

A STORY OF TRINITARIO

Member Profiles & Stories

Stories and Photography by Denise Speck
September 2023





THE ORIGINAL TRINITARIO COCOA EDUCATION FOUNDATION (OTC)

The OTC Not-for-Profit organization acts as catalyst for sustainable growth of the cocoa industry in the Caribbean, generating foreign exchange and offering diversified employment throughout the value chain. The OTC was created as a response to a market need and desire to incorporate more environmentally friendly and socially sustainable cocoa farming and processing operations.

Our group consists of award-winning cocoa farmers and chocolate makers that share the common goal of making the local cocoa and chocolate industry more equitable, internationally oriented, and economically viable.



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TAMANA MOUNTAIN CHOCOLATES

Organic Cocoa Farming with the Matthew's Family
in Talparo



FACT SHEET

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|---------------------------|--|
| Name: | Tamana Mountain Chocolates |
| Size: | 10 acres |
| Region: | Tamana / Talparo |
| Crops: | Cocoa and exotic fruits |
| Certification: | Organic certification in progress |
| Awards: | 2 |
| Flavour Profile: | Sweet brown fruit/rum cake smell with very low acetic acid |
| Whole bean colour: | Red/brown/white spots |

"THE TIME TO BE IN COCOA IS NOW"

"The time to be in cocoa is now" has been written by Anthony Bridgewater and Denise Speck and originates from a day at the family business Tamana Mountain Chocolates in Talparo. Martin and Jacqueline Matthew share about their lives as cocoa farmers and processors, their challenges and opportunities, and their hopes to revive a fair future for Trinitario Cocoa Farmers in Trinidad and Tobago.

In the face of enduring challenges experienced by farmers in the local industry, this is the bold opinion expressed by cocoa farmer and entrepreneur Martin Matthew of Tamana Mountain Chocolate. Martin and his family have been involved in the cocoa business since 2017 when they first purchased a mature estate comprising 10 acres, with 1,800 established cocoa trees that has since expanded to 2,800 trees. From a gathering space at the front of the family home, I listen closely to Martin's ambitious vision to increase the ranks of cocoa farmers while boosting individual estate production and material success.

I travelled with my colleague Denise Speck to Talparo to meet with the Matthew's and document a milestone; a roof frame installation for a new propagation station that is under construction guided by Übergreen team member Shawn Sajad, and propagation consultant, Junior Bhola. This prototype facility will provide a vocational training space to educate and train farmers and their employees in a novel propagation method that is accessible and accommodates large volumes of plants. As part of the OFCCC initiative, and with assistance from rum producer Angostura, this facility will provide plant material and training to farmers through workshops in propagation best practices, guiding participants up until planting on individual estates. In Martin's opinion, the facility that is being built should reflect a communal model to be replicated in other areas in Trinidad: thus, teaching people how to craft cocoa and eventually other fruit trees as well.

“Each one, teach one - It is not just about talking, it is action.”

Upon our arrival, we were greeted almost immediately by the warmth of Martin’s wife Jacqueline [Jacky], as she offered us samples of cocoa wine and chocolate ponche de crème - some of the company’s best sellers. Jacky informed us that a visitor’s \$50 contribution for a homestead tour is multiplied when they sample and purchase her chocolate bars, logs, butter, coffee and aforementioned local cocoa beverages. When asked, “Did you choose cocoa or did it choose you?”, Martin replied that cocoa chose them. The family entered the cocoa arena a few years shy of Martin’s retirement from working offshore in oil & gas. Jacky admitted that they knew very little when starting out but little-by-little, they grew their knowledge base through tutorials and workshops organized by the Cocoa Development Company (CDC). Furthermore, the family shared that the expertise provided by cocoa expert, Sarah Bharath, has helped to greatly enhance their cultivation and post-harvest practices. The propagation station is a critical step for Martin as he sees the need to attract young farmers to the industry. When asked about the average age of a typical cocoa farmer, he cheekily replied “old!” but really meaning 50+ years. The question then begged, “what is the lure for young people to choose agriculture, especially when faced with other less labor intensive and less risky options?”

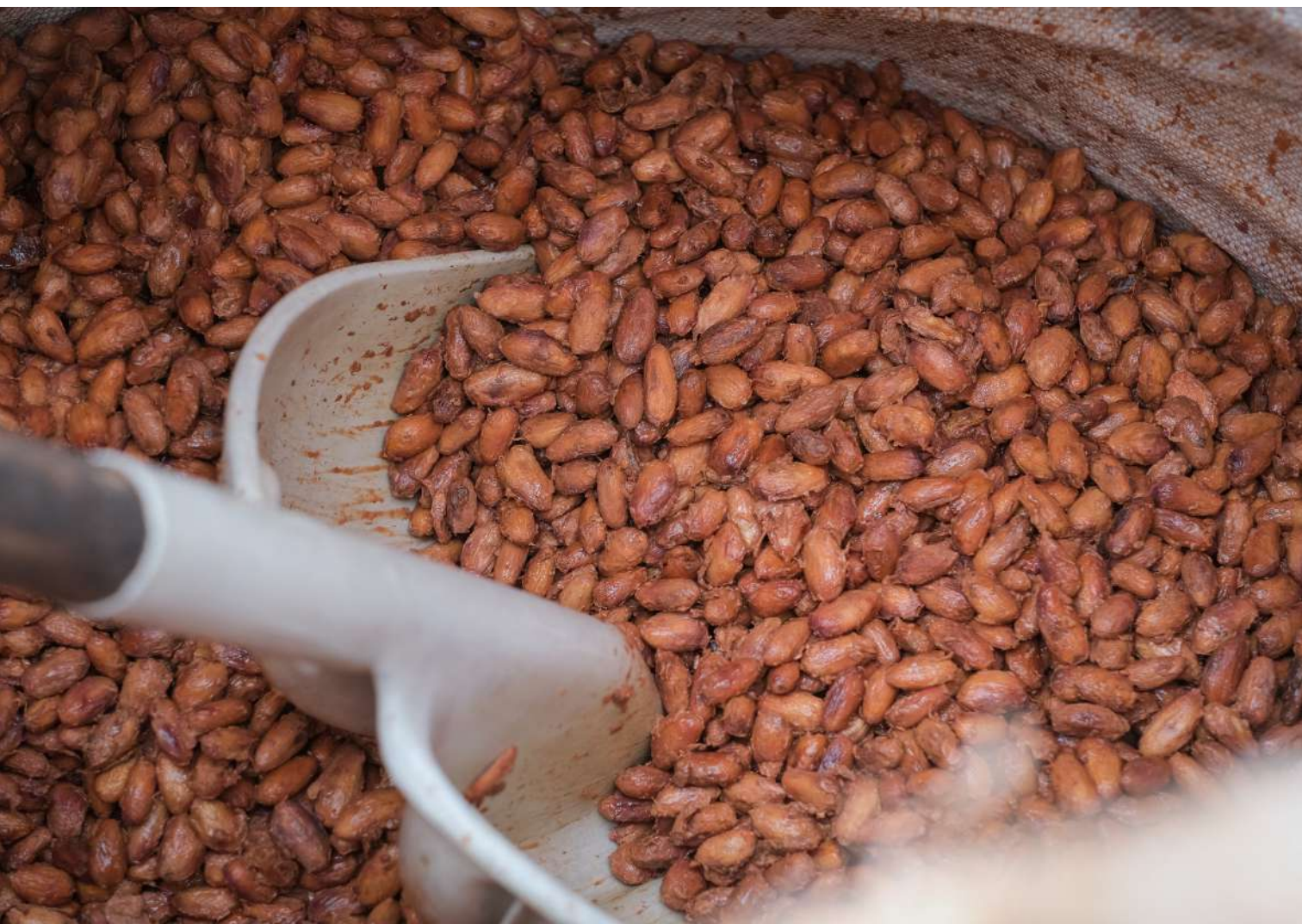
The answer might come from Oshun, the couple’s second eldest son. Recently turned 19, he had just returned from a morning driving lesson in Arima and disappeared behind the front door curtain only to reemerge and “plop down” on the couch next to us. Jacky indicated that he needs no prompting in caring for the beans in the drying shed just one house over, and is very meticulous during the fermentation and drying stages, avoiding any activities that might contribute to off-flavours developing in the beans. As a diligent post-harvest student, Oshun is learning important steps that can either make or break those cocoa farmers willing to attempt their own fermentation. Because fermenters take on major risk in purchasing wet beans from farmers to undergo a process that inevitably shrinks final yield, many are unwilling to pay prices that reflect what farmers truly deserve. The conversion rate from 100 kilograms of wet beans to dry, typically hovers around 30%, and this does not account for flat and/or improperly fermented beans. Even though, Oshun has devoted himself to cocoa and is helping with the construction of the new facility, he also enjoys other activities like video games and fishing. When I looked up from my notebook, his attention was taken by a new fishing rod received that same day as a token of appreciation. I wonder if he has contemplated this as also building his own future?

Another perspective comes from Megan, the couple's daughter and eldest child who works shifts at the airport that often require family trips on lonely roads at odd hours. Jackie stated that after seeking out a taste of professional work life, Megan has expressed a desire to get more involved in the family's expanding cocoa business and helps out when she finds the time. Jacky assured us that there is more than enough work to go around when Megan is ready to make the full transition. Unfortunately, she was not around during our visit. In addition to cocoa farming, the family has dreams of opening an eco-lodge at their property with an [existing] antiques museum and children's play area. The goal here is to create a family-friendly eco-retreat centered on the family's passion for cocoa where visitors can immerse themselves at once in all things cocoa, local history and cuisine.

At just 14 years, Zari is the youngest member of the family, and though barely seen on our visit made his presence known through his passion for cooking. Delicious smells travelled from the kitchen to alert us that a scrumptious meal is awaited for lunch. His mother informed us that he dreams of one day feeding the tour buses full of visitors who make the journey to the Matthew's homestead and future eco-lodge. Cooking for our group and the project workers serves as practice for Zari to hone his craft.

The vehicle for this grand vision is of course the cocoa, however, cocoa farming presents a constant battle against shifting weather patterns, seedling shortages, diseases and pests, not to mention, little support where it is needed the most. Support can come in the form of grant money for farmers to invest directly into their farms on trees, pruning and processing equipment or labour. It can also show up as guaranteed price minimums to ensure that farmers receive fair pay for their freshly harvested cocoa. Another big opportunity lies in the development of new markets for cocoa products. Fine flavour or craft chocolate is light years ahead of the stuff locals ate, while growing up. It is darker, contains less sugar and sometimes no milk or flavour additives. The result is a less familiar taste profile associated with a commonly known product that is chocolate. Although Trinidad has several established chocolatiers with dedicated customer bases, they still remain largely unknown to many consumers either, due to unfamiliarity with their products or considered out of reach due to the higher prices they command. Martin thinks this is changing though as consumers' taste preferences become more sophisticated and choices more intentional in what they consume. Dark chocolate is a well-documented source of antioxidants and labelled a superfood. A new local market is emerging but is it enough to sustain a burgeoning fine chocolate market locally?

One major goal is to win markets internationally as fine flavour chocolate is a global and, on the one hand, luxury industry with coveted awards for the both the best bars and beans in the world. The Matthews themselves have won two awards in the past for their beans: 2019 International Cocoa Awards and a joint award in the prestigious Cocoa of Excellence as part of Four Roads Tamana Cluster. Being judged as among the best in the world opens up a whole new raft of opportunity for farmers and their families, unlocking value that can be leveraged when forming new partnerships with both domestic and foreign chocolate makers, chefs, hotels, etc. The benefits also extend beyond the farmer and his estate casting a spotlight on the region. This is important for an island like Trinidad which boasts of having some of the best fine flavour cocoa beans in the world. Martin of course welcomes the accolades and associated benefits for his own family, not just as recognition for their hard work but as a testament to the homegrown quality from Trinidadian cocoa farmers. He dreams of having a large centralized facility where locals and visitors can come to appreciate cocoa being processed and taste different cocoa and chocolate from various producers around the island. Don't think Willy Wonka – Better! To realize this long-term vision, Martin's message to the world now is that this is the right time to be in cocoa: learn, invest, grow, support, enjoy.









THE TINAMOU ESTATE

Organic Cocoa Farming with Stephanie Omardeen
in Brasso Seco



FACT SHEET

Name: Tinamou Estate

Size: 15 acres

Region: Madamas / Brasso Seco

Crops: Cocoa and exotic fruits

Certification: Organic certification in progress

Awards: National Cocoa Award 2021
- 1st place

Flavour Profile: Sweet brown fruit smell with very
low acetic acid odour

**Whole bean
colour:** Red/brown/black spots

" I AM NOT A COCOA FARMER. I AM A SOIL FARMER "

"I am not a cocoa farmer. I am a soil farmer" originates from a day in the field with Dr. Stephanie Omardeen at the Tinamou Estate in Brasso Seco/Madamas. Together we travel up windy roads and spend a day on an impressive cocoa estate. As the day progresses, she shares valuable insights about who she is, how her love for farming developed, what she is doing at the Tinamou Estate, her challenges in managing the space, and her aspirations for the future.

Dr. Stephanie Omardeen is an energetic, healthy, vibrant personality with many diverse interests and a keen interest in learning and growing. She is an admirable personality with a very strong ethical foundation and a deep-rooted desire to create a thriving ecosystem and abundance for everyone involved in the system.

Stephanie was born and raised in Belize and has, in contrast to most farmers in Trinidad & Tobago a rather unusual background in cocoa. "My love for farming and agriculture is from Belize" and she has been a nature lover ever since. Already from a young age, she always found herself in close connection to nature – spending time close to trees and rivers, her holidays on a charming island off the coast of Belize, using homegrown products, joyfully sucking the fruity pulp of cocoa pods, or visiting local markets. In Mexico, she laughs, she stumbled across some chocolate-covered insects. Maybe a first sign towards her future cocoa destiny? Many years and experiences later, she acquired The Tinamou Estate in Madamas/Brasso Seco.

"Tinamou estate is a haven for my husband and I, and some friends who are willing to brave the road". Stephanie is a phenomenal chef as well, and that does not come by chance, since she is a self-proclaimed food lover; not of just any food, but the healthy and organic kind. "I don't eat processed foods. I just don't!". Stephanie is very aware of the importance of a balanced and healthy nutrition to prevent diseases – "I decided to live myself healthy".

As such, producing her own organic crops in a regenerative agricultural model has always been a dream of hers. She wants to take this knowledge and teach others how to live healthier too, because she rightfully indicates that, so many people do not know what healthy nutrition looks like.

The Tinamou Estate shall represent a place of feeling enlightened and self-sustainability. It covers a total of 15 acres, whereby five acres are currently under cultivation with a large variety of local and exotic fruit trees, such as cocoa, coffee, different varieties of citrus and bananas, ground provisions, spices, and other exotic fruits such as mamey, sweetsop, passion fruit, pois doux, breadfruit and much more – mirroring a Garden of Eden on Earth and what could be more satisfying to a fruit lover than munching fresh fruits directly from the tree. But her mission is not only to cultivate crops, but to do it in the most harmonious and organic way for all elements involved. Stephanie refers to it as collective system, or “collective consciousness”; a methodology that is reflected in the quality of Omarbeans Trinitario cocoa beans which were selected as the best cocoa beans in Trinidad & Tobago, resembling a balance between browned fruits and fresh fruit notes of the surrounding fruit trees, such as orange blossom, banana, and tropical red berries.

Stephanie’s tasks at the Tinamou Estate vary depending on the weather conditions and the seasons. Together with the support of her team, Stephanie identifies areas that need new plants, plants new trees, observes how rainfall drains from the land, organizes tools, clears land, harvests cocoa beans, coffee berries and bananas, climbs trees, and prunes cocoa trees and banana plants. When cocoa is in season, the work is intense as there are crops to pick, pods to crack, pulp to detract and beans to ferment and dry, on a weekly basis. “Never a dull moment, but always a moment to enjoy the beauty of nature and the tranquility of the estate”. In addition to afore-mentioned and maintaining the five acres under production, Stephanie, along with Javed, pioneer a movement that is increasingly gaining momentum – “from bean to bar” – and process their organically grown Trinitario cocoa into cocoa nibs and exquisite chocolate products under the brand Omarbeans Organic.

Stephanie loves the connection to nature, and appreciates the opportunities it gives her to learn and evolve, because the dynamic nature of owning an estate in a tropical zone is ever changing. Most challenges she experiences are related to a scarcity of workers to assist her in the estate’s maintenance.

For example, she needs skilled workers to prune overgrown cocoa trees, because “you must see cocoa pods to harvest them”. Pruning is different in every region and there are not many skilled workers available in Brasso Seco who are trained to understand the context-specifics of the area. Since Brasso Seco is considered rather moist with year-round rainfall, one must find the right balance between pruning. “I cannot only prune when I am supposed to prune, I can only do it when I get the help”.

Pruning is not the only expertise required, since Stephanie also is interested in more regenerative methods to regenerate her land. She shares with me that proper soil management requires one to take a step back from aggressive methods that kill the plants' roots, “I don't want that”. Cleaning too aggressively kills roots, so the ground becomes very muddy during the rainy season and very dry during the dry season. In other words, “[The soil] is dead. It doesn't have any more microorganisms”. Thus, her permaculture orientation is centred around regenerating the soil, or as she says “I am not a cocoa farmer, I am a soil farmer”. Thereby, Stephanie holistically combines her environmental and medical knowledge – the healthier the soil, the easier it fights diseases.

So, what Stephanie envisions at the Tinamou Estate is a place for healthy nutrition, community and collaboration, teaching about regenerative farming practices and healthy nutrition, finding peace and calmness and being away from the busy demands and stress, and living in harmony with nature.







THE LITTLE HERMIT ESTATE

Organic Cocoa Farming with Javed Omardeen
in Brasso Seco



FACT SHEET

Name: The Little Hermit Estate

Size: 20 acres

Region: Brasso Seco

Crops: Cocoa and exotic fruits

Certification: Organic certification in progress

Awards: National Cocoa Award 2021
- 1st place

Flavour Profile: Sweet brown fruit smell with very
low acetic acid odour

**Whole bean
colour:** Red/brown/black spots

"THERE ARE SOLUTIONS JUST BY DOING SIMPLE THINGS"

"There are solutions just by doing simple things" is an excerpt from a conversation with the cocoa farmer and environmentalist Javed Omardeen. Javed is a Trinidadian from Port of Spain who lives in a self-built wooden cabin on a remote piece of land in Brasso Seco; A part of his journey to finding stillness and nourishing deeper connections within himself and within his ecosystem. A truly remarkable journey.

Once arrived in Brasso Seco Village, a rocky dirt road leads up a hillside to the estate. A road winds through a beautiful lush landscape with all sorts of flowers, vines, shrubs, and trees along the path. An eyesight dream that is visited by a variety of pollinators in search of the sweetest floral nectars including butterflies that majestically display their brightly-coloured wings while playfully fluttering among the plants. If you are lucky, you may even witness a snake enjoying the sun rays nearby the path - a true sanctuary. After a short ride, an inconspicuous rustic wooden cabin emerges from the roadside - Javed's home - offering a spectacular view over Brasso Seco Valley and "The Little Hermit Estate".

Javed and his siblings hiked around the islands from a very young age, with their parents, Stephanie and Verose, who nourished their children's hunger to learn about and experience nature. Unsurprisingly, Javed grew a deep connection to the environment and began organic farming ten years ago. "My parents invested in a piece of land in Brasso Seco and I decided to start farming with them... [We] were starting on a small-scale planting citrus, trying to rehabilitate the estate, and we worked on a small area. Learned a lot in the process about how to cultivate crops, bananas, cacao, coffee...".

Besides spending time amidst trees, he is a passionate beekeeper, explorer, avid researcher, and exceptional chocolate maker. How did he get into chocolate making? "We tried to develop something that could add value to the products that we have. Therefore, we started to make chocolate from early on, and developed a small business around chocolate making".

The family business is called Omarbeans Organic Chocolates, a creative wordplay deriving from the family's surname Omardeen, producing "tree-to-bar" chocolate products with cocoa that is sourced from the family's estates and processed at their own facilities.

The Little Hermit Estate comprises 20 acres located in a beautifully lush and tropical landscape on a challenging slope in Brasso Seco. The family bought the estate as a means to realize their dreams of growing their produce in a regenerative agricultural way that would secure and nourish food security. What was an abandoned estate back then, has been transformed into a syntropic Garden of Eden.

A quick glance around reveals that The Little Hermit Estate does not resemble the patterns of a conventional farming landscape. There are no perfectly lined crops arranged in a monocultural approach, instead, everything appears very natural, mimicking forest systems. While following Javed's quick steps down the estate's challenging slope, we pass an array of treasures: wild orchids hanging off tree branches, beautiful, healthy cocoa trees bearing bright, ripe cocoa pods ranging from shades of brown, dark red, and orange to bright yellow, coffee trees bearing bright red cherries, flowering roucou trees, bananas and plantains, black zapote, cryptophene vines, and so much more. Having reached all the way down to the valley, Javed guides me to a beautiful pristine river that flows through the estate. The freshwater river is home to a few crabs that seem to enjoy the cool rocks and fresh spring water. There is a nice cool breeze, the sounds of flowing water, and wind through the leaves of the upper canopy trees.

Javed shares with me his experience in putting theories that the community's elders have passed on, into practice. "When you actually get into [regenerative farming] you realize that with every crop there is a predator so to speak, depending on your perspective, a problem to be resolved, and there are solutions just by doing simple methods". One such lesson, is combatting issues such as black pod or witches' broom, which has an increased incidence when the trees are stifled and experience insufficient airflow. This causes a build-up of humidity, which in turn facilitates the growth of the fungus that causes the disease. Therefore by simply cleaning the estate and keeping it well-irrigated, a farmer can reduce the incidence of black pod cocoa. This is just one of the many lessons Javed has learned in his journey to organic farming.

Much of his understanding as it pertains to organic farming has been passed on from community members. "I would [...] learn from older people in the community, learn the traditional ways of cultivating crops.

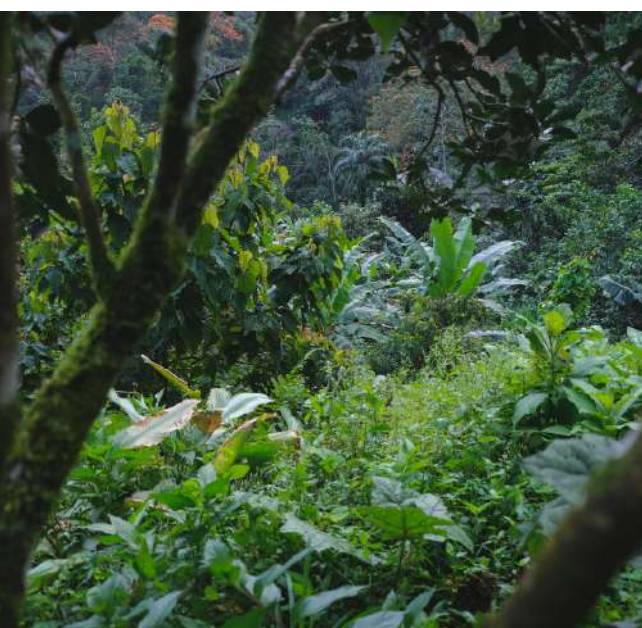
Javed believes in agroforestry systems with very little to no inputs, such as cacao mixed with coffee, oranges, bananas, and different levels of canopies, are the way in which people have been cultivating crops for many years.

Javed shares beautiful insights about collective and individual strengths, and the ways forward. "An individual could only do so much." Although change must happen at the individual level, it is necessary to share knowledge and competencies with the broader community to generate a larger momentum, and ultimately impact the entire industry. The OFCCC is a community-driven cluster that combines both individual and collective levels, and according to Javed, it had a tremendous impact on his agricultural career. Experts in the field such as Sarah Bharath and Junior Bhola shared best practices on pruning and crafting, and individual members had the possibility to host different workshops based on their strengths.

One takeaway from my conversation with Javed seems obvious; organic farming means to re-think methodologies, using land as a means to cultivate quantity at the cheapest price. What does this imply for the role of the farmer? "I think it is about the intention of cultivating a harmonious relationship, appreciating everything, and trying to relate to everything from a place of love because there are also challenges with the environment [...] facilitating everyone, even the ones that might be a little bit unpleasant to come in contact with. Just keeping respect for them, knowing that each has its place".

For the future of The Little Hermit Estate and Omarbeans Organic Chocolates, Javed's objective is to increase scale "by pruning more, having trees lower so it is easier to harvest and rehabilitating more of the estate". This goal is sure to enhance a harmonious abundance for every organism inhabiting this place.







SAN ANTONIO ESTATE

Organic Cocoa Estate in Gran Couva



FACT SHEET

Name: San Antonio Estate

Size: 125 acres - 100 acres cultivated

Region: Gran Couva

Crops: Cocoa and bananas

Certification: Organic certification

Awards: National Cocoa Awards

Flavour Profile: Bright fresh fruit, browned fruit notes, mild floral herbal note, and woody notes.

Whole bean colour: Dark brown

“ WE HAVE BEEN HERE FOR SO LONG ”

I visited Richard De Verteuil at the San Antonio Estate in Gran Couva where he shares insightful thoughts about cocoa cultivation in Trinidad & Tobago. “We have been here for so long” is an excerpt from a conversation with Richard, where he shares his family’s narratives, his background in farming, the challenges in the sector and his aspirations that shape potential pathways of sustainable development in the area.

It is another sunny morning in Trinidad & Tobago. Today’s journey leads me to Richard De Verteuil in Gran Couva – cocoa farmer, cocoa supplier to OFCCC member – to learn more about his very unique narrative in the field. I follow winding roads through lush, green sceneries, where, almost invisible if one does not know what to look for, a sign depicting “San Antonio Estate” on the eastern side of the road reveals a compound nestled between the coconut and mango trees. Upon reaching the parking lot, I notice the large cocoa drying facilities all around the place, three traditional wooden workers’ houses or “barracks”, a well-maintained light green house to the left, which serves as Richard’s home and office space, and a shed with a thatched roof that beautifully merges into the natural landscape. Richard already awaits me and casually strolls around the house, followed by a tiny, hazelnut-coloured puppy companion. We sit down under his thatched-roofed shed to seek some shade from the increasingly rising midday sun. The space is very tranquil without much noise or distraction in the background, excerpt for the occasional crowing of the estate’s rooster and a very refreshing breeze blowing through the shed, making the leaves rustle almost like the ocean’s waves. It is so peaceful – the silence – almost a little melancholically peaceful.

Richard takes a deep breath and shares: “My name is Richard De Verteuil born in Trinidad, parents born in Trinidad, grandparents born in Trinidad”. Richard was born in 1949 in San Fernando where he resides on the weekends with his family while he spends the weekdays on his estate – San Antonio Estate – in Gran Couva, a region that is known around the world for its cocoa cultivation. He has been directly involved in the cocoa business at San Antonio Estate for the past 25 years; before this, he worked in the oil field for more than two decades.

The estate has 125 acres of land, of which approximately 100 acres are used for the cultivation of cocoa and some by-crops, such as plantains and bananas. San Antonio Estate has been certified organic since 2019.

Richard proudly shares that “the family has been in cocoa for a very long time”. Both his grandfather and grandmother used to live in the neighboring San Juan Estate where his dad grew up and also went on to manage the estate. In the 1970's, his father purchased the San Antonio Estate in Gran Couva and when old age set in, Richard gradually took over his management.

Richard’s interest in farming developed at a very young age when he came up to the San Juan Estate to visit his grandparents and get a glimpse into the environment of cocoa estates. Spending his days at San Juan Estate, playing, and exploring the surroundings gave him the possibility to get closely in touch with nature and cocoa, to ultimately develop a passion for farming which drove him to continue the family’s legacy. Although farming entails a lot of hard physical labour, the closeness to nature and healthy environment it provides are aspects that Richard particularly appreciates. “I think I am blessed with what I have”, he smiles at me. Not only did the regular visits to his grandparents nurture his love for farming, but they also provided the space for personal narratives to emerge and be shared across generations and time – a form of cultural wisdom that is priceless. These dynamics certainly played an important role in shaping his sense of self-identity as a cocoa farmer and being a driver to continue pursuing the family’s legacy.

I am curious about how the cocoa landscape was back then, and ask Richard whether he wants to share some of these narratives with me: “Remember in those days, there were not many automobiles. [My grandfather] used to tell us stories that they used to get around on horseback and trains, which we no longer have on the islands. We used to get stories that all the large cocoa estates in the area used to have 100-200 workers” and the workers lived together with their families in wooden housing structures known as “barracks” around the compound, offering much more possibilities for human interactions, Richard emphasizes. Presently, only a fraction of these estates survive, with workforces no larger than twenty. Indeed, one may imagine how much livelier these spaces were in contrast to the present relatively silent estate, broken mostly by the call of forest birds and the compound’s chicken. But not only was there “plenty, plenty more workers”, but also “plenty, plenty more cocoa”. His father told stories, that with the surge of the industrial sector in the 1960s and 1970s, truck drivers came up the country areas and picked up labourers to take them to the Industrial Plants;

a development that made it increasingly difficult for estate owners to find quality workers. Richard, however, never doubted for a single moment the continuation of the San Antonio Estate – “We have been here for so long”. But Richard emphasizes a generic issue within the cocoa industry. “Gradually, as the older heads passed on, the younger generation just was not interested in agriculture anymore, because things change and modernize”; A topic that has certainly been going around his mind for quite some time. Despite De Verteuil’s involvement in the cocoa industry for at least three generations, Richard himself faces similar circumstances. He is the father of three children whom all chose paths that never got too close to the estate or agriculture but Richard remains happy with being a cocoa farmer and keeps his spirit up. “I try to not make it a problem. I enjoy it and that is what I have chosen. Life goes on and everybody has what they choose”.

The San Antonio Estate is a rather large estate in the region with 125 acres of land and has been blessed in many regards; not only that Trinidad is considered a fine flavour chocolate destination, thanks to the “planting material, the soil, temperature, and rain falls”, but San Antonio’s cocoa beans have reached as far as Hong Kong and the United States and won a Silver Award at the Academy of Chocolates Award in 2020. In addition, San Antonio Estate has been officially certified organic since 2019. Richard shares that “the organic certification is something that I always wanted to do”. Since Richard’s practices have not involved any chemical fertilizer for the past 15 years, the process was rather simple. He explains that he got involved with Übergreen Organics who supported the process of facilitating the certification. Subsequently, the demand for his organic cocoa has risen tremendously, and his success has sparked an interest in many farmers to pursue organic certifications themselves. “It is something very reliable to be respected for”. Since then, Richard relies on permaculture practices to nurture the soil. “I just depend on nature, where the leaves and branches fall, forming nice mulch for the trees. Once you do your good required maintenance on the estate, just let nature take its course”.

Not only does the organic certification yield a positive impact on the cocoa estate, but also Richard’s aspirations for the future – “I have big ideas about here!”. He plans to diversify the estate, and plant many different by-crops like exotic fruits to not only increase soil health but also minimize business risks by relying on multiple crops to supplement annual variations of cocoa harvests. Additionally, Richard dreams of further developing the eco-tourism aspect of the estate. Instead of only offering small tours around the estate, he dreams to establish an eco-tourism site with little accommodations that enable people to stay a few days and enjoy the countryside to “enlighten people about the cocoa industry”

It is evident that, original Trinitario cocoa cultivation in conjunction with eco-tourism appears to have an increasing potential around the region.

The conversation with Richard De Verteuil grants a very humble and informative insight into past and present developments in the cocoa sector. A perspective that certainly alerts one about the future - if cocoa agriculture is not revived, or in other words, does not gain more relevance in the local economy and society's minds to proudly continue the legacy of Trinbagonians' ancestors in sharing the very unique essence of fine flavour Trinitario cocoa with the world, it will fade out of existence. Cocoa farming in Trinidad & Tobago is at a very interesting point in time with a magnitude of opportunities to generate sustainable development in the region - not only by nurturing the soil in a way that cultivates organic, fine flavour products, but also by developing opportunities which add value, like diversification, organic certifications and eco-tourism.



San Antonio
ESTATE





LAWRENCE JAMES ESTATE

Organic, Small-Scale Cocoa Farming in Brasso Seco



FACT SHEET

Name: Lawrence James Estate

Size: 10 acres

Region: Madamas / Brasso Seco

Crops: Cocoa and exotic fruits

Flavour Profile: Muted aromas with dominant cocoa bean smell

Whole bean colour: Mottled red/brown/white spots

"TODAY I AM ABLE TO DO MY OWN COCOA"

Cocoa farmers in Trinidad & Tobago are increasingly learning about the advantages of processing their cocoa beans into finished products. In the article "today I am able to do my own cocoa", Lawrence James shares his experiences as a cocoa farmer in Trinidad & Tobago, and how associations, training, and a vision, improved his cocoa business.

Lawrence James is the proud owner of the James Estate on Madamas Road in Brasso Seco, Paria. Together with his mother, Josephine, he lives between the lush, tropical mountainsides approximately 30 minutes drive outside of Brasso Seco Village. To the right, there is a hillside overgrown with green vegetation and to the left, a spectacular view down the Madamas Valley - a hiker's paradise with many trails and waterfalls. The path to Lawrence's home is steep and challenging for vehicles, especially during rainy season, but once the hurdle has been conquered you are rewarded with a beautiful agroforestry estate and two very happy and welcoming people, Lawrence and his mother Josephine.

Lawrence grew up together with his parents and two older siblings on the family's estate. After his father passed away, Lawrence knew that he would dedicate his life to farming and the continuity of the James Estate. Today, Lawrence and his mother live in their humble home and cultivate a variety of crops which they process into finished products, such as cocoa tea and roucou sauce. But, needless to say, being a cocoa farmer doesn't come without hurdles, and "one of the main challenges is of course little funds... but by doing little business with cocoa, coffee, and roucou, it will generate back a fund that I have money to do what I do, invest it back into the business".

Awareness and improvement of his circumstances are what Lawrence acquired through training. What truly inspires him and empowers his skills as a farmer are networking, sustainability training, and a vision for the future of his estate.

Lawrence loves to connect with like-minded souls and learn new things about sustainable agriculture. Throughout the conversation, he highlights the importance of industry associations for the present and future of Trinitario cocoa. "I was doing it on my own but I wasn't reaching very far, because I really struggled." This is the reality for many farmers that work hard yet struggle to make a living off their estate. Oftentimes they lack networks that help to foster resources and capabilities, stimulate innovative ideas and support the progress of development. Today, Lawrence is part of two associations, the North Ridge Cooperative which represents a regional farmer's group, and the OFCCC. Particularly, the training provided through the OTC was a very important step for Lawrence to improve his circumstances. For instance, a consultancy provided by Sarah Bharath for the OTC cluster taught farmers like Lawrence to ferment and dry cocoa beans and maintain cocoa trees to achieve a higher and healthier yield. "Now I am able to do my own cocoa", Lawrence shares with a proud tone and shiny eyes. But it doesn't end here!

For him, collective actions are the only way forward into the future, as they will create awareness to learn about cocoa farming in society to encourage farmers and younger generations to get involved in the business, and ultimately produce a higher yield of cocoa beans that is competitive to other cocoa producing regions. To do so, several programs are being explored. Associations will be necessary to (1) encourage younger generations about the chocolate-making process, "the finished product", as Lawrence calls it to, (2) support farmers to join a community, (3) enable farmers to plant more trees and exchange grafted cuttings, (4) access grants that provide opportunities for young people to receive a piece of land and cultivate cocoa.

Both on the individual and collective level, the OTC and its associated training through Sarah Bharath formed an impactful indentation in farmers' knowledge about sustainable land use. "I learn a lot where you could intercrop within the cocoa space". Through intercropping, farmers like Lawrence provide a healthier environment for cocoa trees and are able to reduce income risks. Lawrence intercrops his estate with a variety of plants, such as bananas, citrus, roucou, coffee, papaya, mamey, coconut, pois doux, chataigne, carambola, mango, breadfruit, peewah, and ground provisions. When asked about what crop surprised him most, he says "You know which one is very helpful, the roucou. Because hear what roucou does: it comes up big, it provides shade, keeps the grass low, and you could use it as fertilizer... it works well, and you could make sauce too!". Of course, Lawrence is an expert in the making finest Roucou sauce. but he also knows that the only sustainable way forward requires farmers to protect their trees, because "the trees are very important for the environment"

What truly strikes me most about Lawrence however, is his passion, his optimism, and his vision for the future of James Estate – Eco-tourism. “That is one of my dreams, to make people happy”, he shares. His goal is to build two cabins on his site, one made out of wood and the other made of mud. “So, when visitors come, they have a place to sleep, to eat, and to have a nice bath in spring water by moonlight”. One may imagine how unique the experience is to visit Lawrence and his mother, to be welcomed with their friendliness and openness, to receive a tour of the cocoa estate, to taste fresh fruits from the land and home-made foods thanks to Lawrence’s fantastic cooking skills, and to spend the night in a cabin in the middle of nature, listening to the sounds of the bush and enjoying baths in waterfalls while gazing at the stars and moon – truly, a very special experience.

Lawrence is a creator, and with the right support and knowledge shared, he is able to create a lot from little. He maintains a wonderful agroforestry estate, produces his popular cocoa tea and roucou sauce, prepares local meals for visitors, and sells his products every Sunday on the North Ride market at “The Clouds” at Las Lapas Lookout. He dreams of moving mountains through industry associations that tackle relevant issues, such as sustainable agriculture, youth involvement, and labour shortage. The training through the OTC helped him to make better use of resources and process his produce into finished products. This helps to generate income that he wants to reinvest in the estate and use to create an enjoyable eco-tourism experience for guests.” And together in a collective with other farmers and processors, such as OTC, practices, and policies are being put in place to support farmers building a more sustainable livelihood. “I think we are getting there; it’s going to happen!”.

He shares the following, “I would really like to see the cocoa reach a certain level where we could travel and see different places, meet other cocoa farmers abroad, you know, share ideas, that is what I would like to see in the cocoa space”. In a collective with other farmers and processors, such as the OTCCC, this is gradually becoming a reality since practices and policies are being implemented to support farmers, which subsequently, forms a more sustainable livelihood.







ORTINOLA GREAT HOUSE & ESTATE

Eco-Tourism To Experience The Past, Present and Future
of Trinitario Cocoa



FACT SHEET

Name: Ortinola Great House & Estate

Size: 365 acres

Region: Maracas Valley

Crops: Cocoa and bananas, citrus & timber

Awards: National Heritage Landscape
Award (Silver ADDY Award)

Flavour Profile: Balanced, natural blend of Trinitario
cocoa flavour notes. Good basal
chocolate flavour with mild fruity
and floral notes.

**Whole bean
colour:** Red/brown/some white spots

"ORTINOLA IS ONE OF A KIND."

This piece – “Ortinola is one of a kind” – originates from a conversation with Nikita Nath, owner of Ortinola Great House and Estate, a family-owned business nestled in Trinidad’s lush Northern Range. It offers the perfect space to host events, provide tours and cultivate Trinitario cocoa beans that are crafted to the finest chocolate bars. In this conversation, Nikita provides a glimpse into the versatile nature of the family business and its efforts to revive the regional cocoa industry.

The ambiance of Ortinola Great House and Estate is picturesque. Imagine an old, wooden estate house nestled in a lush, tropical scenery. Ortinola Great House is situated in Maracas Valley, St. Joseph, at the base of Trinidad’s second-highest mountain, El Tucuche. This region that is home to crystal-clear waterfalls and trekking paths through gorgeous rainforests, along the pristine Ortinola river. “It is pristine. There is nothing between here and Maracas Beach but the Northern Range”. Ortinola Great House and Estate is owned by the Nath family who is passionate about tourism and the revitalization of the cocoa industry. You don’t even have to close your eyes to let the imagination flow freely, to imagine the buzzing cocoa life, labourers and their families all around the Great House, horses galloping up and down the estate, guests spending time at one of the many events and parties – a true hub of activities. “Ortinola is one of a kind” and a place full of history. Formerly representing an old Cadbury Estate, the place has seen a lot, from the golden times of cocoa production to the crippling of the industry after the great depression. Consequently, the place went through the hands of multiple owners and got more and more dilapidated, until two destinies aligned.

“Around 20 years ago my parents were looking for about five acres of land to get a pony for me. But instead of five acres, they took a wrong turn and found 365 acres by accident”. Back then, Ortinola was one of the numerous abandoned cocoa estates on the island, and the family realized quickly that they had to create a sustainable business model because maintaining the property was very resource intensive.

"We decided to take this really old building and turn it into a place for events". The restoration of the Great House took approximately 2.5 years, "each board was taken down, sanded and put back up". But the business plan did not end with the restoration of the Great House, instead, it opened a gateway to reconnect its history with the present and future of the space.

The restoration revealed a lot about the history of Ortinola, and Nikita and her family knew that cocoa restoration would be a part of the plan to revive the estate. Cocoa was a good business step for the family, "but more importantly it was something we always wanted to do, to have a sense of pride, to know that we restored this house, and we've gone back to cocoa." Reviving Ortinola's golden era, meant reconnecting with passions. "I was a big chocoholic. I would sit under the kitchen table and eat tins of cocoa powder. My dad and I had always loved dark chocolate." A beautiful coincidence that seemed like an alignment of destinies, a historically very special cocoa estate being revived by a serious chocolate-lover.

When asking Nikita about her experience in the cocoa business, she laughs "it has definitely been a learning experience... we were first-time cocoa farmers". Nikita proudly shares that Ortinola is home to old, heirloom varieties of Trinitario cocoa. But having gone through the hands of many, the restoration of cocoa was not going to be an easy task. Although the family had planted a few citrus and timber trees here and there, nobody was experienced in plant science. "We took on 5,000 trees in a year... it was a lot...I would not recommend it to anyone. Plant a couple of hundred trees a year, but to plant 5,000 in one go is madness... It was really one of the toughest times". Eventually, the cocoa trees matured and the family began to see the cocoa estate coming alive and paying for itself "because it is our bread and butter", she shares.

Today, Ortinola proudly calls itself a heritage building and a family-run business far away from the hectic city life. It offers a truly magical location for events such as conferences and weddings, tours to educate people about the history, present, and future of Trinitario Cocoa, and sells products such as cocoa beans, honey, and homemade Greek almond cookies, and their own "tree-to-bar" Trinitario chocolate bars.

"We are both the farmer and the chocolate maker". Following a rather novel approach of 'bean-to-bar', Ortinola can capture more economic and social value regionally. After harvesting beans, cracking cocoa pods, and carefully fermenting and drying the beans at the estate's

facilities, Ortinola sends a small batch of cocoa beans to Japan and processes the cocoa beans into cocoa nibs, cocoa powder, cocoa liquor, and crafts artisanal chocolate bars. Nikita is the driving force behind the chocolate making. She studied genetics and biotechnology in Edinburgh and was always fascinated by the scientific side of cocoa varieties and chocolate-making. When Nikita returned from Scotland, she saw an opportunity to combine her love for science and cocoa and studied the science of chocolate making. Many courses and classes later, she set up her little chocolate kitchen and crafts exquisite 'bean-to-bar' dark chocolate products which she sells in multiple retail stores all around Trinidad and Tobago. "It worked out as my destiny", she tells with glowing eyes. Ortinola offers a variety of chocolate bars - 100% chocolate, 60% chocolate, 70% with sea salt, and 80% with coffee, both in large and small sizes. These are not only crafted with love but also wrapped in a packaging that is almost too beautiful to throw away. "We are really proud of the packaging". Rightfully, because the watercolour drawing was not only curated by a local artist but designed and printed locally, winning a silver award.

A fairy tale story, isn't it? But even the most sparkling stories deal with some villains. What challenges does Ortinola face with its cocoa cultivation? Both price-wise and quality-wise, handcrafted Trinitario chocolate bars cannot be compared to conventional chocolate bars that are made of bulk cocoa. The efforts and high cost behind crafting artisanal, low-volume 'bean-to-bar' products are one of the main factors influencing the cocoa industry. "The reason for the high price is our fine flavour, but also, that you know where your chocolate is coming from and that somebody has been paid a fair wage, because cocoa is extremely labour intensive", and there is no machine that can do this work. On the other hand, Nikita shares that it is extremely difficult to find qualified labourers who are trained to work with cocoa, because of increasing costs of labour which in turn further augment Trinitario cocoa's prices. Consequently, the small volumes and high costs are the main barriers for Trinidad & Tobago to access international markets.

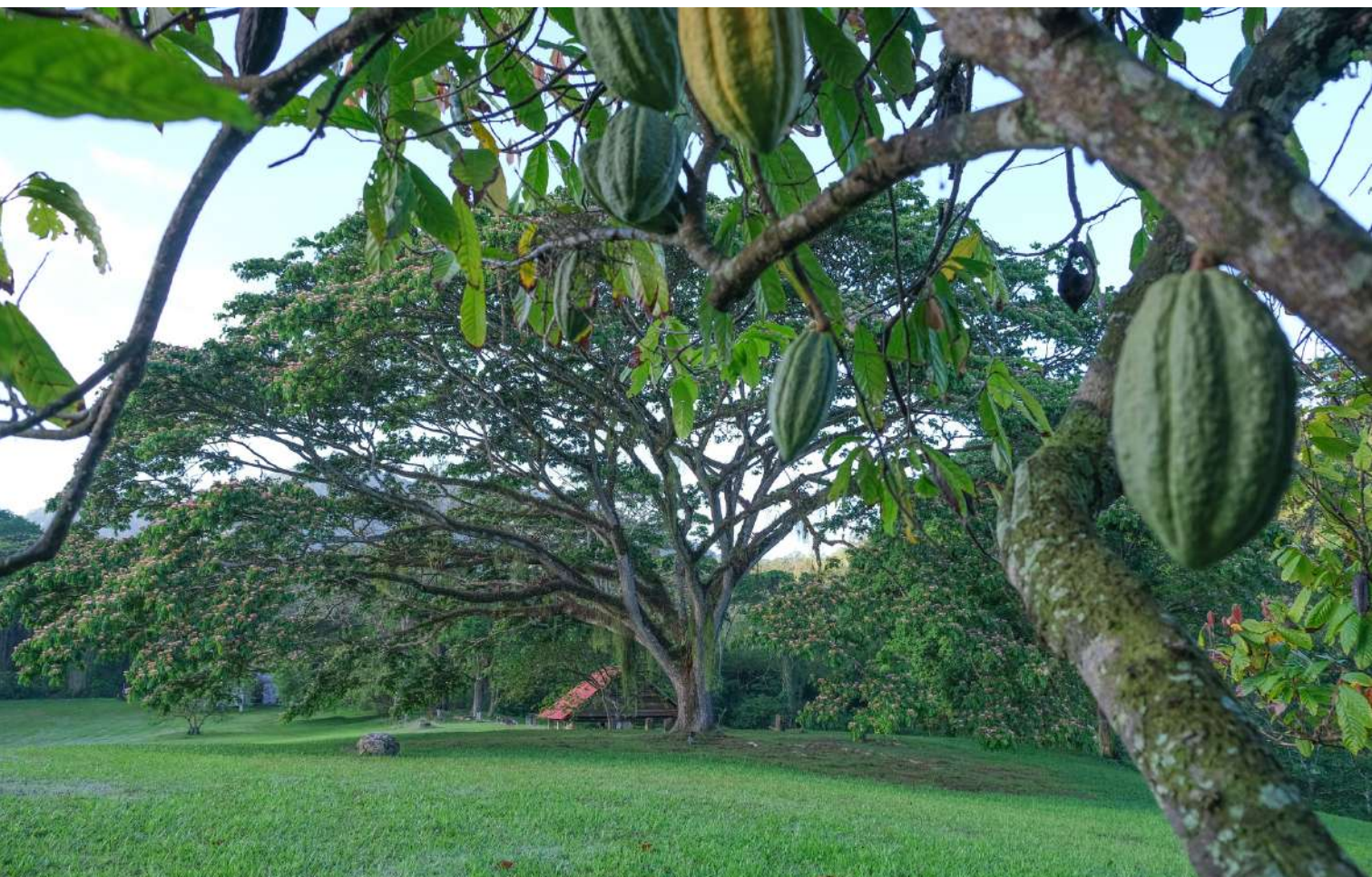
But what are the opportunities to shift these labour issues? "Deep down you go to bed at night and you are thinking: how can I make this work? Would I want to be working full-time? And the answer is - if the finances made sense, I would". But providing a secure job with a fair wage in a post-pandemic world is very challenging.

Considering the history of Ortinola and the Naths, you become aware that the family does not give up so easily. Nikita has plans for the future. Ideally, she would love to create a space where workers could work and live on the estate, "like in the old times".

Workers could settle in with their families, work for half of the day in the cocoa field, and use the other half of the day to cultivate their own crops.

Another idea is 'Voluntourism', where tourists get hands-on experience in the field, connecting with nature and appreciating the efforts behind crafting chocolates. Other concepts to revive the cocoa industry are traceability and transparency. She wished that there was more data available about farms and cocoa cultivation and processing in Trinidad; Data that helped to research and form alliances between farmers, scientists, processors, and chocolatiers, because, clusters, such as the OFCCC are of extreme value to Nikita and her business. "With two tons a year, I cannot do anything. I cannot lobby anyone and I cannot ship a container! We need to come together as a nation, for Trinitario Cocoa."

Ortinola Great House and Estate are "one of a kind", it does not matter whether you prefer to get a chocolate tour by Nikita, stroll through the cocoa fields, or you simply visit to experience handcrafted Trinitario cocoa whilst enjoying the atmosphere of a historical cocoa estate, because it offers something for everybody. The evolution of this family business over the past years is truly remarkable and shows that passion and a vision for Ortinola can certainly have a great influence on reviving Trinitario cocoa's cultivation and processing in the land of its origin.









ÜBERGREEN ORGANICS

ON A MISSION TO REVIVE ORIGINAL TRINITARIO
COCOA



FACT SHEET

Name: Übergreen Organics

EST: 2013

Founders: René Sperber & Tobias
Schulze Frenking

Mission: To source organic fine-flavour
Trinitario cocoa and craft
CBD bean-to-bar chocolates

Location: UWI Cocoa Innovation
Center, Mount Hope

Employees: 10 - 5 female and 5 male

Awards: National Cocoa Awards

"THIS IS A RECIPE FOR SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL."

"This is a recipe for something very special" is an excerpt from a conversation with Übergreen Organics Co-Founders Tobias Schulze-Frenking and René Sperber. In this conversation, the co-founders share what has gotten them into the cocoa sector, the mission of Übergreen Organics, and how it aims to overcome challenges.

Übergreen Organics is crazy about cocoa, especially, Original Trinitario Cocoa. Übergreen Organics is a local enterprise that focuses on sourcing and supplying the best cocoa from Trinidad & Tobago and the Caribbean and converting it into the finest chocolate products at the origin. By doing so, it aims to be the catalyst for positive change in rural communities through honest partnerships that are built on mutual trust and respect.

"It was during my first training in cocoa agronomy in Costa Rica in 2013 that I experienced the passion with which cocoa farmers in Central America care about their crops and the commitment that goes into preserving the balance in the soil and with nature" shares co-founder Tobias. This experience made Tobias aware that no matter where you are, environmentally friendly and regenerative agriculture is possible. Trinidad & Tobago is the birthplace of the famous and infamous Trinitario cocoa variety and provides ideal conditions to cultivate this unique and flavourful cocoa which inspired the two Founders to dedicate their time and effort through the launch of Übergreen Organics. "In Trinidad, we have a treasure that is somewhat forgotten and deserves preservation, and we have the opportunity to curate the original Imperial College varieties and to share those flavour adventures with the world", shares René.

Tobias and René established Übergreen Organics on the basis of their background in business and their understanding of the global cocoa and chocolate market to support the development of the local market in Trinidad and Tobago.

Not only did the two co-founders observe a gap in the local industry to provide a link between producers and international markets, but also an urgent need to transition to more environmentally friendly and regenerative agricultural practices. Conventional agriculture is built on the usage of pesticides that harm people and the environment, “oftentimes creating dependencies in which farmers are exploited”, shares Tobias.

So, what is Übergreen Organics doing really? Übergreen Organics’ activities can be grouped into different tiers. While it fosters partnerships between farmers and markets and establishes support systems to enhance the local cocoa sector, it also supplies a very special fine flavour cocoa product mixed with Cannabidiol, also known as medicinal cannabis – Übergreen CBD Chocolate. In fact, Übergreen CBD Chocolate is made at origin with award-winning, Fine or Flavour Original Trinitario beans sourced from selected single estates in Trinidad & Tobago. “The flavour profile of our single estate origins can differ from harvest to harvest. We frequently detect red, brown, and yellow fruit notes, as well as coconut, spicy and floral notes”, shares Tobias. This project includes the development of the first medicinal cannabis (CBD) chocolate bar made at origin in a fine/flavour cocoa country.

Fast forward to the present, Übergreen Organics has been involved in many projects in the regional cocoa and chocolate industry. Some included the conceptualization, administration, and implementation of the Organic Fine Cocoa and Chocolate Cluster (OFCCC) project. The project is funded by Compete Caribbean Partnership Facility, a private sector development program that provides technical assistance to support productive development policies, business climate reforms, clustering initiatives and technology and innovation in Small and Medium Size Enterprises (SME) in the Caribbean region. The program, jointly funded by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the United Kingdom’s Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) and the Government of Canada, supports projects in 13 Caribbean countries. The OFCCC project transitioned to the Original Trinitario Cocoa (OTC) Education Foundation, in which Übergreen is the Lead company. Some of the project's activities include the development and construction of an innovative containerized cocoa storage facility, in collaboration with the UWI Cocoa Research Center, the design and construction of a cocoa nursery and youth training facility with Tamana Mountain Chocolate, as well as the development of a website for the OTC (www.otcctt.org). Übergreen Organics was also the first company in Trinidad that was certified organic for trading organic cocoa beans and the first one that successfully established a 3PL (Third-party logistics) hub through a warehouse in the United States market.

The two co-founders strongly believe that Trinitario Cocoa is very special. "It uniquely combines flavour with heritage and productivity, making it an aromatic sensation to connoisseurs and everybody who loves chocolates". Trinitario Cocoa was hybridized by nature and then further enhanced through selective breeding. According to Tobias "this is a recipe for something very special".

Throughout the years in the local cocoa business, the co-founders have witnessed an array of challenges affecting all levels of the value chain. For instance, farmers lack planting material, good field management practices, such as regenerative agricultural practices, and post-harvest practices, and the sector experiences low productivity of cocoa trees and unreliable labour. Therefore, Übergreen Organics aims to change the narrative and mitigate challenges for "cocoa-preneurs" in the space to revive the local industry.

One way of doing so is to work closely with the farmers and support them to increase productivity and quality so that the final chocolates can continue to fetch premium prices for farmers in the market. Another way is to leverage the power of partnerships, in which Übergreen Organics has formed powerful ties with local and international partners. These include the Inter-American Development Bank, ExporTT, the Cocoa Research Center of the University of West Indies, thus enabling the company to grow internally while simultaneously sharing the benefits with cocoa farmers and processors around the island. As such, the OTC emerged as a long-term entity to foster educational value by providing training on organic field management practices to farmers across Trinidad & Tobago and the Caribbean.

The directors have thereby leveraged the power of partnerships to bring about a change with a large impact. Research institutes, private and public institutions, and cocoa-preneurs combine their skills and resources to generate sustainable value in Trinidad & Tobago. Additionally, the community has played a crucial role since the organization is built on rural community ties. "We cannot produce premium chocolate without maintaining close ties to the communities in which the cocoa is produced. The community also means an active fraternity of chocolate makers that help each other and provide advice and training when needed. Übergreen has successfully built such a community through the OFCCC."

For the future, Tobias and René have aspiring goals to revive the Original Trinitario Cocoa industry in Trinidad & Tobago and to establish Übergreen's Original Trinitario Cocoa and Chocolates on the world stage as the most premium products in their respective categories.





COCOA REPUBLIC LIMITED

TRINITARIO COCOA CHOCOLATES FROM TREE TO BAR



FACT SHEET

Name: Cocoa Republic Limited

Est: 2016

Founders: Daniel Barcant & Christopher Boodoosingh

Mission: Bean-to-bar handcrafted Trinitario Chocolates

Location: Diego Martin

Employees: 7

Awards: Entrepreneur of the Year, International Chocolate Salon Gold, Silver & Bronze Medal, International Chocolate Award Silver

COMBINING ENVIRONMENTAL, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC VALUE CREATION

This article "Combining environmental, social, and economic value creation" highlights the mission of Cocoa Republic Limited and gives a comprehensive insight into the Trinidad & Tobago-based "bean-to-bar" chocolate manufacturer.

Cocoa Republic Limited was founded in 2016 by Daniel Barcant and Christopher Boodoosingh in Trinidad & Tobago. Their mission is to produce some of the world's finest chocolate made with the finest Trinitario Cocoa beans sourced from Trinidad & Tobago, while ensuring a fair value creation throughout the entire cocoa value chain.

To do so, Cocoa Republic crafts all of its chocolate products using only local, Single-Origin Trinitario Cocoa sourced from selected estates. All Trinitario Cocoa beans are carefully fermented and naturally dried under the Caribbean sun to awaken Trinitario cocoa's subtle flavour notes. Cocoa Republic's Chocolate Masters then combine Trinitario Cocoa beans with a variety of complementary ingredients to create some of the most exquisite and fine-flavoured, handcrafted chocolate bars.

So, Cocoa Republic – a chocolate manufacturing company with locally sourced Trinitario cocoa grown in Trinidad & Tobago at its foundation. In addition to optimizing its manufacturing process, the team at Cocoa Republic can guarantee full transparency and traceability of its supply chain, as well as craft award-winning chocolates'. In fact, Cocoa Republic has won a host of awards, such as the 2019 EY Entrepreneur of the Year, 2019 International Chocolate Salon Gold Medal in "Best Vegan Milk Chocolate", 2017 International Chocolate Award winner, Academy of Chocolate Silver, and many more. This enabled the organization to steadily grow its national and international presence and its reputation.

These accolades have secured a very significant role within the local cocoa industry for Cocoa Republic since their cocoa and chocolate products can be found in a variety of retailers around the islands, in various e-commerce shops, as well as in the airport duty-free area.

The airport's kiosk was established by Cocoa Republic in partnership with the OFCCC, providing members with the opportunity to display and sell their products in the airport's duty-free area. This is a beautiful example of the power of partnerships to enhance the local cocoa industry, especially, Cocoa Republic's modern packaging which takes consumers on an entire journey of their mission and cocoa quality. The international, award winning packaging designed by Roland Thomas, educates consumers about the origin of Trinitario Cocoa, the single estate beans, the 'bean-to-bar' process as well as the flavour profile. Therefore, its assortment of exquisite chocolates – such as 65% Dark Chocolate with Blue Mountain Coffee, 82% Dark Chocolate, 59% Dark Chocolate with Peppermint Bark and Cocoa Nibs, or Vegan Malted Chocolate with Almond Toffee – cater to chocolate lovers all over the world.





RODCO HOME ESSENTIALS

Trinitario Cocoa Butter For Holistic Well-Being



FACT SHEET

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Name: | RODCO Home Essentials |
| Est: | 2005 |
| Founder: | Colleen Malwah-Aqui |
| Location: | Trincity |
| Mission: | creating organic skincare and beauty products with local ingredients |
| Employees: | 2 |
| Awards: | Chocolate Spa Products from Formula Botanica |

TRINITARIO COCOA FOR HOLISTIC WELL-BEING

"Trinitario Cocoa for holistic well-being" is an excerpt from a conversation with RODCO Home Essentials Founder Colleen Malwah-Aqui. In this conversation, Colleen shares about her cultural ties with cacao, her childhood memories and her path of becoming a cocoa-entrepreneur.

Theobroma cocoa, rightfully called, the fruit of the Gods, is an extremely versatile fruit. Trinitario Cocoa beans are mostly cherished for the flavourful, award-winning chocolate products, but one shouldn't underestimate the healing benefits of cocoa butter for our body and mind. In fact, cocoa butter or Theobroma oil has a number of health benefits and is ideal for skin care products. Colleen Malwah-Aqui re-discovered her ancestral roots in cocoa farming and utilizes Trinitario Cocoa butter as a main ingredient for the skin care product lines of RODCO Home Essentials. In a conversation, Colleen shares about her ancestral relationship to cocoa, and how she became an entrepreneur in Trinidad & Tobago's cocoa space.

Colleen Malwah-Aqui is a real force of nature. As the head of her own business RODCO Home Essentials, she develops ever-expanding cocoa-based skincare and beauty products with the finest, natural ingredients locally sourced in Trinidad & Tobago.

Colleen grew up on Trinidad's sister isle of Tobago with her grandparents, who themselves were entrepreneurs in the cocoa sector, which in turn inspired her to seek a career in cocoa and become an entrepreneur herself. Colleen was in contact with cocoa from an early age; She helped her grandparents pick cocoa pods off the trees, stack them on piles, and crack them open to enjoy the fruity, white pulp. "It was a joy to cut open those pods and eat the meat off the beans. Eating too much, which often led to serious tummy aches but it was worth it".

For Colleen, dealing with Trinitario Cocoa brings up a form of nostalgia, reconnecting to memories and senses that transcend her back in time. "The best fun was in dancing that cocoa below the house and then moving it all to the cocoa house. That cocoa house became my hideaway and still stands today. In those days your mornings started with a mug of cocoa tea with homemade bread and fried jacks. Yep, I will indulge my taste buds with my favorite breakfast."

Eventually, RODCO Home Essentials was born in 1999 and registered as an enterprise in December 2005. Having experienced changes in her skin, the idea of RODCO Home Essentials was born through a need to create a solution to a problem Colleen had faced. This re-discovery of cocoa, and re-connection to her ancestors' experiences, happened during research for the highest quality raw materials to produce the best-handcrafted skin care products. "I am pleased to say that my skin has improved significantly and I have been able to assist others with their skincare journey". Scientific studies have shown that cocoa is very beneficial for the skin. Cocoa is rich in vitamins, and minerals like zinc, iron, and manganese along with anti-aging properties. In fact, cocoa butter is an excellent moisturizer for your skin. The high levels of antioxidants protect and repair the skin from damage and premature aging. Its anti-inflammatory properties help to soothe redness and blemishes while improving the skin's complexion and rejuvenation.

Since the beginning of RODCO Home Essentials, Colleen has refined the product line based on customers' feedback, including soaps, face masks, body polish, body butter, lip balms, and a Chocolate Spa Line. Thereby, Colleen aims on using all-natural and organic cocoa from Übergreen Organics to ensure that all natural cocoa properties are maintained in the production of RODCO Home Essential's skincare line.

Although RODCO Home Essentials has experienced severe consequences through the COVID-19 pandemic, Colleen shares that it also brought about a lot of growth for the business. It enabled her to dedicate more time to experiment with different ingredients and formulas to further refine the quality of skin care products and expand RODCO Home Essentials product line. For the future, Colleen aspires to build the brand and bring more awareness to the products and the benefits of cocoa to maintain healthy skin.



COCOBEL CHOCOLATE

Artisan Chocolate Craftmanship in Trinidad & Tobago.



FACT SHEET

Name: Cocobel Chocolate

Est: 2009

Founders: Isabel Brash

Mission: To handcraft artisanal fine - flavoured Trinitario chocolates

Location: Woodbrook, Port of Spain

Employees: 10 (9 women & 1 men)

Awards: 6

"IT IS MORE THAN JUST COCOA; IT IS THE WHOLE FOODSCAPE"

This piece "It is more than just cocoa, it is the whole foodscape" originates from a conversation with Isabel Brash, founder of Cocobel Chocolate in Woodbrook, Port-of-Spain where she grants insight into her journey to chocolate making, the chocolate studio and much more...

Isabel Brash is a remarkable person; she is a mother, an artist, an architect, a teacher, a chocolatier, an entrepreneur, and a wonderful person to be surrounded by. Isabel was born and raised in beautiful Trinidad & Tobago, or as she says about her cocoa beans "to be born in Trinidad & Tobago is cool". Although her family has deep ties to Trinidad & Tobago's cocoa legacy, she herself has never lived on an estate. "I am not a person that was born on an Estate and had all the experience with it. My father's father did. He had a workshop and used to process tonka beans. He was familiar with the smells and the processes of the beans."

Cocobel Chocolate is an artisan chocolaterie that was born out of no more than Isabel's curiosity. "It was an experiment in transformation that transformed me". Cocobel reflects a balance of form and function that aim to create a delight for both the eye and palate. The flavours she uses for it are curated in her kitchen and originate from Trinidad & Tobago, such as tonka beans or sorrel.

Being a trained architect, she merged her technical and visual eye for detail and designed and built her home and chocolate kitchen in Woodbrook, Port of Spain. A very beautiful and clean space that combines cultural craftsmanship, modern design, and local artisanry, and is oriented on the traditional 'gingerbread house design'.

Upon entering through the front gate of the property, one is immediately immersed into Isabel's passion by the mere presence of a cocoa tree, located right in the center of Port of Spain.

An employee of Cocobel opens the doors and welcomes one warmly into the building, guiding one towards an abundant exhibition of Cocobel's craftsmanship, which is elegantly placed in a room filled with handmade mosaic paintings depicting the beauty and essence of Trinidad and Tobago, as well as its abundant and lush flora and fauna. This is an artistic piece created by the local pottery artisan, Bunty O'Connor of Ajoupa Pottery. In the same room, a spiral staircase of dark steel leads downstairs into a big, squared space – Medulla Art Gallery. Medulla is a contemporary art gallery providing a workshop space curated by Martin Mouttet and Geoffrey Mac Lean "to show the importance of art as a social expression, including art as a medium for therapy and growth". Both of these spaces act to combine Isabel's passion for form and function in both spacial design and culinary arts.

Back on the ground level, an inconspicuous, wooden door leads into Cocobel's chocolate kitchen, a vibrant place of life, laughter, passion, joy, handicraft, chocolates and so much more.

Cocobel is a social enterprise led by a woman, employing local women. It is a chocolate kitchen filled with a captivating spirit – women preparing artisan chocolate bars, barks, and bonbons, home-made cocoa tea boiling on the stove, the scent of cocoa beans and ground cocoa, smart hands packaging products with precision and devoted to the details – yet, an easy and relaxed atmosphere.

But Cocobel is much more than the space it owns and the wonderful souls it employs, it is "like a language in the form of chocolate" says Isabel. Thereby focus is placed on every element of cocoa existence and beans are solely sourced from quality single estates grown in Trinidad. Isabel shares that "even at the beginning when we get that cocoa, it is already amazing, it is infused with so much". Isabel understands that every element of cocoa is important to create fine-flavoured, artisanal chocolate products. This begins with the growing conditions and diversity of the cocoa trees, the harvesting as well as the post-harvest processes. "They have to be processed well, with precision" before she even puts her hands on it, because "there is only so much I can do when I get those beans".

With every batch of chocolate Isabel prepares, her objective is to celebrate the best experience she can. "I have to do it justice by processing it again through sorting, roasting, winnowing, grinding to give it the standard it deserves. It is an injustice if I don't!". She shares that the processes and experiences are strongly connected to who we are and the stories where this came from and the threads that come together.

Cocobel sources quality beans that tell a story of origin and transform this indigenous agricultural product into a valuable commodity with the objective of justice and inclusion. “I want people to know the whole story!”. Through the OTC, Cocobel aims to include the whole value chain and foster more just and organic conditions within cocoa agriculture in Trinidad.

Cocobel’s story is about the collective, because everyone involved in the enterprise adds value with their unique personality and skill, and Isabel worships that. “I believe in developing skill rather than looking for skill... and we all have an opinion and contribute”. According to her, working with food is a powerful tool that enables us to work towards something positive and beautiful – “it is quite cool that it works that way”.

Through Cocobel’s artistic delights that satisfy palates and taste buds through an interplay of form and function, Isabel wants to offer a well-rounded experience, “I want the whole story to come together in one package”, so, that the person who is unveiling the chocolates experiences pleasure and an explosion of senses. “I want to transport people on a journey with the product, to tap into something wild and raw, to moments of truth”. Soon Cocobel will offer a cocoa café, and the chocolate kitchen will be expanded to San Fernando – offering new products and employment in Southern Trinidad.



Please scan the QR code for a short video about Cocobel:







SPARKLING GOLD CHOCOLATES

Artisan Chocolate Craftmanship in Trinidad & Tobago.



FACT SHEET

Name: Sparkling Gold Chocolates

Est: 2016

Founders: Sparkle Charles

Mission: To "wow" customers with her chocolates and enhance their appreciation for Finest Trinitario cocoa.

Location: Princess Town

Employees: 1

"IT MUST REFLECT TRINIDADIAN CULTURE"

"It must reflect Trinidadian culture" features Sparkle Charles, chocolatier and owner of Sparkling Gold Chocolates. In this article, she shares about herself, her entrepreneurial path, and the opportunities and challenges she experiences as a cocoa entrepreneur in Trinidad & Tobago.

I met Sparkle at her home and chocolate kitchen in Southern Trinidad, a community in the vicinity of Princess Town. Sparkle lives in a beautiful, light-grey house with a big garden that is used to cultivate banana trees, granadillas (or barbadine it is called locally), kale, mint, basil, pakchoi, and much more. Upon arrival, her mommy takes good care of me and treats me to a typical Trinibagonian dish: saltfish with provisions. Yummy! I immediately feel welcomed amongst the two heart-warming women. With satisfied tummies and souls; we channel our energies and get back to why I came all the way from Central Trinidad, across bumpy countryside roads to meet Sparkle and learn about the story of her Trinitario cocoa journey. This time, from the perspective of a chocolatier, magically crafting these beautiful raw materials into the bonbons.

But first things first, who is Sparkle? Sparkle Charles (40 years) is an inspirational soul: she is very talented, versatile, graceful, strong, faithful, driven, passionate, beautiful, and charming. All of this was revealed after spending just one afternoon with her, so one can imagine what a marvelous personality she possess. Before dedicating her life to chocolate, Sparkle worked as a model for local fashion brands and acquired a professional background in Information Technology (IT). She eventually realized that office work wasn't her true calling and reconsidered her path which led her to the art of crafting chocolates. Today, she proudly calls herself a chocolatier and business owner of Sparkling Gold Chocolates, a part-time employee in a school, a single mom, and an advocate for a healthy lifestyle. She juggles all of this while maintaining a smile that conquers hearts.

Sparkling Gold Chocolates has been established in 2016 and crafts handmade Trinitario chocolate products for private customers and corporate events. Her small but exquisite selection of products resembles culinary art to pleasure both the eye and palate, ranging from bonbons, medallions, turtles, and sculptures made of true Trinitario cocoa which she sources mainly from Übergreen Organics. “I source from more than just one person and that is because each estate tells a different story, and each estate has different flavour profiles: you might get something fruity, you might get something nutty”. She then pairs these flavour profiles with suitable ingredients “to create a wow for the person who eats it”. This is Sparkle’s mission in a nutshell, but in reality, her business is not just about creating flavour explosions for the senses, but so much more. Sparkle wants to set an example for women-led businesses of purposeful products; “it must reflect Trinidadian culture”.

Sparkle's entrepreneurial endeavours are quite remarkable and are an inspiration to many Trinidadian women. She built her business from scratch, without many resources, while managing her many roles in life. Her journey certainly was not a stroll in the park, since it required a lot of passion and endurance.

Having worked most of her life for others, Sparkle reached a turning point in her life, which caused some reflection on elementary questions about human existence, thus allowing her to conclude that “it must be more to life than this!” Building her own business and being her own boss seemed like the only plausible solution to finding more fulfillment in her professional life, and for some unexplainable reason, she immediately felt attracted to cocoa and chocolate.

Her first idea of creating chocolate sculptures with 3D printers failed. “I was devastated because I took this loan and I cried, I cried, I cried”. Her entrepreneurial process however, was not meant to stop there. She decided to use this opportunity to learn everything about chocolate. In her first chocolate-making workshop in Tobago, she learned everything about chocolate, “I learned how to make chocolate from bean to bar”, or in other words, making chocolate directly from beans instead of prepared chocolate liquor. This approach is increasingly gaining awareness in the fairtrade cocoa sector as it focuses on more profound value creation at the origin.

Her passion for chocolate making grew and she took whichever possibility came along her path to gain more skills, even though she may not have had the necessary funds. “It was a rough time”, she

shares, but it was meant to go on this journey, her faith and positivity helped her succeed. She borrowed loans and got stipends.

Her most impactful time was probably in New York, where she took a course and an internship at a renowned institution. "It was the most amazing experience because I got to work with some top chefs". The question arose of how could she make use of her expertise and experiences and start her own chocolate business in Trinidad? "Once again, I was stuck with a passion, stuck with limited funds, balancing a day job, being a parent, having a home, trying to run a business, and then life challenges in between, but I try to thank God for the blessings he gave me that I made it this far", she says with a sense of gratitude in her voice. Sparkle's talent wasn't unseen and she won multiple prizes and awards for her chocolate bonbons and sculptures which allowed her to reinvest in the business to acquire the necessary tools.

Sparkle ticks many boxes of a typical bricoleur (bricolage entrepreneur) who represents the majority of entrepreneurial mindsets in the developing world. She makes do with what she has and reinvests her gains to acquire equipment for the business. This being said, not only the monetary aspect posed many hurdles on Sparkle's path to becoming a self-employed chocolatier, but more general business "know-how". "I think there is a lack of support, especially for small businesses". Hereby, Sparkle refers to mechanisms to reinforce personal development of business owners in financial accounting and branding. "If you had the knowledge of how to do a story, to connect and make people feel one with you, you might be able to get more customers", she rightfully claims.

One thing becomes obvious from my conversation with Sparkle, from little resources but a strong passion and belief, She has developed a remarkable, Trinidadian, women-led enterprise. She had the right nose for following trends and her passion for chocolate-making, and maybe, with a pinch of luck, attracting the right energies. Her lioness strength and aspirations, and her limitless faith, might have attracted it all into place. She connected with the right people of the OFCCC who provided business model training and supplied fine quality chocolate liquor. She reinvested in her passion, understood the importance of organic products, and is determined to craft delightful chocolate pieces which reflect Trinidadian culture through its heritage, its flavours and its appearance.





Narratives That Shall Transform Trinidad & Tobago's Cocoa Industry

Written by Denise Speck in Trinidad & Tobago



How is it even possible? In an academic research project at the University of Groningen, I investigated how digital storytelling could be used as a tool to foster sustainable development within marginalized communities. My research revealed a vast untapped potential within sustainable enterprises that could not only foster economic value through marketing strategies but also support communities at origin, to amplify their voices and grant a glimpse into the authentic stories behind the people, their relationship to the products they cultivate, and their agricultural practices

To bring my research to the next level, I left The Netherlands in January to explore digital storytelling over the coming six months within the local cocoa sector in Trinidad & Tobago. This initiative is spearheaded by Übergreen Organics and co-founded by the Compete Caribbean Partnership Facility (CCPF) which is a private sector development programme that delivers innovative and practical solutions that stimulate economic growth, increases productivity, and fosters innovation and competitiveness. CCPF works in 13 countries across the Caribbean region and CCPF is a partnership between the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the United Kingdom's Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO), the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) and the Government of Canada.

In line with novel insights of sustainability research, this initiative follows a transdisciplinary and ethnographic methodology that aims to combine knowledge across different sectors and disciplines. In doing so, my storytelling consultancy seeks to create authentic narratives about cocoa farmers within the Organic Fine Cocoa and Chocolate Cluster (OFCCC) in Trinidad & Tobago which acts as a catalyst for sustainable growth in the Caribbean. Within this context, digital storytelling is understood as the art of telling narratives with a variety of multimedia tools. It enables people to understand what we do as humans to make sense of the world and how we understand our connection with our surroundings – a perspective that is particularly relevant within responsible supply chains, where storytelling adds value at every stage of the chain, increasing the sustainable value creation for all actors involved.

Over the next few months, I will guide you through my storytelling journey in the cocoa industry and share the authentic stories about the people and processes behind fine-flavour cocoa in Trinidad & Tobago. Together with farmers, processors, and experts, we will create photographic documentaries, videos, and interviews to foster awareness about the region's fine cocoa and chocolate industry as well as empower the communities to develop a sense of ownership and promote sustainable cocoa agriculture.

In this sense – see you, when I see you!

You can follow me:

Website: www.bydenisespeck.com

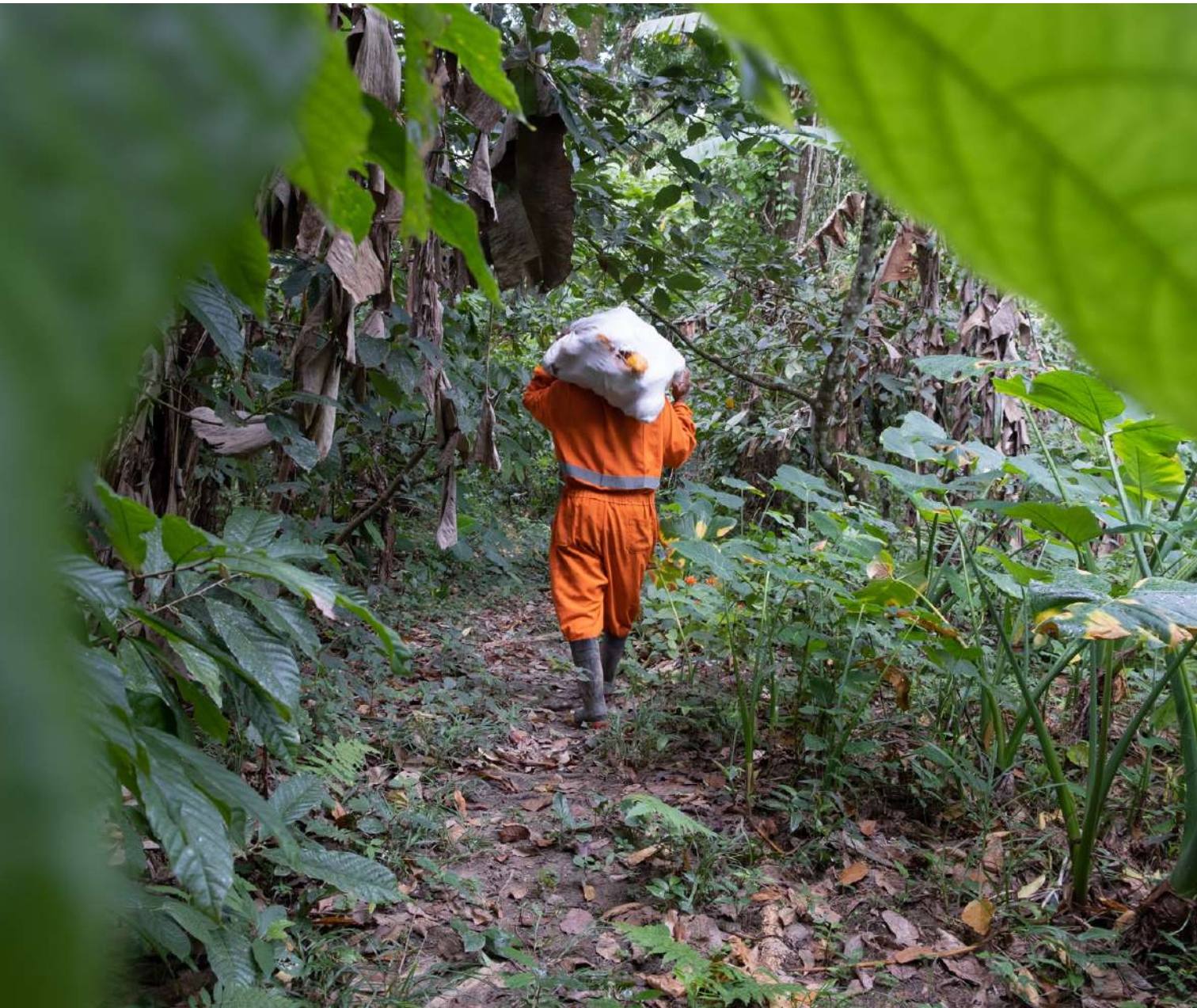
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Re-imagining the story of a lost treasure; Original Trinitario Cocoa.

Written by Denise Speck in Trinidad & Tobago



Close your eyes and follow me on a journey many years back in time. Imagine a place of rich history and cultural diversity, a place of friendly and hospitable people, a place of lush rainforests and an abundance of exotic fruits, a place that is home to one of the most exclusive fine flavour cocoas, a place that has an ocean of stories to tell... Welcome to Trinidad & Tobago! Open your eyes again.

During the last weeks of my field trips in Trinidad & Tobago, my travels have taken me to many corners all around the twin islands, passing once gracious and now abandoned farmlands. Here, nature reclaimed a space that once was cultivated, where only fragments provide a glimpse of the image it once portrayed. Silently, I hold the image in for a moment, trying to imagine past glory, realizing that no existence is eternal, but instead, life is ephemeral and very fragile, and we need to appreciate and care for it now to ensure its presence today and in the future.

Let's travel back in time, and hear a synopsis of stories about these abandoned yet mystical places, as narrated by farmers of the twin islands, a journey to rediscover a lost treasure: The story behind The Original Trinitario cocoa variety.

After a long walk through the cocoa estate, I sit with Martin Matthew of Tamana Mountain Chocolate Estate in his beautiful wooden cabin, which, as we chat, is gently flooded by a lovely afternoon breeze and prosperously visited by a variety of brightly coloured hummingbirds. He tells me, that cocoa originated in a South and Central American context and was first used by the Aztecs and Mayans as a holy drink that was prepared at special events such as weddings using crushed cocoa beans, water, chili peppers, and cornmeal. Hence, the name "Theobroma cocoa", or the Food of the Gods. Later on, cocoa's relevancy grew in a socio-political context as it represented a viable trading tool, where beans were exchanged for products and slaves, too. Sad but true.

Taking on an increasingly important role, cocoa went on a journey across Mesoamerica, where it was first cultivated in Trinidad & Tobago by the Spaniards in 1525, hence the term "Chocolate Islands". During this time, the Spaniards brought Criollo beans which are characterized by notes of chocolate, caramel, and nuts. These plants, however, became increasingly endangered as a result of diseases. To combat the declining cocoa occurrence across the region, Forastero varieties were brought into the islands. This variety is known today as bulk cocoa, with full-bodied cocoa notes which are said to lack complex flavour notes. Over time and evolutionary progressions, Criollo and Forastero plants began to cross-pollinate naturally and gave rise to a new hybrid cocoa that is known as original Trinitario Cocoa.

Despite this, Trinitario Cocoa is not solely produced on its mother soil. As Martin notes, "we are not the only ones, although it was born here". On the contrary, today Trinitario cocoa is grown in more than ten countries around the world, with continuously decreasing occurrences across Trinidad & Tobago yielding annual harvests of as little as 500 tons (Jewell, 2017).

While West Africa presents as a predominant cocoa region, Central and South American countries produce less than a fifth of the world's cocoa (Leissle, 2018). One may wonder what happened to a nation that once produced 34,000 tons of cocoa beans annually (Bekele, 2004), representing the third largest producer of cocoa in the world?

Martin explains, that not only environmental factors, such as a variety of diseases including black pod and witches' broom which started to infiltrate the existence of cocoa, but also both local and global socio-economic forces. With rising prices for sugar, farmers saw fewer prospects to continue cocoa cultivation and instead began to convert their estates into sugar cane monocultures. Additionally, the country's energy sector experienced a blooming season, leading to many agricultural workers leaving their work in the fields behind, for a more prosperous career in the increasingly expanding energy sector. As a result of these forceful circumstances, the cost of producing cocoa in Trinidad & Tobago is much higher when compared to other Latin American and Caribbean countries, thus making it difficult for the twin islands to compete on price with the demands of the global cocoa market.

But original Trinitario Cocoa's story is not meant to end here. Why? I have been told many reasons why it is worth carrying on writing the story of Trinitario Cocoa for many more generations to come! Let me share some of these insights with you.

Cocoa experts and lovers across the Chocolate Islands™ are increasingly placing efforts to not only survive, but to also revive the story of Trinitario cocoa and ensure its high-quality products for the international cocoa market. Presently, original Trinitario Cocoa cultivation is experiencing a flourishing re-discovery both locally and globally, enhancing cocoa demand to a level that presently cannot be satisfied. If you, just like I, have only been introduced to bulk chocolate products that are widely distributed in every supermarket all across the Western Hemisphere, experiencing a crafted piece of original Trinitario cocoa will blow your mind. Its rich flavour profile enhances fruity to floral notes, representing a synergy of both Criollo's and Forastero's best qualities. It truly is a treasure for the taste buds, with a variety of health benefits too, in fact, experiencing its exquisite quality shall alter your perception of chocolate forever. No surprise, it has won many international awards over the past years.

Not only its awards and superb quality calls for attention, but also Trinidad & Tobago's immense efforts to understand and enhance the evolution of its fine cocoa products.

Trinidad's Cocoa Research Centre has placed immense efforts into research and is the custodian of the world's largest cocoa gene bank , registering more than 2000 different varieties of Theobroma cocoa. Who would have thought of so many varieties, if all we know is bulk cocoa?

Additionally, governments and industries are synergizing their forces to enforce collective clusters, such as Übergreen Organic's spearheading of the Organic Fine Cocoa and Chocolate Cluster (OFCCC) which aims at creating a business ecosystem that promotes social, environmental, and economic value generations for all stakeholders along the supply chain, promoting a focus on local value generation (from "bean-to-bar") and organic certifications. Recently, the OFCCC counts 15 members, consisting of cocoa farmers, and processors, with many more small-hold farmers across the Chocolate Islands™ showing an interest in joining the community which will aid in fostering a more sustainable future and revive original Trinitario cocoa on the global market.

In order to fully appreciate the existence and importance of Trinitario cocoa, in Trinidad and Tobago, it is of immense importance to understand its long and quite intricate history. This story is far from being written and it can be referred to as an assertive re-emergence of Trinitario: a re-discovery of a lost treasure. Let's explore what stories farmers and processors will reveal over the coming weeks and months, narratives about challenges and hardships, about opportunities and hope, narratives about collective efforts to preserve original Trinitario cocoa.

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Übergreen Organics platform: <https://www.ubergreen.org>

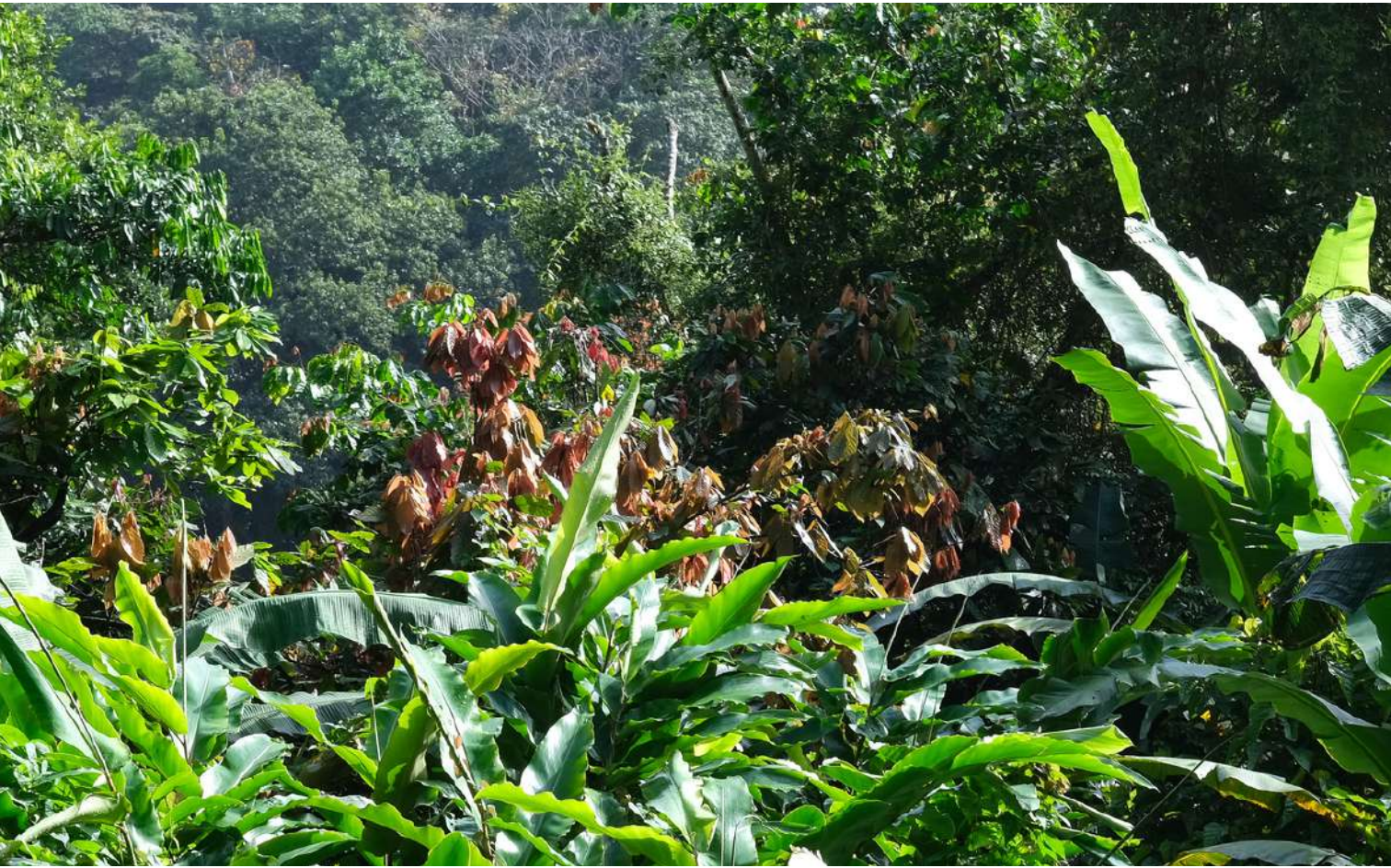
Tamana Mountain Chocolates: <https://www.facebook.com/Tamana-Mountain-Chocolate-1835887860020276/>





Challenges and Opportunities in Trinidad & Tobago's Fine Cocoa Sector

Written by Denise Speck in Trinidad & Tobago



Agriculture is a practice that began long before us – or, at least since the beginning of the agricultural revolution, when homo sapiens experienced a critical transition, evolving from hunter-gatherers to farming villagers (Harari, 2014). Homo sapiens strove towards a far more fruitful future than the one that was lived by their ancestors, who spent a lifetime dedicated to whatever the present space offered. Agriculture is defined as “the art and science of cultivating the soil, growing crops, and raising livestock. It includes the preparation of plant and animal products for people to use and their distribution to markets” (National Geographic, 2011). Yet, the agricultural sector is, despite its immense body of knowledge and experience, a space that is highly vulnerable and continuously exposed to socio-economic, socio-political, and environmental forces. This writing is dedicated to exploring some of the challenges experienced by Trinitario Cocoa farmers and leaves space for future narratives that demonstrate the solutions they have found to cope with the challenges respectively.

During my research and field visits, I learned that Trinidad & Tobago has given rise to a very special and highly regarded variety of Theobroma Cacao – or Cocoa – that has won multiple awards and recognitions at international cocoa and chocolate events. Some of these awardees are amongst the farmers that will be introduced over the coming weeks as a result of their love and passion for the Original Trinitario Cocoa. Despite all of this, Trinitario Cocoa's future is challenged in multiple aspects – environmentally, economically, and socially.

Javed Omardeen, one of the cluster farmers who cultivates the Little Hermit Estate in Brasso Seco, uses its fruity flavoured, award-winning cocoa beans to create the Omarbeans Chocolate, shares that “although high-quality cocoa is produced in Trinidad & Tobago, there has been some history that took place in the last century that affected not only the price of cocoa, the interest of getting into it as a business, but also the general work ethic”. In a nutshell, cocoa's peak production and sales to export markets took place between the 1860s and 1920s (Bekele, 2004) and represented the main source of Trinidad & Tobago's economic wealth at the time. With the advent of oil and natural gas and its high financial gains, the government decided to lead the country in an industrialized direction that placed economic emphasis on developing the nation's petroleum products. The petroleum sector promised much to those directly employed in the industry and by extension, allowed the government to pay livable salaries to civil servants. Growth in the burgeoning energy industry precipitated a type of attrition from the agricultural sector with its slower, more land-centric culture.

Environmentally, this strategy of the government to subsidize more progressive industries, such as the oil and gas industry, and to place focus on strengthening economic value. This encouraged farmers to shift away from traditional small-scale farming to systems that utilized more modernized farming practices, which promised large outputs. These practices rely heavily on agrochemical inputs and monoculture crops that defined success solely in terms of quantity and profits. Increasing challenges posed by climate change, such as changing climate patterns – for instance too much rain in one region or too much drought in another – affected the cycle of cocoa pollinators and gave rise to a variety of diseases which ultimately impacted the productivity of local cocoa trees. Consequently, farmers find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle of relying year-after-year, season-after-season, on agrochemicals to not only fight pests that harm their crops, but also to synthetically replenish nutrients to over-stressed soils.

Furthermore, Javed shares that “not only have historical influences directly degraded the work ethic, culture, and attitude towards Original Trinitario Cocoa but has had other indirect effects too”.

As a natural consequence of the crippling of the industry, additional challenges befell the few remaining farmers. Buyers of raw cocoa became scarce as the price of Original Trinitario Cocoa increased, and the global market's preference shifted to cheaper, bulk cocoa sourced from West African regions. Consequently, farmers' interest in Trinitario Cocoa cultivation declined and facilities for fermenting and drying were abandoned. Not only has low productivity caused decreasing incomes from the farmers' crops, but the low incomes made it unappealing for upcoming generations to practice agriculture. And, despite more recent global efforts to foster greater transparency and fair-trade practices in product supply chains, a lack of economic incentives and scarcity of skilled, Agricultural Extension Officers has created new barriers for farmers. Out of reach is access to additional resources allowing for training in farming practices, post-harvest protocols, cocoa processing, the skills and habit of recording data, as well as access to existing funding including grants, and promotion of added-value possibilities. Consequently, Trinidad & Tobago faces strong competition with other Trinitario Cocoa-producing regions, as it struggles to meet global demands and quality standards.

From a social stance, these environmental and economic challenges have had a tremendous impact on the society's relationship to Original Trinitario Cocoa. The combined effect of the hardships of agricultural work, few economic incentives, and now uncertainties posed by climate change, have created a condition that has kept Trinbagonians further away from a sector they never idealized – traditional agriculture. As a consequence, young people are increasingly becoming less interested in getting into the family farming business and continue the cultivation of cocoa. Thus, the status of Original Trinitario Cocoa is 'endangered' and government and industry are becoming more aware of the necessity to stimulate new interest in sustainable farming by creating more attractive conditions for farmers.

Nowadays, various institutions acknowledge that natural resources are limited and economic as well as educational systems must be shifted to more responsible models that support family-owned, small-scale, fair-trade, and circular farming communities to ensure Original Trinitario Cocoa's survival in the long term. On top of that, increasing environmental phenomena like climate change and poor soil health, demonstrate that it is inevitable to return to an agricultural system that works more in harmony with nature. Yet, despite increasing efforts for transparency and fair-trade practices, the lack of economic incentives remains a tremendous challenge for farmers; As a result, societies that could place more emphasis and appreciation on the gifts of their soil, may be of the opinion that becoming a farmer meant that they go backward in development.

Javed says that “this is one of the main things holding the sector back”. But one must keep in mind that returning to systems that are more in harmony with nature, does not condemn progress does it imply a backward development that turns away from modern solutions. On the contrary, it emphasizes that solutions have to be critically reflected upon and focus has to turn away from purely profit-centered orientation to an educational approach that generates social, environmental, and economic value for all stakeholders involved.

You may understand now that in order to grasp the contextual forces historically and presently impacting the success of individual farmers, as well as the collective Original Trinitario Cocoa industry, one has to understand the complex dynamics among the above-mentioned social, environmental and economic influences. Thus, it is important to learn about the very unique setting of Trinidad & Tobago and its rich yet challenged, cocoa industry to bring about change that has a responsible and long-lasting impact. But what can be done to ensure cocoa’s survival? To find out, I spoke with farmers, cocoa processors, and experts and found many private sector-led initiatives that are in place or being developed in order to change the existing relationship with cocoa while capturing greater social, environmental, and economic value, both at origin and globally. Throughout this storytelling initiative, made possible thanks to the collaborative efforts between Compete Caribbean and Übergreen Organics, different members will share their insights – because the wheel really does not need to be reinvented! Much of the required knowledge is there, created by our ancestors, transmitted over generations and spaces. However, one must acknowledge that these solutions will have to be critically reflected and repeatedly adjusted because there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution in contexts that are highly vulnerable to external forces.

So, a lot is happening and I am very grateful to be part of this space, capturing the dynamics of responsible change. In the upcoming stories, we will meet the farmers and get to know some narratives about who they are and what they do to cope with the context they currently experience.

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What is happening in Brasso Seco?

Written by Denise Speck in Trinidad & Tobago



Imagine a place where pure and untouched mountainous forests descend to meet crystal clear streams. A place where the misty mornings are filled with the melodies of a myriad of different birds and the dance of massive forest trees, to the cool embrace of the wind. A forest not only filled with life in all its forms, but encircling agricultural estates filled with fruit trees, oranges, lemons, breadfruit, chataigne, bananas, coffee and of course, Original Trinitario Cocoa! Brasso Seco, situated within the north eastern part of Trinidad is this place. Appropriately called the "Valley of Life[1]", it is not only rich in biodiversity but home to roughly 300 inhabitants who reside mostly along the 8 mile road that connects the community. This article introduced three of these residents who are inspiring cocoa farmers and members of the newly formed Organic Fine Cocoa and Chocolate Cluster (OFC).

Tapping into the magic of this community, requires visitors to be willing to brave bumpy village roads, come and linger. Realizing this, I spent a few days here to engage with the farmers, listen to their stories, and immerse myself in Brasso Seco's way of life.

Situated at one end of the village, the small family-owned 'James Estate' run by Lawrence James who lives with his mother, Josephine James in their humble home amidst papaya and coconut trees. Josephine is also known as "Mamey" and "Mau Paul" among older folks in the village, connecting her to her deceased husband whose name was Paul James. From the moment I met Lawrence, I felt captivated by his contagious smile that breathes a sense of happiness and lightness through the space. While showing me the plants he cultivates around his estate, he enthusiastically shares about his prospects of developing his business and creating an ecotourism side that will enable guests to retreat in his magnificent setting, while appreciating the peace and quiet of the beautiful, tropical rainforest. Lawrence skillfully maintains his Trinitario cocoa trees allowing for the most efficient harvesting, and interplants with a variety of other tree crops of various uses. Lawrence specializes in his culinary ingenuity, taking his own organically grown ingredients and producing delightfully tasty dishes, such as his very tasty Mango Massala. Lawrence is the producer of mortar-ground cocoa balls and 'James Old Time Roucou' - an annato-based liquid infusion that imparts both flavour and gives a deep orange colour to a range of different dishes.

Within walking distance is Dr. Stephanie Omardeen, a medical doctor by education and practice. She resides in Port of Spain and commutes multiple times a week to the Tinamou Estate to work vigorously to enhance harmonious permacultural systems. Stephanie has acquired an enormous body of knowledge about permaculture since she got more involved into regenerating the estate's natural systems. According to Stephanie, acquiring such knowledge is an ongoing process that is constantly evaluated, as new information and experiences are encountered, and she tirelessly works on putting these principles into practice. But her energy seems far from spent, as she glows with contagious enthusiasm and passion for what she is doing. While taking me around the estate, she proudly shares her exotic fruit and tree collection with me. Whenever she makes her way to Brasso Seco, her days are ambiguously filled with tasks, like planting trees, tending to young plants, observing and evaluating what grows best in what environment. She shares that "a very wise older farmer told me once, to be a successful farmer, you have to 'maco' your plants". "Maco" is a very Trinidadian expression referring to someone that is "overly curious about other people's affairs".

She also spends her days harvesting cocoa pods, cracking them, and preparing the beans for further cocoa processing. Her motivation is to increase both the quality of goods cultivated on the land as well as the people's lives who take part in producing it, thereby, always trying to increase abundance in every single way.

Approximately 20 minutes drive away from the Tinamou Estate, Javed Omardeen cultivates a beautiful piece of land, the Little Hermit Estate, representing a haven for birds, bees, and fruit lovers too. About 10 years ago, Javed made the decision to leave the bustling city of Port of Spain behind to build a sanctuary for the mind and soul – a cozy but beautiful wooden cabin – where he has been practising farming as a way to serve nature's systems. The terrain is very steep, but I am impressed by how he masters his hill, almost as if he never did anything else. He guides me through the Little Hermit's space, shows me the abundance of flowers covering the soils, exotic fruits, his beehives, and, of course the Trinitario cocoa trees majestically bearing brightly coloured cocoa pods that my eyes alight upon. I am in awe of the fertile soil and nature's amazing creations which are growing and living on it. While he spends most of his time in nature, he usually operates a stall on Sunday's in the Macoya Farmers' Market where he sells an abundance of organically grown fruits that vary per season, such as a variety of bananas, oranges, christophene, plantains, roucou pods, and Omarbeans chocolate products.

But Javed's and Stephanie's efforts do not stop here. In addition to cultivating award-winning cocoa beans, the family processes the cocoa beans for their own brand – Omarbean Chocolates. The brand represents an exemplary case of the "bean-to-bar" approach; A method gaining increasing momentum in the arena of sustainable entrepreneurship to foster more value at origin. Within their cocoa processing facility in the family's home in Port-of-Spain, Javed and Stephanie craft an exotic assortment of fine chocolate products with ingredients that are purely sourced from the family's estates (for example: Tonka Bean Chocolate, Pepper Chocolate, Ginger Chocolate, and much more).

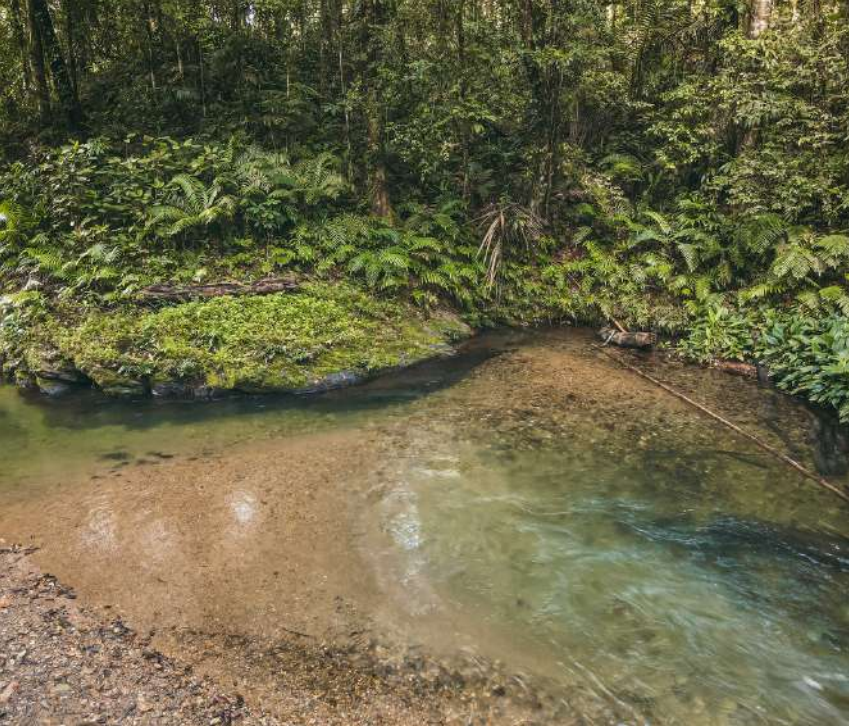
To get a better feel of this magical community, you really need to stay and experience it yourself. During my time in Brasso Seco I stayed at "The Cocoa Palace", a former cocoa drying house at the end of a valley that has been transformed to a beautifully rustic accommodation, secluded from society and connections, in the midst of nature's purest forms. The precious space and time there allowed me to get a better insight into the lives of our cluster members and remarkable organic cocoa farmers.

You may understand now why this place is called “The Valley of Life”, because it feels like a place somewhere else in time and space, breathing life from its pristine waters, fertile soils, and remarkable people that are inspired by alternative solutions, permaculture principles, and enhancing harmonious systems. All this life is breathed in Original Fine Trinitario Cocoa and explains its exquisite quality and flavour profiles. Frankly, all this is only the tiniest of glimpses into what is happening in the village of Brasso Seco to keep the spirits of farming alive and the blueprint of what is the only truly sustainable way of farming and feeding the world.

Partnership

Übergreen Organics: <https://www.ubergreen.org>

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by denise speck
storytelling & photography



COCOBEL

Übergreen

NATURAL CARIBBEAN QUALITY
TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

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bitters

