



TREND

PUERTO RICO'S CACAO COMEBACK

Centuries after hurricanes devastated local chocolate production, a handful of determined farmers are reviving and reinventing the crop.

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIEL MORRIS

A **AMERICANS LOVE CHOCOLATE.** U.S. citizens eat some 10 pounds of the stuff per person each year, and an increasing demand has contributed to shortages and skyrocketing prices. But in Puerto Rico, quality-focused farmers are shaking up the global industry by reintroducing cacao plants and making some of the world's best bars. Here, chocolate is a new frontier.

But how “new” is it, really? Puerto Rico served as an entry point to the Americas for Spanish colonizers, who, as early as the 16th century, profited off sugarcane and tobacco grown there. To protect those crops, Puerto Rican plantation workers also planted cacao—a Central American tree with broad leaves that shield seedlings from the harsh tropical sun. “Cacao was never an economic crop [in Puerto Rico],” says Elaine Shehab, founder of Chocobar Cortés, a trio of chocolate cafés in San Juan and New York City.

The Indigenous Taíno community embraced the beans, crushing them in water with herbs and spices to make a hot beverage. However, hurricanes eradicated much of Puerto Rico's agriculture in the early 1700s, and cacao production was all but forgotten. Wild trees, vestiges of that initial boom, still grow on the island's lush hillsides.

Cacao requires a tropical climate. Most comes from the Cacao Belt (within 20 degrees of the equator). Roughly 70 percent of the world's crop originates in West Africa, where recent strife,

pests, and disease have wreaked havoc on the supply chain—leaving an opening for Puerto Rico.

The island, it turns out, is ideal for growing cacao, due to its warm, wet climate and nutrient-rich soil. The Tropical Agricultural Research Station (TARS) in Mayagüez studies more than 300 cacao varieties, a fact that caught the attention of Shehab's son, researcher Eduardo Cortés, who secured a USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant to provide local farmers with thousands of cacao trees.

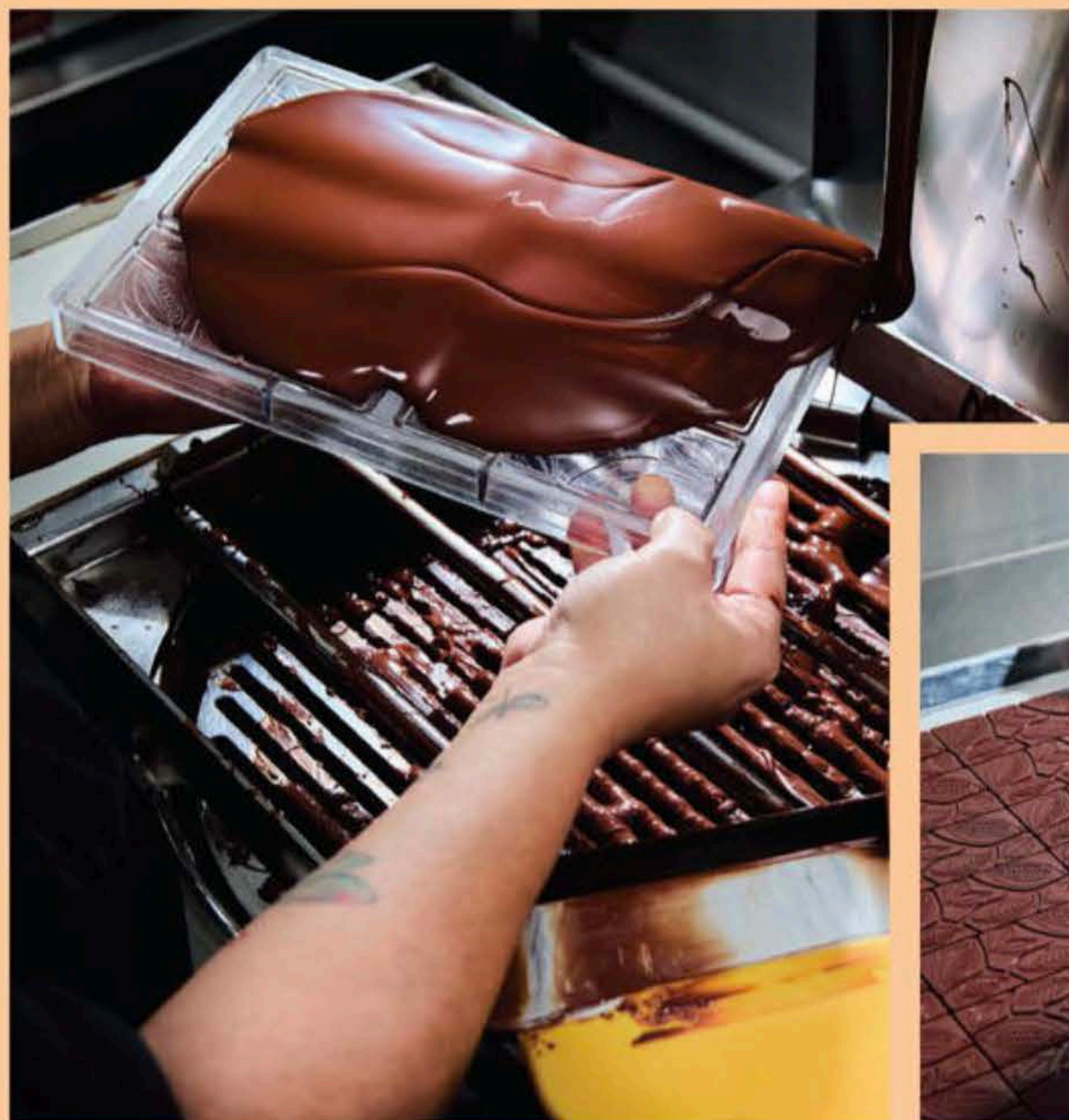
One recipient was Yadira Vázquez, a radiologist with a 27-acre farm in Fajardo. In 2021, her beans won the silver prize at the Cocoa of Excellence Awards. Two years later, her 75 percent dark chocolate and caramelized white chocolate won awards at the Academy of Chocolate Awards, too. Puerto Rican chocolate was suddenly turning heads.

Seventy miles west, at Finca Semila, husband-and-wife farmers Abel Vélez and Decenia Vega also received grant funding. Their high-yield trees were

destined for a niche type of chocolate called “fino de aroma.” This International Cocoa Organization designation requires prestigious Criollo or Trinitario cacao, which comprise less than 5 percent of the world's crop but make up the majority of Puerto Rico's. Vélez and Vega's Cacao 360 brand is all about terroir: “The microorganisms that play a role in fermentation are specific to the place,” Vázquez says.

As word spreads about Puerto Rico's producers (Loiza Dark, Castronovo Chocolate, Forteza Caribbean Chocolate, and others), more islanders want in. Tens of thousands of cacao trees have been planted in recent years, and some haciendas are even dabbling in chocolate-driven agrotourism, inviting travelers to live out Willy Wonka-esque fantasies through tours, workshops, and tastings.

“Many who come to Puerto Rico want to enjoy the nature, food, and everything the land has to offer,” Vélez says. And now, as history happily comes full circle, that includes chocolate once again. •



Facing page:
Grinding cacao
nibs at Loiza Dark.
Below, from left:
Molding chocolate;
embossed bars at
Loiza Dark.



GET IN ON THE ACTION

FORTEZA CARIBBEAN CHOCOLATE

This floral 80 percent bar by Chocolate Cortés, the island's oldest producer (est. 1929), is made from inland and west-coast cacao. It comes in a tin decorated by abstract expressionist painter Guillo Pérez.

CACAO 360

A husband-and-wife team uses beans from their farm to make these petite bars. With woody astringency and perky fruit flavors, the signature 80 percent chocolate pairs with bold red wines and dark beers.

CASTRONOVO CHOCOLATE

Made in Florida using cacao sourced from Hacienda Jeanmarie Chocolat in Aguada, this 70 percent dark chocolate is redolent of dates, vanilla, and pecans. Proceeds from this bar go directly to the Hacienda.

LOIZA DARK

This 65 percent bar was the first to use exclusively Puerto Rican cacao, and its success is a testament to the complex, nutty flavors of the single-origin beans.