



Cuatro Sombras and Hacienda Santa Clara: San Juan's Specialty Coffee Pioneer



Cafe Cuatro Sombras opened its Old San Juan microroaster in February 2011, becoming the first dedicated micro-roastery and coffeehouse in the historic district. The coffee served is single-origin from Hacienda Santa Clara in Yauco — a 175-year-old farm in the family of one of the founders, Pablo Muñoz, whose

ancestor Domingo Mariani settled in the Yauco mountains in 1846 and established the hacienda when Puerto Rican coffee first earned its global reputation. The brand's name — Cuatro Sombras, "four shades" — refers to the four traditional shade trees that protected the original Santa Clara harvests in the 19th century: pacay, guamá, guaraguao, and palo de pollo. The operation today is one of the cleanest farm-to-cup integrations in Puerto Rican specialty coffee, with the bean grown, processed, exported, roasted, ground, packed, and served by the same family-owned vertical operation between Yauco's mountains and Old San Juan's cobblestones.

A Hacienda from 1846

The story of Cuatro Sombras begins almost two centuries before the coffee shop opens. In 1846, Domingo Mariani — a Corsican immigrant — settled in the mountains of Yauco, in the southwest of Puerto Rico, and established what would become Hacienda Santa Clara. The decade was a pivotal moment for Puerto Rican coffee. The Spanish colonial administration had begun encouraging coffee cultivation, the Yauco region was being recognized as the prime growing zone, and Corsican families were beginning to arrive in larger numbers — the migration that would, over the next several decades, define Yauco's distinctive coffee culture.

Mariani's choice of location was good. Hacienda Santa Clara sits in mountainous terrain at the right altitude for high-quality Arabica, with the volcanic soil and afternoon-mist microclimate that the best Puerto Rican coffee farms share. The shade tree pattern Mariani used — pacay, guamá, guaraguao, palo de pollo — was the traditional Caribbean shade-coffee model: dense overhead canopy, slow ripening, low water stress, and the secondary benefit of providing nitrogen-fixing trees that improved soil quality without external fertilizer.

By the late 19th century, Santa Clara's coffee was being exported globally, part of the Yauco-led export wave that made Puerto Rican coffee internationally celebrated.



The Mid-Century Decline

Mid-20th century, Hacienda Santa Clara fell silent — like most Puerto Rican coffee operations. The trajectory has become familiar in Boricua coffee history: Hurricane San Ciriaco in 1899 destroyed most of the island's coffee. American annexation in 1898 redirected the economy toward sugar. The Great Depression collapsed coffee prices. World War II disrupted shipping. Subsequent hurricanes — beginning with the chain of mid-century storms and continuing through Hurricane María in 2017 — repeatedly damaged what farms remained.

By mid-century most of the great 19th-century haciendas had shut down or shifted to other crops. Santa Clara was one of these. The coffee bushes were not removed — many of the original 1850s Tipica plantings actually remained alive, dormant, and capable of producing fruit again — but the operation as a working hacienda ceased.

The land remained in the Mariani family across generations of fallow. This was, in retrospect, the saving grace of the operation: when the renaissance came, the genetic material was still there.

The Reopening: 2011

Sixty years after the hacienda fell silent, Pablo Muñoz — a young descendant of Domingo Mariani — and his wife Mariana Suárez began replanting the Santa Clara farm. The replanting required restoration rather than from-scratch development, since many of the original 1850s Tipica bushes were still alive and producing. Coffee plants are surprisingly resilient. With pruning, soil amendment, and renewed shade tree management, an abandoned coffee farm can be restored to production within a few seasons — vastly faster than starting over with new plantings, which take 4 to 5 years to first harvest.

In February 2011, Pablo and Mariana opened the Cafe Cuatro Sombras micro-roastery and coffeehouse at 259 Recinto Sur Street in Old San Juan, near the Paseo de la Princesa. It was Old San Juan's first dedicated micro-roaster — at the time, no other coffee shop in the historic district roasted its own beans on-site.

The model was vertically integrated: grow the coffee at the hacienda in Yauco, process it on-site, transport the green beans to Old San Juan, roast in small batches at the storefront, grind, pack, and serve same-day. This farm-to-cup integration is rare even in specialty coffee globally. Most specialty cafes buy green coffee from importers or roasters; only a handful operate their own farms.



The Name: Four Shades

Cuatro Sombras — "four shades" — refers to the four shade trees that traditionally protected the Santa Clara coffee crops:

- **Pacay** (*Inga* species, also called "ice cream bean") — a tropical legume with edible white pulp inside the pods, common in Caribbean coffee shade systems for its rapid growth and nitrogen fixation.

- **Guamá** (*Inga vera*, locally called "guaba" in some regions) — another legume tree, fast-growing, nitrogen-fixing, deeply rooted, well-suited to the steep coffee slopes.
- **Guaraguao** (*Buchenavia capitata*) — a tall tropical canopy tree with dense foliage, providing the highest layer of shade.
- **Palo de Pollo** (*Pterocarpus officinalis*) — sometimes called dragon's blood tree, a wetland legume that thrives in the Yauco hills and contributes nitrogen.

The naming choice is not incidental. Each tree species shapes the coffee differently — the speed of ripening, the protection from afternoon sun, the soil chemistry, the water cycle. A coffee grown under four-shade canopy has a different character than the same coffee grown under two-shade or under sun. By naming the brand for the trees, the founders explicitly invoked the agronomic tradition that distinguished Caribbean coffee in the first place.

The Coffee

Cuatro Sombras coffee is single-origin Tipica from Hacienda Santa Clara. Tipica is the original Arabica varietal that traveled from Yemen to Java to the Caribbean in the 18th century and to Puerto Rico in 1736. It is also the most demanding varietal — slower-growing than modern hybrids, more sensitive to leaf rust, lower-yielding per tree — but with what specialty coffee buyers consider the cleanest classic Arabica cup profile.

The processing is washed: cherries hand-picked at peak ripeness, depulped same-day, fermented in tanks for 12 to 36 hours to remove the mucilage layer, washed, and sun-dried. All beans are sun-dried and stored in climate-controlled bodega before shipment to Old San Juan.

In the cup, Cuatro Sombras coffee presents medium-bodied, with hints of semi-sweet chocolate, spices, and caramel — the classic Yauco Tipica profile. The coffee is fully roasted by Pablo and his team in the Old San Juan storefront, in small batches sized to weekly consumption. Walking past the cafe on a morning in Old San Juan, one of the

dominant background aromas of the cobblestone streets is the roasting drum venting from the Cuatro Sombras facade.

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/v2irY8zenxE>

The Old San Juan Coffee House

The Cuatro Sombras storefront occupies a historic building at 259 Recinto Sur Street, near the Paseo de la Princesa walkway. The space includes the cafe with seating, the working micro-roaster visible to customers, and a back room used for cupping classes and small private events.

The cafe operates seven days a week. Hours are roughly 7 AM to 6 PM Monday through Thursday, extending to 8 PM Friday through Sunday. The menu beyond drinks includes guava butter croissants (the most-cited single item from the cafe), avocado toast, sandwiches, paninis, salads, and pastries. The kitchen runs at moderate speed — quick grab-and-go is not the cafe's intended pace.

Among Old San Juan's many coffee shops, Cuatro Sombras occupies a distinct position: it is the cafe specifically tied to a working farm, with the longest unbroken family lineage in the Puerto Rican specialty coffee scene. Other San Juan cafes serve Puerto Rican coffee, but Cuatro Sombras serves coffee from a single farm owned and operated by the founders' family for nearly two centuries.

The Cupping Class

Cuatro Sombras offers a structured 1-hour cupping class for visitors at \$89 per person. Held in the back room of the Old San Juan cafe, the class begins with a slide presentation by Pablo Muñoz on Puerto Rican coffee production — historical and current — using photographs from Hacienda Santa Clara to illustrate every stage from cherry to cup. Visitors see green specialty-grade beans side by side with green commercial-grade beans, learn the visual differences, and discuss the challenges facing

the modern Puerto Rican coffee industry.

After the slide presentation, the class moves to hands-on cupping. The full SCA cupping protocol is demonstrated: the dry fragrance, the wet aroma, the crust break, the slurp. Visitors taste several Cuatro Sombras lots side by side, learning to distinguish the descriptors that the SCA flavor wheel codifies.

The cupping classes are part of a deliberate educational mission. Pablo and Mariana have spoken openly about wanting to educate Puerto Rican consumers about specialty coffee, both as a market-development effort and as a way to support the broader island specialty movement. As more visitors and locals learn what good coffee actually tastes like, the demand for high-quality Puerto Rican specialty coffee grows, which in turn supports the farms producing it.

Reservations for the cupping class are by appointment, through the cafe's website or by phone (787-724-9955).

The Coffee Encyclopedia



*cupping class small group tasting coffee
professional setup*

Image curation pending

= PuertoRicoCoffeeShop.com

The Dorado Location

In addition to the Old San Juan original, Cuatro Sombras now operates a second cafe location in Dorado, Puerto Rico, on the north coast about 30 minutes west of San Juan. The Dorado cafe runs slightly different hours — 7 AM to 4 PM daily — and serves the same single-origin Santa Clara coffee in a more residential setting.

For visitors and residents in the San Juan-to-Dorado corridor, the Dorado location offers a less crowded, more leisurely environment than the Old San Juan flagship. The coffee is identical — both locations are supplied by the same Yauco farm and the same Old San Juan roastery.

Comparison with Other Modern PR Specialty Operations

Several modern Puerto Rican specialty coffee operations follow similar farm-to-cup models. Hacienda San Pedro, run by the Atienza family in Jayuya, has been continuously operated by the same family since the 19th century and now also operates several metropolitan coffee shops. Hacienda Tres Picachos in Jayuya represents the heritage Jayuya farm tradition. Café Lareño operates from Lares with similar small-batch single-origin focus.

Cuatro Sombras is distinctive among these in two ways: the explicit branding around shade trees (cuatro sombras) ties the modern operation directly to traditional agronomy in a way few competitors articulate; and the Old San Juan urban roastery model brought micro-roasting visibility to the historic district at a moment when no other cafe in the area was doing so. The 2011 opening was, at the time, somewhat ahead of the curve — preceding the broader specialty coffee wave that would eventually wash through several Old San Juan locations.



Visiting

For visitors planning a Puerto Rican specialty coffee itinerary, Cuatro Sombras is the most accessible point of entry. The Old San Juan location is centrally located, walking distance from major Old San Juan tourism stops, and serves coffee directly from a single working family farm. The cupping class is one of the most affordable specialty coffee education experiences in the Caribbean.

For visitors wanting to see the source farm, Hacienda Santa Clara in Yauco is approximately 2 hours west of San Juan by car, in the heart of the Yauco coffee region. The hacienda is not always open for casual visits — the working farm operates around the harvest cycle — and visits typically need to be coordinated through the Old San Juan cafe in advance.

For Boricuas living in Dorado, Bayamón, Toa Baja, or the western metropolitan corridor, the Dorado Cuatro Sombras cafe provides regular access to the same coffee without the Old San Juan parking and tourism load.

Key Facts

- Hacienda Santa Clara established 1846 in Yauco by Corsican Domingo Mariani
- Cuatro Sombras micro-roastery opened February 2011 in Old San Juan
- First dedicated micro-roastery in Old San Juan
- Founders: Pablo Muñoz (Mariani descendant) and Mariana Suárez
- Brand name "four shades" refers to pacay, guamá, guaraguao, palo de pollo
- Single-origin Tipica variety, washed-process
- Some original 1850s coffee bushes still in production
- Old San Juan cafe at 259 Recinto Sur Street; Dorado second location
- 1-hour cupping classes available at \$89, by reservation
- Phone: 787-724-9955

Frequently Asked Questions

How do I get to the Old San Juan cafe? 259 Recinto Sur Street, near the Paseo de la Princesa walkway. Walking distance from the cruise port and the major Old San Juan tourism areas. Open 7 AM to 6 PM weekdays, extending to 8 PM weekends.

Can I visit Hacienda Santa Clara directly? Visits to the working farm in Yauco are coordinated through the Old San Juan cafe and depend on the harvest cycle. Contact the cafe in advance.

What does the coffee taste like? Medium-bodied with semi-sweet chocolate, caramel, and spice notes — the classic Yauco Tipica profile. Available as whole bean or ground, in several roast levels including a 17+ premium single-origin lot.

Is the cupping class worth \$89? For visitors interested in specialty coffee, yes. The hour-long format covers Puerto Rican coffee history, the SCA cupping protocol, and a hands-on tasting of multiple lots. It is one of the most accessible specialty coffee education experiences in the Caribbean and connects directly to the cafe's working farm.

Can I buy the coffee outside Puerto Rico? Cuatro Sombras operates an online store accessible from the cafe's website. Shipping is available to mainland US and select international destinations.

Related Articles

- [Hacienda Tres Picachos: The Jayuya Heritage Farm](#)
- [Hacienda San Pedro: The Atienza Family Coffee Legacy in Jayuya](#)
- [Yauco: Puerto Rico's Crown Coffee Region](#)
- [Coffee Cupping: The SCA Protocol and How Professionals Taste Coffee](#)
- [Cafés of San Juan: A Coffee Shop Tour of Puerto Rico's Capital](#)
- [Café con Leche: The Puerto Rican Morning Tradition](#)
- [Pilón de Café: The Wooden Pestle Tradition of Puerto Rico](#)

Taste Authentic Puerto Rico Coffee

The single-origin tradition that Cuatro Sombras represents — one farm, one variety, one bean traveled from Yauco to your cup — defines what specialty Puerto Rican coffee can be. Single-origin Boricua coffee from the same Yauco mountains, freshly roasted and shipped to your door, is the closest most coffee drinkers come to the Old San Juan cafe experience without crossing the Caribbean.

BUY AUTHENTIC PUERTO RICO COFFEE NOW ?

Freshly roasted, shipped worldwide. The real taste of Boricua heritage in every cup.

Part of The Coffee Encyclopedia — the world's largest free coffee reference. Proudly sponsored by PuertoRicoCoffeeShop.com.

Revision #6

Created 2026-04-26 03:18:36 UTC by Admin

Updated 2026-04-27 04:48:37 UTC by Admin