



## FAIR AND SQUARE

PHOTO: ALTER ECO

The act of giving  
can make chocolate—and livelihoods—  
a little bit sweeter.

BY MICHAEL A. MILLER

'Tis the season for chocolate goodies to deck the aisles of your local grocery store, but do you know where they all came from? Before it nestles behind festive wrappers, chocolate's headliner ingredient—cocoa—can be traced back to impoverished farmers in developing West African countries. Yet these hard workers do not receive fair pay for their toils in the field.

Instead, a barrage of retailers, wholesalers, transporters, and middlemen take bloated cuts of the pie, and what trickles down to the local farmers is all but nonexistent. Without financial resources to spare, many farmers are unable to maintain their farms. Yields wither and product quality suffers, limiting their opportunities even further. Some have no access to clean drinking water, healthcare, or education for their children. In the worst cases, struggling farmers cannot pay their employees and even resort to slave or child labor—hardly invoking the jolly image sold to consumers in supermarket candy sections.

But what if you could pay a little more for your holiday chocolate and designate a portion of the price to directly benefit the farmers who actually grew the cacao? You can—if you buy fair-trade chocolate this season. The fair-trade movement is a system of trade that empowers the little guys by ensuring they are paid fairly, improving their communities, and giving them a stronger voice in the global market.

Here's how it works: Instead of dealing with deceitful and greedy middlemen, small-scale farmers work through local member-owned cooperatives and associations to sell their goods at a guaranteed minimum price. The co-ops are supported, inspected, and certified by internationally-recognized fair trade federations that set standards like fair prices, decent working conditions, a minimum wage for employees, long-term trade relationships, and a fair-trade premium—a fee paid on top of the fair prices that co-op members democratically invest in social, economic, and environmental protection projects.

Back in the northern hemisphere, chocolate manufacturers that buy fair trade cacao are certified by third-party labeling organizations. Look for a fair-trade certifier's mark on product packaging, verifying that it was made with quality ingredients purchased at a fair price. One such company, Alter Eco, buys organic, non-GMO ingredients from 24,338 farmers across nine co-ops to craft socially responsible chocolate

### GET TO KNOW A CACAO FARMER

**NAME:** María Estela Guerrero Peñafiel

**HOMETOWN:** El Deseo, Yaguachi  
in the province of Guayas

**AGE:** 58 years old

**OCCUPATION:** Cacao farmer

**FARM SIZE:** 2 hectares

**YEARLY YIELD:** 1,000 pounds per hectare

**COOPERATIVE:** UNOCACE

bars, truffles, rice, and quinoa products. They also help their farmers invest in their farms and communities by setting up local projects, such as building a seed nursery in Peru and donating laptops for indigenous quinoa farming communities in Bolivia.

Although fair trade products tend to cost a bit extra, this can be justified by more than just superior quality of ingredients. "When shoppers use their purchasing power to support fair trade certified chocolate, they're not only getting a high-quality product, they're also directly impacting the lives of others," said Edouard Rollet, co-founder of Alter Eco. To find out exactly how you can impact the life of another this holiday season, we spoke with one Ecuadorian cacao farmer who sells cocoa to Alter Eco through her local association under the UNOCACE co-op.

**EATING NATURALLY:** *Please tell me about your household.*

**MARÍA ESTELA GUERRERO PEÑAFIEL:** I currently live in a modest house in El Deseo. My grown-up children live in Guayaquil and I support them financially to pay for basic services such as housekeeping costs and to help them with their sons and daughters; my grandchildren.

**EN:** *How would you describe the economy of your hometown?*

**PEÑAFIEL:** El Deseo was economically slow-growing. There was only one convenience store where everyone used to go on the weekends to get their food and supplies after working very hard on their land. Initially, farmers cultivated melon, watermelon, cucumber, corn, and other food crops. But in 1936, they started cultivating cacao, and thanks to these crops, farmers earned additional income which improved their household financial situations. Cacao was the first big cash crop that was exported. The other crops were only sold at the local market. Because cacao from Ecuador was very famous, it fetched a good price. This is how I

was able to provide education to my children, own my house, and own two hectares of farmland.

**EN:** *Why did you become a cacao farmer?*

**PEÑAFIEL:** Before inheriting my farm, I had no idea about cacao prices and how to grow cacao. When I inherited my farm, I took a chance and started to learn what I had to know about cacao production, so that I could continue producing it in the future. When I sold my first bag of cacao I realized that I received much more money than I received for my food crops, which I was sometimes selling to the local market. I realized that by growing cacao I could improve the financial stability of my family.

**EN:** *What is a hardship you have faced with your farm?*

**PEÑAFIEL:** My predecessors cultivated my farm for many years using seed agriculture, so the production was notably lower than when planting already grown and crafted cacao seedlings. With the latter method, the plants develop better and are more productive. I made the decision of renewing two hectares of old fields with a new and improved cacao crop. The investment was very costly so it was more of a sacrifice than just a difficulty, but with the support of my family I overcame this sacrifice.

**EN:** *Please elaborate on the improvements you've made to your crops and your farm.*

**PEÑAFIEL:** The farms weren't managed correctly because I had native tall plants with a height between six and eight meters. These plants' production was low and the harvest was very difficult. Now with the organic and fair-trade certifications, the higher prices have improved the productivity of my farm because I was able to create nurseries where I grow new cacao seeds. Then I use only the best ones to plant in my cacao farm, which renewed my fields.

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**EN:** *Tell me about a specific process that was enhanced by the cooperative.*

**PEÑAFIEL:** When I was not organized in an association, I had to take care of the whole post-harvest process. The cacao wasn't fermented; I dried the cacao under the sun using plastics that contained waste on flat structures made of zinc and other materials and sold it semi-dry to the intermediary association. Many farmers did not do well with the drying process. They opened the cacao pods and directly dried the beans without fermentation. This issue was brought to light by the post-harvest management centers of the different associations belonging to UNOCACE, a second-level organization, and now the farmers just deliver fresh cacao beans. Through my membership, I can bring freshly opened cacao beans directly to the buying center of my association and they will take care of the whole post-harvest process.

**EN:** *How does the cooperative ensure you receive fair prices for your cacao?*

**PEÑAFIEL:** I meet with the other associate farmers monthly to learn about the progress of fair-trade cacao sales. At the end of the year, UNOCACE sends information about the quantities of cacao sold for each fair-trade organization so that cooperatives and associates can create a development plan for the fair-trade premium.

**EN:** *Tell me about the improvements the cooperative has made in your community and how they have impacted you and your family.*

**PEÑAFIEL:** Since I started planting cacao and harvesting it, I realized that in my farm there is a great diversity of fauna and flora, and by keeping the cacao crops, I'm contributing to the conservation of that biodiversity. Since I'm a member of the cooperative, I volunteer very actively; I participate in meetings to decide democratically on things about the cooperative. In general, one

of the biggest changes I had was to receive a fair price for my products. Thanks to the fair-trade premium, I was able to improve infrastructure and facilities, always with the goal of improving the quality of my products.

**EN:** *How has the cooperative improved the sustainability of your land and your crops?*

**PEÑAFIEL:** I farm the cacao using biodiversity and environmental sustainability criteria, which has helped me to improve the quality of my land and therefore the quality of my products. In farmer trainings, UNOCACE tells farmers that they have to grow their cacao associated with a lot of other crops (fruit trees, timber trees, food crops, like manioc, yam, etc.), which keeps the cacao farm quite diversified. Because of organic certification, farmers do not use pesticides

and mineral fertilizer. All these issues are managed in the organic farming manual of UNOCACE.

**EN:** *What do you want consumers of your cocoa to know about the difference fair trade makes in your life?*

**PEÑAFIEL:** I would like the consumers know about the agroforestry approach I use to preserve Ecuador's native species. Also, at some point I'd like to have Ecuador's own certificate of origin for cacao with aromas known all over the world.

*For an in-depth look at fair trade from a chocolate manufacturer's perspective, read our exclusive interview with Alter Eco's Edouard Rollet on our website [www.eatingnaturallymag.com](http://www.eatingnaturallymag.com).*



## COCOA VS. CACAO

Until recent years, the term cacao was primarily used by the chocolate industry in reference to cacao beans, their fruit pods, and the tree that they are harvested from. Then came the natural movement. Now companies seek to inspire a more raw, closer-to-the-farm image for a product that traditionally undergoes highly complex processing before reaching your taste buds. Lightly processed, cacao-labeled products will be closer to the acidic, bitter spice used by the Aztecs and Mayans, but no less enjoyable.

**\$126,133**

THE AMOUNT IN FAIR TRADE PREMIUMS  
PAID BY ALTER ECO IN 2015

**\$1.96**

THE PRICE PAID BY ALTER ECO PER  
POUND OF COCOA