

# THE CEO OF

JUAN CARLOS RAMÍREZ-ABADÍA WAS THE MOST NOTORIOUS DRUG AND A FACE ALTERED BY PLASTIC SURGERY, HE WAS ON THE LAM FOR

LATE ON THE AFTERNOON OF MARCH 3, 1993, a young Hispanic man walked into the office of Madalax Real Estate, a run-down storefront in the heart of Little Colombia in Queens, New York. He asked to see the owner, Gladys Claudio, and was directed toward the back of the building. A few seconds later, there was the sound of gunfire: Guillermo Benitez-Zapata, a 21-year-old Colombian, had shot Claudio four times in the face. He returned calmly to the front of the office and, as he passed the desk of Claudio's terrified coworker, turned and pressed

a finger to his lips. He made no attempt to conceal his face.

New to the detective squad of the 110th Precinct, Billy Ahern had never been assigned a homicide case before. As baffling as it seemed that a Queens Realtor could be the victim of an execution-style killing, Ahern was determined to find those responsible—working for years with the Drug Enforcement Administration's "REDRUM" unit, which specializes in narcotics-related homicide, and as a member of the Queens Cold Case Squad. The investigation would lead him to make

more than 40 arrests in the United States, and to track down Benitez-Zapata. But the hit man had no idea who had sent down the order for the Queens killing. The search for the answer would span 14 years and three continents before entering its final act on an airstrip in the Amazon jungle in August 2008. By then, the investigation would have reached into the heart of one of the world's largest criminal organizations, and brought down one of the wealthiest and most elusive drug kingpins to emerge from South America: Juan Carlos Ramirez-Abadía, known

MAN OF A THOUSAND  
FACES: A DEA photograph  
of Juan Carlos Ramirez-  
Abadía, known as Chupeta,  
after his extradition to the  
United States in August  
2008. While living in Brazil  
he underwent numerous  
surgical procedures to  
alter his appearance.  
Opposite: Law-enforcement  
officers take the former  
kingpin into custody.



# COCAINE, INC.

KINGPIN SINCE PABLO ESCOBAR. WITH NUMEROUS IDENTITIES FIVE YEARS. SO HOW DID HE END UP IN A BROOKLYN JAIL?

by the man who finally caught him as “the Colombian With a Thousand Faces” but more commonly as Chupeta—or “Lollipop.”

**PABLO ESCOBAR, THE MOST INFAMOUS OUTLAW** in Colombian history, was finally cut down by police gunfire on a Medellín rooftop more than 15 years ago. In the violent epoch that followed, dozens of other drug barons rose and fell, bringing the country to the brink of anarchy. But none would reach the same reckless heights of notoriety as Escobar. His gang of roughnecks was sup-

planted by the men of the Cali cartel, who preferred to be seen as respectable businessmen. They divided their enterprise into cells, a structure designed to foil the work of law-enforcement agencies, separating distribution centers from “offices” of enforcement, transport, money laundering, and bribery. But for all their sophistication, the cartel leaders remained committed to the use of horrifying brutality; after one DEA operation, they immersed suspected informers in barrels of acid. It was against this backdrop that Chupeta first appeared.

Juan Carlos Ramírez-Abadía was born in 1963 in Palmira, Colombia, grew up in a middle-class district of nearby Cali, and later told police that he’d earned an M.B.A. from the University of Miami. Barely into his twenties, he began to work in South Florida in what one law-enforcement source close to the case describes as “retail”: selling cocaine from local labs a kilo at a time. At some point, he acquired the nickname Chupeta.

By 1990, Chupeta was back in Colombia, running his own operation under the umbrella of the Cali cartel. According to the po-



lice, he had an extensive wholesaling network in the United States. Each office was personally overseen by Chupeta and run by individuals who were never permitted to communicate directly with one another. One of those employed by the New York money-laundering operation, renting apartments that were used as stash houses—*culetas*—for drug money, was a Colombian-born Realtor: Gladys Claudio.

Demonstrating a keen eye for detail, Chupeta quickly earned a reputation as an obsessive micromanager and a remarkable innovator, devising a profit-sharing arrangement with the Mexican cartels that made him one of the top five cocaine traffickers in the world, engaged in what Michael

attention to his former rivals from Cali. In an attempt to bring the drug wars to an end, the Colombian government offered traffickers who gave themselves up drastically reduced prison sentences, along with an assurance that they would not be extradited to face charges in the United States. During the summer of 1995, six of the seven Cali bosses surrendered or were arrested, leaving Chupeta, at 32, in a position to step into the vacuum.

In early 1996, the government intensified its anti-narcotics efforts and Chupeta surrendered. Convicted of drug trafficking, he was given the maximum sentence, 24 years, but it was reduced to 13 years and four months; he was expected to serve as little as eight years. In June, the United States sent a for-

Using information from Memo and a DEA drug investigation in Houston, REDRUM agents began tracing the links in the organization's drug-distribution and enforcement offices. Gradually, they made their way up the chain to Colombia.

**CHUPETA CONTINUED TO DIRECT HIS NARCO-**trafficking operation from jail, while working on a degree in economics under the tutelage of a fellow convict, later known to the DEA as Copernico. By 2002, Chupeta had completed his sentence and, employing Copernico as an accountant, begun making his organization even more powerful than before—as part of a loose affiliation of traffickers from the Valle del Cauca region known as the Norte del Valle car-

## "AFTER THE SURGERY," A LAW-ENFORCEMENT SOURCE SAYS,



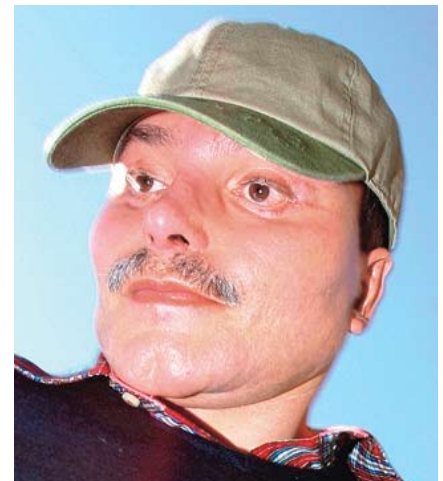
Braun, former DEA chief of operations, describes as "transnational crime, in an organization that's run like a Fortune 500 company." Chupeta bought cars, motorcycles, and houses but secreted millions of dollars in cash in *culetas* around Cali. Young and handsome, he was obsessed with his looks. Andrés López López—who began work in the Cali drug labs in 1986 and has written a book about his experiences—says Chupeta began getting Botox-like injections in his face when he was in his thirties. He became renowned for his parties and his womanizing, fathering five or more children with at least four women.

But Escobar's death drew law-enforcement



mal extradition request related to 1994 drug-trafficking charges; it was denied.

**MORE THAN A YEAR BEFORE THE EXTRADI-**tion request, Billy Ahern opened the file of a man named Vladimir Biegelman who had been found shot dead behind a mall in Queens in December 1993. The subsequent investigation led him to a half-Colombian teenager, "Babyface," who'd gone on the hit with an assassin known as "Memo." Memo was in custody in Florida under his real name: Guillermo Benitez-Zapata. He readily confessed to killing Biegelman and Claudio on jobs given to him by his brother-in-law. He had no idea who had ordered the hits.



tel. Chupeta expanded his money-laundering operation, employing a phalanx of legal and financial professionals. His accountants sent him daily reports on Excel spreadsheets, and the activities of his assassins were logged in the same way. "They had to account for every dime," one law-enforcement source says. Chupeta was soon averaging \$70 million a month in profits, and investing in dozens of properties and businesses across Colombia. The U.S. Department of Justice would later estimate his global assets at some \$2.1 billion.

On May 6, 2004, Attorney General John Ashcroft unsealed charges against the nine principals of the Norte del Valle cartel. The cartel was accused of helping to smuggle

PHOTOGRAPHS: PREVIOUS PAGES; DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION (2); THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT, MAURICIO LIMA / AFP/GETTY IMAGES; REUTERS/U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE/HANDOUT; SEBASTIAO MOREIRA/EPA/CORBIS.

more than \$10 billion worth of cocaine into the United States between 1990 and 2004. The State Department offered a reward of up to \$5 million for information leading to the apprehension of any of the men named in the indictment. A provisional arrest warrant for Chupeta was sent to the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá.

Within weeks of Ashcroft's press conference, Chupeta vanished. He would not be positively identified again for more than three years. He made arrangements to leave the country through a person who has since been killed. He packed his bags with as much cash as he could carry and supposedly gave the details of his destination only to Laureano Renteria, his loyal deputy. From that point Renteria would run the business and be the sole line of communication to the boss. The DEA's sources of intelligence about Chupeta suddenly went dark.

Chupeta continued to control drug shipments leaving Colombia for Spain and Mexico for distribution in Europe and the United States.

Chupeta and his latest "wife," Jessica, took up residence in a modest house in Morada dos Lagos, a gated community outside São Paulo. Their neighbors were largely wealthy businessmen. The security staff at the complex sometimes spotted Chupeta at night, cycling around the ornamental lake outside the front gates, his face partly hidden beneath a wool hat. He also spent months at a time living at the gang's other properties, which had been set up as safe houses, complete with stashes of cash and false passports. He used documents for at least five different aliases.

During Chupeta's first year in exile, the PF kept the mystery Colombian under intermittent surveillance. "We weren't watching him closely at all times," Francischini says. "We'd lose him sometimes because of the

daylight. Like many convicts, he exercised to help pass the time. "He was absolutely crazy about working out," Francischini says. Since arriving in Brazil, Chupeta had also embarked on an ambitious program of cosmetic surgery—one that would leave him unrecognizable to anyone who knew him as the good-looking young man from Palmira.

**EARLY ON THE EVENING OF MARCH 5, 2005,** a single-engine Beechcraft Bonanza piloted by an associate of Chupeta's, 52-year-old André Barcellos, crashed on takeoff from a small airfield in Curitiba, the largest city in southern Brazil. The accident caused only minor damage, but it would prove to be Chupeta's downfall: The fact that the flight had two Colombian passengers was enough to alert the PF.

Francischini sent two teams of agents to tail the Colombians, who had checked into a hotel

## "EVEN PEOPLE WHO KNEW HIM COULDN'T RECOGNIZE HIM."

**THE REAL SCARFACE:** (From left) Fernando Francischini, the Brazilian Federal Police officer whose investigation into a shadowy Colombian in São Paulo ended in the capture of one of the world's most wanted men; an undated picture of Chupeta before surgery; the results of the procedures.

**ON A SUNDAY AFTERNOON IN MAY OR JUNE** 2004, a group of foreigners came ashore at Camocim—a small town in northern Brazil—from a sailboat. Agents of the Brazilian Federal Police (PF) watched as the party was met by known Colombian narco-traffickers. One of the arrivals—a short man with a powerful upper body—carried two bags. Fernando Francischini, who was in command of the operation, had no idea who the man was but, judging by the reception, knew that he must be a major criminal figure. Chupeta later told investigators the bags he'd brought ashore contained \$4 million. "We think it was a lot more," Francischini says—perhaps as much as \$16 million.

Chupeta began constructing a new criminal network in São Paulo. Like the Colombian operation, it was built on a cell structure. Each cell was run from a ranch or large house in a gated community in one of the three southernmost states of Brazil, bought by the members of Chupeta's new outfit. Each employee was paid a monthly salary to run a range of businesses that included import-export operations, a fish farm, and a car-bulletproofing shop. These investments represented the end of a complex money-laundering scheme routed through five countries. Via Renteria,

phone encryption."

Chupeta took extraordinary care to make sure nobody could eavesdrop on him or his employees. On the rare occasions he talked on the phone, he never discussed business. The members of the organization used their mobile phones only to call other members of their cell. To communicate with Colombia and beyond, Chupeta used encryption software to conceal information within images that could be e-mailed without risk of discovery; as his wife was a devotee of Hello Kitty, he favored pictures of the cartoon cat. Messages to and from Renteria in Cali were sent by couriers carrying envelopes containing encrypted flash-memory chips.

**ON DECEMBER 21, 2004, A DECADE'S WORTH** of work by Billy Ahern and the REDRUM unit came to fruition in a U.S. courtroom. A new indictment filed against Juan Carlos Ramírez-Abadía included charges for commissioning the murders of Vladimir Biegelman and Gladys Claudio.

In Morada dos Lagos, remaining incognito had become a full-time job for Chupeta. Although his wife was able to amuse herself by going shopping, the exiled narco-trafficker almost never showed his face outdoors in

using their real names and phone numbers. "That was the first mistake," Francischini says. By the end of 2005, Chupeta was under constant surveillance. "Every day," Francischini says. "Every time he moved."

In May 2005, Chupeta paid his first visit to the clinic run by Loriti Bruel, a cosmetic surgeon in São Paulo's wealthy Jardins neighborhood. Bruel performed four peels, lifts to both the nose and eyelids, a rhinoplasty designed to narrow the nose, and a liposculpture, a finely focused form of liposuction usually performed on the face and neck. Chupeta paid for everything in cash.

In October 2006, Francischini's men tracked the Colombians to a meeting in Curitiba. Closed-circuit television cameras in a shopping mall captured images of the mysterious figure from São Paulo. The police got a second picture of him at an airport check-in desk when he produced an Argentine photo ID and an employee made an excuse to take the document away and copy it.

But, for the time being, the PF kept the images to themselves. Based on the volume of cash they had seen, Francischini and his men were deeply concerned that someone in another branch of Brazilian law enforcement might tip off the criminals.

**IN DECEMBER 2006, THE \$5 MILLION BOUNTY** for information leading to the arrest of

**ENDGAME:** (Clockwise from top left) a police officer retrieving some of Chupeta's cash; a sale of his possessions in Brazil; the police operational chart.

Chupeta finally found a taker: Copernico, Chupeta's jailbird accountant. Copernico's laptop computer contained documents that laid bare the workings of Chupeta's Colombian operation: the monthly bribes to government agents and policemen, the chain of command from Renteria downward, and the precise location of many of the kingpin's *caletas*. Less than three weeks later, in January 2007, the Colombian police launched a series of raids,



seizing more than \$80 million worth of cash and gold ingots, much of it vacuum-packed in bricks of \$100 bills and buried beneath a concrete floor. Renteria himself had the misfortune to arrive at one of the houses in the middle of a raid. The DEA put him on an express track for extradition. While Renteria waited in prison for the paperwork to arrive from New York, he let slip that Chupeta was in Brazil with "the girl from the coast" (Jessica). It was the only secret he would reveal: Before he could leave Bogotá he collapsed and died in his cell, poisoned with cyanide.

**IN JUNE 2007, THE PF FINALLY SENT THE IMAGES** they'd gathered to agencies around the world. The DEA office in São Paulo forwarded them to agents in Bogotá and New York. They were circulated among informants and cooperating witnesses in the United States, but not one of them could pick Chupeta out: "It's after the plastic surgery," one law-enforcement source says, "so even peo-

ple that knew him well couldn't recognize him." The DEA eventually sent word that the man the PF in Curitiba were watching was probably Juan Carlos Ramírez-Abadía, one of the most wanted drug traffickers on earth. But the ID was not conclusive—and the agents were concerned that, if the man believed to be Chupeta was arrested, he could escape justice by simply denying that he was who they claimed he was. From New York, the DEA requested a voice sample.

At some point in June 2007, Chupeta had a telephone conversation that lasted no more than a minute. Whether his encryption software failed or wasn't used, Francischini doesn't know. But the exchange was conducted in the clear, and the PF managed to record it and send it to New York.

In July, Fernando Francischini presented his case to a federal court in São Paulo and



requested an arrest warrant in the name of Juan Carlos Ramírez-Abadía. The month before, Chupeta had returned to Loriti Bruel's clinic for a final cosmetic procedure. With it, his old face disappeared, replaced by the exaggerated shapes and distorted planes of an image in a fun-house mirror. Chupeta began making plans to leave Brazil; by early August, the PF heard that he had his furniture packed into trucks and had bought the toll tickets for the highway to Uruguay. Francischini decided to move his plans up by a week.

At four A.M. on August 7, he assembled a force of 400 men in the auditorium of FP headquarters in São Paulo. Two hours later, as dawn broke, he led 20 armed agents through the gates of Morada dos Lagos and up the hill to 71 Alameda Dourada. Francischini was the first up the stairs inside the house and picked the largest of five doors. With his partner, he kicked it down. In the darkness he found a light switch, then pulled back the comforter on the bed. Despite the years of surveillance,

the photographs, the wiretap recordings, and the word of a DEA informant, Francischini still wasn't certain he had the right man.

"What's your full name?" he asked.

Finally, reluctantly, the Colombian gave up the words Francischini had been waiting to hear: "Juan Carlos Ramírez-Abadía."

He said he was 44 years old. He said he had been in Brazil for three years. He sighed heavily.

Later, after finding him guilty of criminal conspiracy, money laundering, and falsification of documents, a Brazilian court would sentence the kingpin to 30 years and five months in prison.

**ON AUGUST 22, 2008, CHUPETA WAS TAKEN** from prison in Campo Grande in central Brazil and flown to the jungle city of Manaus. There he was met by agents from the DEA's São Paulo office for extradition to New York. He is currently being held in Brooklyn, and will face charges for drug trafficking, conspiracy, and ordering the murders of Vladimir Biegelman and Gladys Claudio.

Billy Ahern retired from the NYPD in 2002. Over lunch one day in late 2008, he explains why a billionaire narco-trafficker might bother reaching into the United States to allegedly order the execution of a Queens Realtor.

One night a few months before her death, Claudio and the chief of Chupeta's money-laundering cell in New York were arrested. The launderer was charged and Claudio released; when news reached Cali that the DEA had raided the *caletas* Claudio had rented—apartments where millions of dollars were stashed—maybe those making the decisions back in Colombia suspected she had talked. In fact, she had nothing to do with the raid: The DEA had been watching the money launderers for eight months. "She never ratted. She never said anything to anybody," Ahern says. The murder was the result of a paranoid miscalculation. In the end, Ahern realized, for all Chupeta's meticulous planning and advanced technology, his accountants and their spreadsheets, he was in handcuffs on a U.S.-government jet bound for New York because his organization was only as good as the people running it.

"It wasn't this Fortune 500 company," Ahern says. "It was a bunch of knuckleheads." ■

PHOTOGRAPHS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: EFE/CARLOS ORTEGA; EFE/SEBASTIAO MOREIRA; NELSON ALMEIDA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES.