says. "You can spend a long day starting at 5 in the morning doing nothing but weeding with a machete, up and down the rows." Greeting a long line of visitors at a trade show is not that different. "It takes the same mental preparation, to just keep going." Still, "to go out with your mule onto the streets of New York ... to walk up Fifth Avenue in a poncho and thatched slippers -- How can I describe it? It just gives you the goose bumps."