

Dining In

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When Chocolate Is a Way of Life

By JILL SANTOPIETRO

ON an island in the Napo River in Ecuador's Amazonian rain forest, in a tin-roofed hut on stilts, live some of the world's most unusual chocolate entrepreneurs.

César and Magdalena Dahua grow cacao, along with pineapples, vanilla, avocados, cassava, coffee, oranges and plantains. As they hack off the football-shaped fruit of the cacao trees, their three youngest daughters run barefoot nearby. The girls stop to suck the sticky white pulp that envelops the cacao beans in the pods. It tastes like Sour Patch candies.

For Quechua people like the Dhua, cacao has always been a treat — the pulp a tart candy and the purple bean, when ground to a paste and mixed with hot water and a little sugar, a rustic hot chocolate.

But mostly, the beans were a commodity, sold for about 20 cents a pound to men who would bring them to the port of Guayaquil. From there they would be shipped around the world to be turned into mass-produced chocolate. Every once in a while the Quechua might even taste it.

But the Quechua grew tired of making such a meager living from so highly valued a product. With the help of volunteers they eliminated the middlemen and created their own chocolate. Now Kallari bars (pronounced kai-YAH-ri) — named for the cooperative they formed — are being sold

throughout the United States. People in the chocolate industry said they knew of no other cacao farmers who were making and marketing their own chocolate.

The cooperative uses an unusual blend of cacaos that grow on the Quechua land — fruity Cacao Amazónico, nutty Criollo, Forastero Amazónico, Tipo Trinitario and, most important, a rare variety that flourishes around their homes, Cacao Nacional.

"They have a certain smell and taste that is herbal, flowery but also savory, like black pepper," Tomas Keme, a Swiss chocolate expert who consults for Kallari, said of the Cacao Nacional beans. "It's the same taste I find in a Californian cabernet."

The chocolate is smooth, rich and straightforward. The 2.47-ounce bars, in 75 and 85 percent cacao, sell for as much as \$5.99 at Whole Foods.

To become chocolate makers the Quechua first had to decide to be more than just farmers. But they didn't have the knowledge or experience.

"We wanted change," said Carlos Pozo, Kallari's marketing director, "but we didn't have the capital or anyone who would trust us."

Then in 1997 they met Judy Logback, a lanky Kansan with wild blond hair who was volunteering for a foundation promoting biodiversity in Ecuador.

"I didn't show up with a plan," Ms. Logback said. "I asked them what they wanted." Mr. Pozo and others said they wanted to sell directly at markets and learn how to grow better, more desirable cacao. They wanted to find a way to survive and thrive as they faced pressure from companies that sought to log their hardwood trees, drill on their land for oil and mine for gold.

Ms. Logback first helped them take their beans over 250 miles to Guayaquil.

"We received threats that the intermediaries would rob or hijack our trucks," Mr. Pozo said. "In the first years, Kallari was so united that the intermediaries realized they could not break through this union."

They watched their profits from cacao more than double as they got 48 cents a pound in Guayaquil.

Four years later, they established Kallari, which in Quechua means both "to begin" and "the early times." The



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name seemed fitting, Mr. Pozo said: "In the present, we are valuing our past." With Ms. Logback's help, the cooperative now includes about 850 families.

"Judy really sacrificed a lot for us," said Elías Alvarado, Kallari's director of production and natural resources. "The people in the communities really love her for what she has done."

As their confidence grew, they decided to sell their cacao directly to big league chocolate makers. They e-mailed makers in North America, attracting the interest of Robert Steinberg, a founder of Scharffen Berger chocolate in Berkeley, Calif. But Dr. Steinberg said that before he could use the beans they needed to be properly fermented, a process that brings out fruit and floral flavors and reduces astringency.

Ms. Logback hired Dr. Jorge Ruiz, who had worked for a cacao cooperative on the coast, to teach the Quechua fermentation. Before his arrival, the Quechua had only fermented their beans inadvertently, when they piled them up before drying. Mr. Ruiz taught them to create fermentation boxes and to monitor temperatures.

In October 2004, Dr. Steinberg made a chocolate bar with Kallari beans and helped them present it at the Terra Madre conference of the Slow Food group in Turin, Italy. Later that year they met officials from the Swiss chocolate company Felchlin, who agreed to pay them 94 cents a pound for their beans.

Inspired by their success, Ms. Logback and Mr. Pozo told Kallari elders that they should start making chocolate.



PHOTOGRAPHS ABOVE AND CENTER LEFT BY JILL SANTOPETRO

"They all thought we were crazy," Mr. Pozo said. "We don't know anything about this market, what kind of people would buy it, how to make it."

Chocolate making has always been less common in cacao producing countries than it has been in Europe, where the technology to create chocolate bars was developed and where such a luxury could be more easily afforded.

With a formula from Dr. Steinberg, who died in September, and heavy bushels of cacao, they traveled 12 hours by bus to a shabby community-owned factory in the Andean hill town of Salinas de Guaranda. There they made the first Kallari bars.

"I was confused a bit by what I believed to be chocolate," said Mr. Alvarado, who had eaten only cheap commercial milk chocolate before he tried the Kallari bars. "Now I realize after all these years that I was eating something that wasn't really chocolate."

By tasting it, they could understand their role in the finished product. They improved their farming practices and bean fermentation. Over 500 families received organic status, which was not difficult since most never had the money for fertilizers or other chemicals.

It was difficult, though, to perfect their chocolate production at such a crude facility. In the spring of 2007, Stephen McDonnell, the founder and chief executive of the Applegate Farms organic food company, and his wife, Jill, met Kallari members through their daughter Nora, who visited the Napo region with her seventh-grade class.

With Kallari's permission and \$250,000, Mr. McDonnell established the Kallari Chocolate Company, which lists him as the owner for liability and insurance reasons. All of the profits, though, go back to the Kallari cooperative.

Mr. McDonnell hired Mr. Keme to teach the collective about bean quality and techniques of Swiss chocolate making. He also hired a larger, more efficient chocolate factory in Quito, the capital of Ecuador, to produce the bars based on standards set by Mr. Keme and Mr. Pozo. (The chocolate made in Salinas, less refined and slightly acidic, is sold in some health food stores as Kallari's Sacha Bar.) Mr. McDonnell asked the farmers to focus on their farming and to master the fermentation of their beans, which the company now buys from Kallari for as much as \$1.95 a pound, an astronomical price for the average cacao farmer cooperative.

(Paradoxically, Kallari does not have Fair Trade certification, since it would cost 10 cents per pound of beans and it seemed unfair for Kallari to pay a fee for its own beans.)

Mr. McDonnell has taken a chance, but he says he is not concerned.

"The Kallari people have pride in their farms," he said, "and are transferring that pride into their bar."

Plans for their own chocolate factory are in the works and Mr. McDonnell hopes that within three to five years a board of Kallari directors can assume most of his duties.

Kallari farmers also hope to diversify to continue living sustainably off their land. They are planting balsa trees, which grow rapidly, to sell to windmill makers and they want to promote agritourism.

"There was a dream that seemed impossible," Mr. Pozo said. "Now we believe there are so many possibilities open to us."

THEIR OWN TREAT

In Ecuador, the Quechua make chocolate from cacao they grow. Right, unripe pods. Top, cacao drying in the Napo Valley. Far right, carrying the rain forest harvest. Carlos Pozo, below, is Kallari's marketing director.



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