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Democracy Dies in Darkness

A ‘wild’ label aims to help find and preserve rare cacao sources in the Amazon

By Virginia Gewin
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Mark Christian doesn’t mince words when it comes to chocolate. Biting criticism is stock and trade for the New Yorker who seven years ago launched the C-Spot, an independent online guide to premium chocolate that boasts it is “the most hated voice in the industry.”

Yet after 2,500 reviews, Christian now wants consumers to take a flavor journey. He is eager to find and preserve pockets of wild chocolate flavor in the Amazon rain forest, where cacao originated, before they disappear.

“These are the primary colors of cacao, the originals,” he explained.

Christian, who in the 1990s founded a discount airfare website, developed his obsessive taste for chocolate during extensive travels through cacao-growing countries. His fixation — and enough studying for what he calls a chocolate doctorate — yielded a user-friendly atlas of cacao genetics based on the research of famed cacao scientist Basil Bartley and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. By factoring in those genetics, the three broad cocoa varieties — Criollo, Forastero and Trinitario — explode into a panoply of nine primary strains and 37 cultivar strains.

Now Christian has developed a label, the Landmark Wild Chocolate Reserve, that uses genetics to identify wild beans. So far, the label has been placed on chocolate emanating from the Beni River Valley in northern Bolivia and the Purus River Valley in northwestern Brazil. But with hopes of securing more wild-harvested cacao, he is negotiating with additional Amazon communities.

The goal is to build a network in the region that can help fuel the specialty chocolate boom with the rarest flavors on Earth — and offer incentive to protect them. Christian said he knows it is a daunting undertaking.

“Craft” chocolate-bar makers already compete for a steady supply of unique beans. The majority search for farmed cacao in Central and South America, and bars that deliver superlative flavor may cost up to $300. Fine-chocolate aficionados have said “wild” bars have incredible marketing potential because they tie flavor to conservation. “People are hungry for authenticity in what they are eating,” said Matt Caputo, president of A Priori Specialty Foods based in Salt Lake City.

Wild beans, however, add challenges to the already complicated cacao supply chain. Identifying novel, untapped strains with proven flavor characteristics is difficult enough because they often grow in areas that lack highways, even roads. But is there enough supply? Can they be harvested efficiently? Is the know-how to dry and ferment the beans in place?

“Each stage is an incredibly difficult process logistically,” noted Kristy Leissle, a University of Washington Bothell researcher who studies the global chocolate industry.

Cacao trader Volker Lehmann, whose Tranquilidad chocolate is one of the first to earn a Landmark label, is well aware of these dynamics. For when it comes to working with indigenous communities to harvest wild cacao, he poured the mold. The former agronomist is one of a dying breed of botanical adventurers — in his case, searching Bolivian watersheds for lost bits of cacao history and flavor that would otherwise rot along the river. Lehmann has long sought ways to protect these endangered resources, and like Christian, he said he wants to help get the wild beans out of the jungle and into upscale markets.

“These people need a market to come to them,” he said. “They have no way of going to the market.”

Still, connecting the market to the jungle is rife with complications. In 2014, Luisa Abram and her father, Andre Banks, sourced her first cacao beans from a community in the Purus valley. But, the young Brazilian recounted, they had to abandon a promising deal with a community near the border with French Guiana because the middlemen were motivated only by profit.

Abram today sells a chocolate that is “81 percent wild cocoa” and bears the Landmark designation. She both wants to find new sources to explore her country’s flavor possibilities as well as to empower communities to help preserve the land they live on. “The Amazon is getting chopped up,” she said. “We are racing through time to preserve it.”

Lehmann said he even hopes that by engaging enough Amazon communities to sustainably harvest wild cacao, Christian’s label can help them secure World Heritage Site status, protections given to cultural or natural places that have outstanding value.

At the least, he and other supporters said, the label highlights the stark contrast to the situation in West African countries, where the vast majority of bulk cacao is a high-yielding, acidic variety grown for the world’s commercial candy market. In recent years, operations have been accused of using slave labor and degrading the environment.

Lyndel Meinhardt, a research leader at the USDA Agricultural Research Service’s Sustainable Perennial Crops Laboratory in Beltsville, Md., maps the genetic diversity of cacao globally. “Anything we can do to preserve wild cacao and not limit production to a few bulk clones grown around the world is good,” he said.

Leissle said she thinks Christian is one of the few people able to pull off both aspects of his endeavor. “Mark cannot only find the wild stuff but also could help sell it, which is incredibly rare,” she said.

Christian’s plan is to continue building the number of communities included in the label’s network, which already has its own website, wildchocolate.org. Both beans and chocolate bars are listed for sale there, toward that aim of creating “value to improve the livelihoods of forest dwellers.” Doing so, the site says, will serve as “a financial bulwark against cutting down the Amazon via logging, mining & drilling for cattle grazing, soybean farming, resort hotels & the like.”

It is an “innovative business model to deliver chocolate that meets consumer expectations, including not advancing conflict,” said John Forrer, director of the Institute for Corporate Responsibility at George Washington University, who studies how to produce and sell conflict-free chocolate.

As the network grows, Christian may start to charge a transaction fee of about 3 percent on bars to maintain the website, as well as to conduct community visits and genetic analyses of new cacao sources.

In his view, few things have more universal value than chocolate.

“People crave chocolate. That relationship does not hold for soybeans,” he said. “If chocolate can’t protect the rain forest, what can?”

Correction: An earlier version of this story incorrectly identified the state where Mark Christian lives.

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