



ESTRELLA DE ORO Coatepec, Mexico

If my notes serve me well, and I think they do, then the Mexican state of Veracruz is oil country and it is sugarcane country. But mostly, it's coffee country. Some of the world's highest quality coffee grows right up to the stony streets of the city of Coatepec. Perhaps that's why I have nothing but warm, dreamy memories of the place—because like the town itself, they're draped in the aroma of coffee.

Lying somewhere between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn, as all good coffee towns must, Coatepec holds other treasures for its pilgrims. It was here that I discovered the Estrella de Oro, mainly by being led directly to it by a guy named Pablo. From the street (which most evenings, I observed, fogs up like a creepy tale of London), there is a nicely intentioned set of saloon doors leading to a dark empty room. In the next room, fluorescent lights hang half way up the empty 15-foot ceilings. Pablo claimed this was the oldest cantina in town, dating back to the late 1800s, and it sure looked every year of the claim. The very air before me had a dog-tired greenish blue tint to it. I felt narcotic slumber coming on just from leaning on the bar.

The guy in the blue hat is Ezequiel Ojeda, the owner and also the son of the second owner, who worked for the first owner, back in the good old days. Behind him are some of the original bar shelves. I was told the railroads used to run to Coatepec, and the movie stars of the mid-century arrived by

train from Mexico City to dine at Estrella de Oro. A framed and fading black-and-white photo seemed to bear the legend out truthfully.

I had hoped my Dos Equis would be turn out to be something different (like how Mexican Coca-Cola is made with sugar cane sugar instead of the high fructose corn syrup added to US Coke), but it was just its usual amber self, which is good, by the way. That's why I ordered Dos Equis in the first place.

I also had mezcal; I believe it was L'aaz or l'aaz El Corazon. Possibly Gold Star. (My notes let me down.) It was terrific with a long and smoky finish. Finally, I tried some donkey herb. It is not as much fun as it sounds, alas. Some roadside weed is gathered and distilled or infused or some other such metallurgy with sugar cane rum and then bottled in a milk jug. My buddy Lew called it "hooch." It was the same color as the bar's tired air, and I was expecting a Mexican absinthe drip experience. Ultimately, the cloying tincture held little appeal for me, but the locals enjoyed it with Fresca.