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BY VERITY EDWARDS
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Thanks to Oz, Vanuatu cacao farmers are tasting sweet success

SO here we are in Vanuatu, sitting under a thatched roof on a lush farm near Port Vila, tasting dark chocolate. No surprises there: there are more than 4000 growers of cacao beans across these South Pacific islands, banded together in family or community farming co-operatives.

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But as I'**m** about to learn from Swiss-born professional chocolate judge Ben Kolly, raw cacao beans, grown on these verdant islands by third- and fourth-generation families, undergo a complex process to turn them into the product we so love. This explains why most of the family growers, growing their beans solely for export, never taste the fruit of their labours.

That was until two years ago, when Australians came to town armed with $1 **million**, promising big changes and a brighter future, on a mission to improve bean quality. Hence our visit, for a unique local chocolate tasting competition. From this little contest, big things could grow. If boutique chocolate makers like what they find, they could triple prices and improve local livelihoods.

This week, two of the largest chocolate producers, Mars and Barry Callebaut, predicted a cocoa shortage by 2020. Climate change, disease, drought, even ebola could hit production, while the growing taste for chocolate in India and **China** will fuel demand. But for the moment, the farmers of Vanuatu, are not seeing the rewards.

Chocolate tasting is an exacting science and a serious **business**. According to Kolly, technical manager for Haigh's, the Adelaide-based fourth-generation family chocolate **company**, the food of the gods has more than 600 identifiable characteristics including floral, earthy, nutty and fruity flavours, smoke taint, astringency, bitterness and even mould, the latter from over-fermentation.

"Chocolate is the most fascinating product," Kolly says. "You can improve on the imperfections that we pick up, just by training the growers." This Vanuatu chocolate tasting competition is part of the federal government's Pacific Agribusiness Research for Development Initiative, run out of the University of Adelaide's Global Food Studies program.

Turning cacao beans into Western chocolate bars is complex, and growers in developing countries rarely add much value to their harvest. While chocolate is everywhere, those who grow the beans are subsistence farmers who live in tin huts and survive on fruit and vegetables.

Cacao bean harvesting is a village effort; family cooperatives cut down pods with machetes and then pack beans in large fermenting boxes, banana leaves or hessian bags. They turn the beans while they ferment to prevent mould, and stoke the embers in drying huts while the beans roast, ensuring smoke drifts away via tin chimney to prevent it tainting the beans.

The last they see of the dried and bagged beans are when they are boated in from outlying islands, flown across the archipelago and transported on old utes to Port Vila, the final chocolate bars never to be seen.

Mark Bahen, a West Australian boutique producer here with his son Josh, says helping Vanuatu growers understand what the beans taste like, what the end product becomes and how it can be improved can help local co-operatives improve their farming.

“We were staggered two years ago at the sophisticated palates of people who had never tasted chocolate; they could pick up taint; they could pick up mould,” Bahen says. “Their palates haven’t been corrupted by salts, sugars, trans-fats. They live in the jungle.” These Vanuatu growers treat their beans a mere cash crop usually trading to Singaporean buyers to churn into Cadbury’s or other popular brands.

Ten farming co-operatives across Vanuatu’s archipelago on the islands of Epi, Malekula and Santo have supplied the 5kg batches of beans for the contest. French volcanologist Sandrine Wallez, who runs the ACTIV Centre supporting islander craftswomen, has made the beans into bars. She plans to open a chocolate factory by the end of the year. The chocolate will be predominantly **sold** to tourists, providing much-needed jobs.

For the competition, Kolly brings a flavour wheel to help both professional and amateur judges identify characteristics listed on a marking sheet. Apples and **bread** cleanse the palate between samples.

First you smell the chocolate — best to close your eyes — and assess its aroma, hunting for a hint of smoke or mould, looking for a strong cocoa odour. Next you taste, savour, allow the flavours to linger, and then grade the product. As with **wine**, coffee and olive oil, there are complexities in chocolate tasting; it’s about identifying positive and negative characteristics and how they affect the viability of a **commercial** product. For a chocoholic with no gastronomic qualifications, it is the perfect gig.

Vanuatu’s cacao industry began in the 1890s, when German missionaries brought beans to grow in plantations as a tradeable commodity. It became a cash crop, along with taro, coffee and coconuts.

Now, thanks in part to the PARDI project, crops flourish. The project, primarily funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research, has cost close to $1m to date.

There have been dramatic improvements in production and quality outcomes, says cocoa project leader Randy Stringer, particularly since growers learned what their end product tasted like thanks to technical testing at Haigh’s, American chocolatier Gary Guittard and WA’s Bahen & Co, and from samples growers initially provided. Stringer says the competition identifies barriers that need to be overcome.

“It’s innovative and you’re connecting the growers to the chocolate makers; they help identify the quality and standard gaps,” he says. “By building that relationship they bring new ideas, they co-invest. It’s not just the money, they co-invest time, they share information. Instead of beans just going one way, you’ve got relationships and information sharing.” The tasting takes place as part of Vanuatu’s Salon Cuisinaire, a cooking competition for local chefs. And after three hours of chocolate tasting, the project’s impact is tangible. The judges agree. Two years of efforts to improve fermentation and drying practices mean there is now very little smoke taint, no noticeable mould and not much astringency compared with 2012 samples.

The next step is commercialisation: Bahen & Co could have a product on the shelves within six months, and Haigh’s is looking at including the farmer’s beans in some of their blends by mid-next year.

Kolly plans to test whether the Vanuatu beans can be incorporated into Haigh’s blends, and whether a single-origin bar is feasible. The **company** trialled a single-origin Vanuatu bar two years ago, but it did not have enough product to sustain volumes and there were minor concerns about smoke taint.

But, he says, when it comes to incorporating different beans into a successful high-end product consumed by connoisseurs, Haigh’s will need to be careful not to vary its popular recipes too much. “It’s a long process; it has to be done very carefully,” Kolly says.

“If you love a product and then something is changed, you feel cheated. Haigh’s is very respectful of its customers. There is a lot of integrity.” The Bahen family involvement is not just altruistic. They are looking for the best beans, a niche market and something to separate them from the common Latin American, Indonesian or West African varieties. Their products are upmarket, with packaging designed by Josh’s wife Jacqui resembling a montage of Australian art collections in the nation’s most prominent galleries.

“We don’t want to come across as altruistic, Mother Teresa — it’s a **business** partnership,” Mark Bahen says. “We want an insight into their souls; we want to see them grow.” His son Josh, a chocolatier with a degree in oenology, has over the past seven years bought century-old equipment to ensure he is faithful to the industry’s roots and flavours. For him it is about provenance. “We want a partnership; we want to tell the story of the grower.” Growers generally receive up to $3000 a tonne when selling to a

bulk dealer, but companies such as Bahen & Co would triple that for quality Vanuatu beans. It is a win for growing communities and buyers.

The growers include Isaac Leo, who carried his beans on the back of a horse to a boat at Wunon, on Espiritu Santo, then travelled for eight hours down the side of his **island** via boat and inland for several hours via four-wheel drive, just to fly them to Port Vila. A two-day logistic adventure.

And then there is Denis Nambith, a third-generation grower from Malekula, who works with his family to harvest their 1000-tree farm. Nambith spent two years improving his bean quality with the help of the PARDI project and was unanimously voted the winner of the chocolate competition. “I’**m** very surprised,” he says. “We changed the height of our chimney, we reduced the smoke, we improved our quality.” And all for an end product likely to be eaten by thousands of people. Except himself.Verity Edwards is writing a book about chocolate. She travelled to Vanuatu as a guest of the Pacific Agribusiness Research and Development Initiative.

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