

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Valle del Cauca

Stories from the Heart of Colombia A podcast by Procolombia

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Hello, and welcome to Stories from the Heart of Colombia, a podcast by Procolombia.

I'm Nick Perkins and I've been living in Colombia since 1999.

I love cycling, hiking and traveling to unusual places. For a long time, I'd been dreaming of visiting every Department in Colombia on one round trip, but I hadn't been able to do it until this year, when I was finally able to plan the trip of my dreams. A trip that would take me to each of Colombia's 32 Departments, plus its capital, Bogotá, to spend a day or two, exploring the magical geographies, witnessing their immense biodiversity and soaking up the majestic vistas, all while enveloping myself in the warmth of their peoples.

In each episode of the podcast, I explore emblematic places in one Department. On my journey, I learn about the customs and cultures of the people I meet, and I record a travel diary of their experiences, stories and legends. The diary becomes an intimate and very personal record of the flavors, colors and sounds I discover in this land of infinite horizons.

Colombia has something for everyone.

Join me on this unprecedented, sonic journey around one of the most diverse and fascinating countries on earth.

I'm Nick Perkins, and this is Stories from the Heart of Colombia.

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Valle del Cauca

I'm Nick Perkins, and in this episode of the podcast I'll be visiting the Department of Valle del Cauca. Most specifically, its capital city, Cali. Cali is a vibrant city in southwestern Colombia. It's known as being one of the centers of musical production in Colombia; arguably, the home of Colombian Salsa. It's also known for its wide variety of cuisines, gastronomic offerings, which have been influenced by the long history of immigration to Cali. Cali is a city of immigrants, it's a city of diversity and I think that we'll find that reflected in what I find out about the music and the food. I'll be meeting Jacobo, who's a musician who lives in Cali, and he's gonna take

me to one of his favorite restaurants and he said that, hopefully, the owner will be there and that he'll be able to give me a bit more context on the food side of things. So, I'm really looking forward to today. I love music myself. It's always nice to sit and talk to somebody about music, especially modern urban takes on traditional music and I love food. So, what better way to spend an afternoon in Cali than eating good food in a great restaurant, talking to an interesting musician? Off we go!



So I start by asking Jacobo to tell us a little bit about what he's working on at the moment. And he starts by saying basically that he doesn't define himself as a musician, he defines himself as a storyteller. And, at the moment, he's working on a project which he said it's a transmedia, multidisciplinary project that incorporates aspects of music and art. It's called "Callehueso and La Mambanegra," and it's a project which tells stories based on popular *caleño* culture, and includes art and music from different parts of the historical past. He says, really, the project is about telling a story based on a fictional character called 'Callehueso' that's based on his great-grandfather, Tomás Rentería. His great-grandfather was the son of a slave. His great-grandmother was called Pilar Mina Rentería and she was a slave who'd been brought to Cali from Africa. And his great-great-grandfather was called José María Cabal, who was a local landowner; and a child was born and he said it wasn't a romantic union, unfortunately, because at that time slave owners had certain rights over their female slaves. But, anyway, he says, that was where his great-grandfather was born, Tomás Rentería. And the project talks about the adventures that his great-grandfather had leaving the port of Buenaventura and arriving in La Habana, Cuba, and finally reaching New York, where he started a band in 1943 which was called La Mambanegra, before being deported for being an illegal immigrant. And he says the project has three fundamental columns, one of which is literary and takes the influences of magic realism, cyberpunk. Another pillar is graphic design and the visual language of the video-clip and cinematography, which is another aspect that Cali is very famous for within Colombian cultural life; and then he says that the center, the sort of fulcrum of the whole project is music and that's the part played by the orchestra that he



currently directs. He's producer and creative director of the orchestra, which is called La Mambanegra. And all of this comes together, he says, it cooks in the pot which is the city of Cali where it's 6:00 in the afternoon, the heat begins to ease a little bit and the wind starts to blow, starts to cool you down, refresh you. And you start to see the diversity of peoples walking the streets, making the most of the slightly cooler early evening. In the background you hear the sound of the church bells as they start to ring; and at night, you've got the sounds leaking out of Salsa clubs where you're probably gonna find yourself dancing until the light of the morning in good company. And, he said as well, "of course, all of that accompanied by the incredible food which you'll find in this beautiful city called Cali."

So, I ask Jacobo why Cali is so culturally diverse, and also, why Cali- if you talk to Colombians, if you look at Colombian cultural production- you find a huge amount coming out of Cali. And that's really related to the nearby port of Buenaventura. Buenaventura is Colombia's largest seaport; for a very, very long time has been so. So, we're talking about, you know, decades and decades in which Buenaventura had sailors landing there, some of them would stay; others would move on, but they would all spend time in Buenaventura. And he said, actually, a lot of the Salsa, for example, that was of coming in to Colombia from New York was brought in by sailors. So, they would drink in the bars of Buenaventura and in exchange for drinks they would pay with records of the latest music from all over the world. So that brought in a lot of very fresh, very new music. He said the other thing is that El Valle, the Department, is a huge sugarcane-producing region. I mean, if we look at the past history sugarcane was one of the industries that brought huge numbers of slaves into countries, and all of those



slaves brought with them their own cultural traditions, musical instruments, musical styles from the places that they came from. And this all came together in the sugarcane fields around Cali, and that influenced local music, influenced local people. And it's just, he said, it's a historical phenomenon. This is all built up a head of steam, as it were, and it means that Cali is the diverse engine of cultural production in Colombia that it is today.

So I asked Jacobo a question which I'm often asked by people that come to Colombia and want to come to Cali. If you come to Cali and you wanna experience Salsa in Cali –which I think is something you have to do –do you have to know how to dance? And he said “no, it's actually better if you come here as a tourist without knowing how to dance,” he said, because there are *caleños* all over the place who are desperate to teach people how to dance Salsa. He mentioned a place specifically: La Topa Tolondra, in which Monday nights are dedicated to novices, so you'll have *caleños* going who want to teach, they want to meet people, and they meet them through teaching them how to dance, and it's a mecca for foreigners who come to Cali and want free Salsa classes, effectively. But then also if you want to do something a bit more formal there's a plethora of Salsa schools in Cali that will take you through that.

The history of Salsa is woven into the fabric of *caleño* musical society. And in fact, one of the greatest works of literature to come out of Cali by one of Cali's greatest authors, a guy called Andrés Caicedo, is called “Que Viva la Música”; “Long Live the Music.” And in Que Viva la Música he tells the story of Richie

Ray & Bobby Cruz, two of Salsa's greatest protagonists, coming to Cali and finding this very special, very unique dance culture in Cali, that even inspired them to write a song in homage to one of the amazing *caleño* dances that they found in the city.

So I asked Jacobo, you know, if he was gonna take me around Cali, like if I was going to land in Cali one morning, what would be like a sort of caricature of a 'Cali experience'. And he said, "right, here we go," and this is amazing, I recommend you look for the Spanish version of this podcast in which Jacobo will be saying the whole thing in his own voice, but I'll try and do justice to what he said. I would be listening, of course, to "Cali Pachanguero," by Grupo Niche, one of the greatest Salsa bands; and would stop on the way for a 'cholado'. Now, I'm not gonna do this justice by saying this, but if you ever had a Slush Puppie, the inspiration for the Slush Puppie is the traditional cholado, which you find all over Latin America and you find it on the street in Cali. It's basically crushed ice, which is then flavored and it has really bright coloring varying from bright red or bright green. It's... It's visually striking and it's a great way of taking off a bit of the heat of the day as you eat this crushed ice snack. We'd then pop into La Alameda, the Central Market. We'd have a bite to eat in Alameda, and then after lunch we'd pop into one of Cali's many theaters; and the first one he mentioned, which I'll focus on here, is "Espacio T.," He said it's a





really interesting theater because they do these 15 minutes work, so you can go in and see a quick 15-minute play and then you're out again into the street because you've got a busy day. He'd then take me to the Museo de La Tertulia, which is one of Cali's cultural museums and then we'd go up and have a bit of a break, I guess, maybe? On the Colina San Antonio, it is a beautiful church out there that he really loves, and he'd take us to have a look around that. And there's also an old shop up there called La Colina which he said serves great empanadas. And then, on the way back down, we'd probably pass by the Gato de Tejada, one of Cali's famous public works of art. And then we might drop by the Loma de La Cruz, which is a place which is famous for a selection of handicrafts, so then we can have a look at some of the local handicrafts that are on sale there. And we might, if we've got time, we'll stop off by the side of the river, they call that La Ladera del Río for a quick beer, cool down as the afternoon begins to cool and then we've got a busy evening' we'd go to Caldera del Diablo, La Topa Tolondra, Zaperoco and Punto Baré, which are bars where you can listen to recorded Salsa, but specially Zaperoco and Punto Baré are places to go and listen to live Salsa. And then, after all of that, I guess collapse into bed in one of Cali's amazing hotels, before starting it all over again the next day.

So, Juan Carlos is the executive chef here at The Comitiva and seven years ago he decided that he wanted to do something himself, he wanted to take Cali's cuisine to a new level and he said what he specializes in is the Pacific, and he said not just the Colombian Pacific, the global Pacific. So I asked Juan Carlos why Cali has become this foodie center, where it comes from this culture, the food and experimentation and fusion, in which you go to a restaurant and you're trying to identify the influences, and there are often so many of them that it just becomes Cali. But, he said, "what you also have to understand is you've got these three major influences: the first one is the indigenous cultures, and they have their own cuisines; the second, were the Spanish colonizers, and they brought over their own gastronomic heritage; and then, you've got the slaves coming over from Africa. So, you've got these three major population groups, ethnic groups coexisting and then gradually all of their different dishes start to merge together into something which is... Which is Cali."

What's really interesting when I asked Juan Carlos to recommend some places in Cali if you're interested in coming to Cali as a food destination -obviously, you're gonna

come to The Comitiva first- but then you want to expand your horizons a little bit, and experience some of the other different food options that Cali has to offer, and the really interesting thing to me is the first place he mentioned is Cali's Central Market, La Alameda. It's a long tradition in Colombia and other parts of Latin America, where you have a Central Market and the Central Market has a food court, as it were, and you've got all sorts of people who've dedicated their lives to food and experimentation with food, but it's in a very, very authentic setting. Don't expect fancy surroundings, don't expect push plates. What you will get is incredibly authentic food and very, very unique food because it is quite literally today's representation of somebody's great-great grandmother's recipe that's been passed down through generations and adapted, and tweaked to take us where we are today. And I think that's fascinating, that Juan Carlos would mention that as the first place you should go in Cali. He also mentions a few other places. He said I must visit restaurants in Cali: "Platillos Voladores"; "Ringlete," he mentions as well; and "El Escudo Del Quijote" as places that you should go.

So I asked Juan Carlos just to sum up, if he had any last words, and he said "if you come to Cali as a tourist, basically you're looking at coming to a place full of good humor and happiness." He said, "it comes through the music that we've got playing in the kitchen, the fact that we live in this beautiful tropical climate, where we've got fresh fruit and flowers growing all year round that we can use in our dishes." And he said, "you'll feel all of that good humor and all of that happiness, coming through into the dishes that you eat."





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