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The cacao hunters

After more than 50 years as a global leader in the cocaine trade, Colombian farmers are turning to a new drug of choice: cacao.

Words Lindy Davis

C hocolate in moderation is supposed to be good for you, but we rarely give much thought to its origin, let alone the farming practices that play a significant part in the final flavour. South America has traditionally been a minor player in cacao exports, but more recently Colombia has broken free of its long involvement in the narcotics trade to find a niche in the cacao industry.

Its association with violent conflict, drug cartels and human rights violations has kept this incredibly bio-diverse country largely in the dark. Colombia's initial drug boom began in the 1960s with the export of marijuana, and a decade later cocaine. Intensive planting of coca crops ensured Colombia's reputation as the second-largest producer of cocaine, behind Peru.

It is hoped that a recent agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) will see a significant decline in earnings related to illicit farming of coca and re-direct farmers to a less risky livelihood growing coffee and cacao.

Theobroma cacao, known as the cocoa or cacao tree, produces seeds we call cocoa or cacao beans. To add to the confusion, the processed powder known as cocoa involves high heat in its production, whereas the raw product cacao is used in chocolate production.

The new initiative is designed to rebuild the socio-economic position of village communities destroyed by the illegal drug industry. Almost half of Colombia's population is classified as poor and a quarter live well below the poverty line. Most of the farmers based in cacao producing regions are impoverished, and if it wasn't for increased global demand the cacao bean would almost certainly be lost. A new farming development programme will replace 60,000 hectares of illegal crops with cacao, in an effort to transform the small-time cacao farming trade into a viable economic activity.

Located at the northern tip of South America and framed by the mountainous Andes, Colombia's tropical climate is ideal for coffee and cacao plantations. Although considered small-time compared with

West Africa, (which comprises 70 per cent of global cacao production) Colombia has experienced increased growth and demand in the area of fine chocolate production (Fino de Aroma).

One company making a name for itself on the global market is Cacao de Colombia. Founded by Carlos Ignacio Velasco and later joined by Mayumi Osaka, the company's aim was to produce top quality craft chocolate from premium beans sourced from 'troubled' regions in Colombia. Its chocolate brand 'Cacao Hunters' reflects the search for various cacao bean species that are increasingly difficult to find. Directly sourced and locally grown, the cacao beans come from three main regions, Tumaco, Arauca and Sierra Nevada. The company engages with rural farming communities in an effort to improve social and economic wellbeing.

Velasco, a native Colombian, had previously worked 12 years for the Federación Nacional de Cafeteros (Colombian Coffee Growers Federation) and understood the hardship farmers faced in remote regions. After studying in France and working in a small boutique chocolate factory, he was inspired to establish a cacao business where the Colombian agricultural community could be actively involved and supported. After receiving significant equity from Acumen (an impact investment fund) and US Aid, he built a processing plant based in their Popayan facility. This created a positive impact on farmers, increasing employment and revitalising community spirit.

A training programme was set up for growers, providing classes on technical and sustainable practices, together with growing and harvesting high-quality cacao. The farmers were given price incentives well above market value for quality beans, giving them the confidence to keep planting cacao.

The company is engaged in ongoing research and development to source and grow new bean varieties. Unlike the bulk of cacao, which is sourced from any number of countries and factory processed multiple times for sale in Europe or the United States, the Cacao Hunters brand

is sourced, processed and packaged in Colombia.

Cacao Hunters Asia Pacific Distributor Chris McKiernan says the company's slogan 'Bean to Bar' highlights the close relationship with the farmers through the entire process, fostering mutual economic and social improvement.

"The beans are grown, harvested, processed and packaged in a closed-loop system. The farmers often have to travel several hours on foot carrying large sacks of their beans to sell at the markets," he says.

Osaka is engaged in creating new flavours to add to the Cacao Hunters portfolio. The aim is to highlight the tasting notes according to the specific origin. There are different formulations with varying percentages of cacao, with or without milk. Last year the company won gold and silver medals at the International Chocolate awards for the best micro batch dark chocolate, Sierra Nevada 64 per cent, and micro batch milk chocolate, Tumaco Leche 53 per cent. The company was invited to the 'Salon du Chocolat' awards in Tokyo and one of its farmers from Arauca was asked to attend. It was his first time on an aeroplane and he arrived at the event in traditional attire.

In five years Cacao Hunters has grown to produce between 5-10 tonnes of chocolate per annum, and aims to quadruple this in a market that is set to grow to \$115 billion by 2020.

The successful combination of a socially and environmentally responsible long-term strategy that engages communities fairly and equitably is, without doubt, a sweet story made to share. **g**



In 2016 the Cacao Hunters won gold and silver medals at the International Chocolate awards for its micro batch dark chocolate Sierra Nevada and milk chocolate Tumaco Leche. Above: A farmer holds some of the chocolate made from the cacao that he's grown and harvested.

Photography Cacao De Colombia