



PHOTOS BY RIAH KNAPP

# The chocolate choice

*A small Costa Rican chocolate producer pursues a vision of shared wealth in an industry rife with abuse*



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Thick humid air stuck to my body as the dense jungle canopy buzzed with sounds of rainforest creatures; the smell of exotic plants and mosquito repellent clung to the inside of my nose. A golden silk orb-weaver spider sat in his web in front of the object of our focus, a cluster of cacao pods hanging from the trunk of a tree. We were there to learn the secrets of a small Costa Rican chocolate producer, Caribbeans. Nestled in the coastal jungle of Puerto Viejo de Talamanca, this Caribbean cacao farm embodies a chocolate industry centered around justice and environmentally conscious production.

According to a study done by Tulane University, on child labor in West African cacao growing areas, 2.26 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 were working in the chocolate industry in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire in 2013-14. These staggering statistics unleash a turmoil of questions around corruption in the chocolate industry on the Ivory Coast and around the world. The cacao haven of Caribbeans is sadly not the norm when it comes to large scale cacao production and chocolate making.

As we ventured deeper into the jungle, cacao pods of different colors – purple, yellow, red – hung under a towering forest roof; Chocolate Master and Caribbeans owner Paul Johnson explained that the cacao forest is more of a rainforest ecosystem than a traditional farm, it's for this reason Caribbeans doesn't use any pesticides, fungicides or chemical fertilizers to alter tree growth. Creating quality ingredients "in harmony" with the natural environment is one value that sets Caribbeans apart from other cacao producers. The use of pesticides would protect the cacao from hungry animals, but it would inflict harm on the delicate forest ecosystems, devastating unique creatures like the red poison dart frog.

Paul and his wife Jeanne began Caribbeans with the vision of creating the first local coffee shop in Puerto Viejo. About 12 years ago, their friends Jeff and Sherry Ghiotto were looking for someone to take care of their 13-acre property. Paul and Jeanne took the job. The jungle property held roughly 2,000 cacao trees that had been abandoned due to the spread of a devastating fungal blight.

During their first years on the farm, Paul and Jeanne occasionally harvested the small amount of surviving cacao, and experimented with roasting it in their coffee roaster. Jeff commented that their first "bean to bar" experiment yielded a revolting chocolate bar, but in time they learned how to perfect the process.

They decided to revive the cacao forest by bringing in local indigenous experts; using natural farming methods they were able to begin the restoration process and today many of the trees yield healthy cacao. Paul and Jeanne continue to work alongside Jeff and Sherry to nurture the Caribbeans coffee shop and cacao.

We emerged at the top of the cacao forest revealing a panoramic view of the Caribbean ocean, where two indigenous workers sat on stools under a wooden shelter splitting open cacao pods with machetes. We gathered around a large pile of cacao carcasses while Paul walked us through the "bean to bar" process. Every week, workers collect ripe cacao pods and bring them up to the shelter, where they are split open; the fruit is separated into a bin and the pods discarded. The bean-containing fruit is transferred into a bag, box, or pile to undergo fermentation before drying in the heat of the sun. After the beans are dried they are roasted, split and winnowed, and refined with sugar. The beans are then tempered and poured into molds, and cooled to form solid bars. Later in an email interview Paul said "the bean to bar process has changed little over the last century."

Paul stated that Caribbeans provides two to five local workers with wages much higher than that of other Costa Rican farmers. Caribbeans grows organic cacao and sources the rest from 15 local families, offering to pay twice the market value. This supports neighboring farms and keeps money in the local economy, empowering farmers to produce higher quality cacao and participate in tasting the end products, which consist purely of organic cacao and organic cane sugar.

Paul took a sliced pod from a worker, grasping its innards in his hand he pulled out a series of white bean-containing fruits smaller than the size of a quarter. Handing each of us a piece we tentatively bit into the pulp, the fruit was sweet while the bean was bitter. He asked us if we knew the major difference between the two workers present, and workers on most cacao farms.

"Their age" he said. He explained that many cacao farms hire children 5 to 11 years old for cheap labor; on the Ivory Coast, children often leave home to work on cacao farms in order to send money to their families, with little knowledge of how to return.

My heart dropped at the gravity of the situation. Paul told us that at Caribbeans they only hire workers of appropriate ages, but this is not the norm when it comes to large scale cacao farming in many parts of the world.

"I think there will always be customers for products that are produced cheaply and ignore the injustices that are behind the products they buy. But those who are more awake to the conditions of cacao producing countries will begin to look for more information about the products they consume," Paul said. His personal mission is to "successfully model a new approach to the production chain," in order to create a wealth of inheritance for the next generation, and to

*Above left, the beans inside a cacao pod. Above, workers at Caribbeans process the cacao.*

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