

equal opportunity

The future for cocoa farmers in Toledo, Belize, is bright, with Green & Black's Maya Cold Project ensuring fair trade for locals and quality 'food from the gods' for us



CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW Cocoa pods; *kuku*, a traditional Mayan cocoa drink; nursery of cocoa tree plantings; farmers Eusebio Salam (left) and Luciano Sho; cocoa seeds; a farmer's dwelling at Toledo

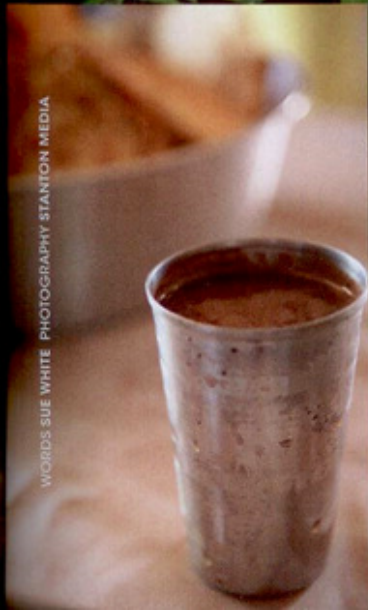
It's not often you meet a genuinely contented man, but after a few minutes with cocoa farmer Eladio Pop, I realise I'm in the presence of someone pleased with his lot in life.

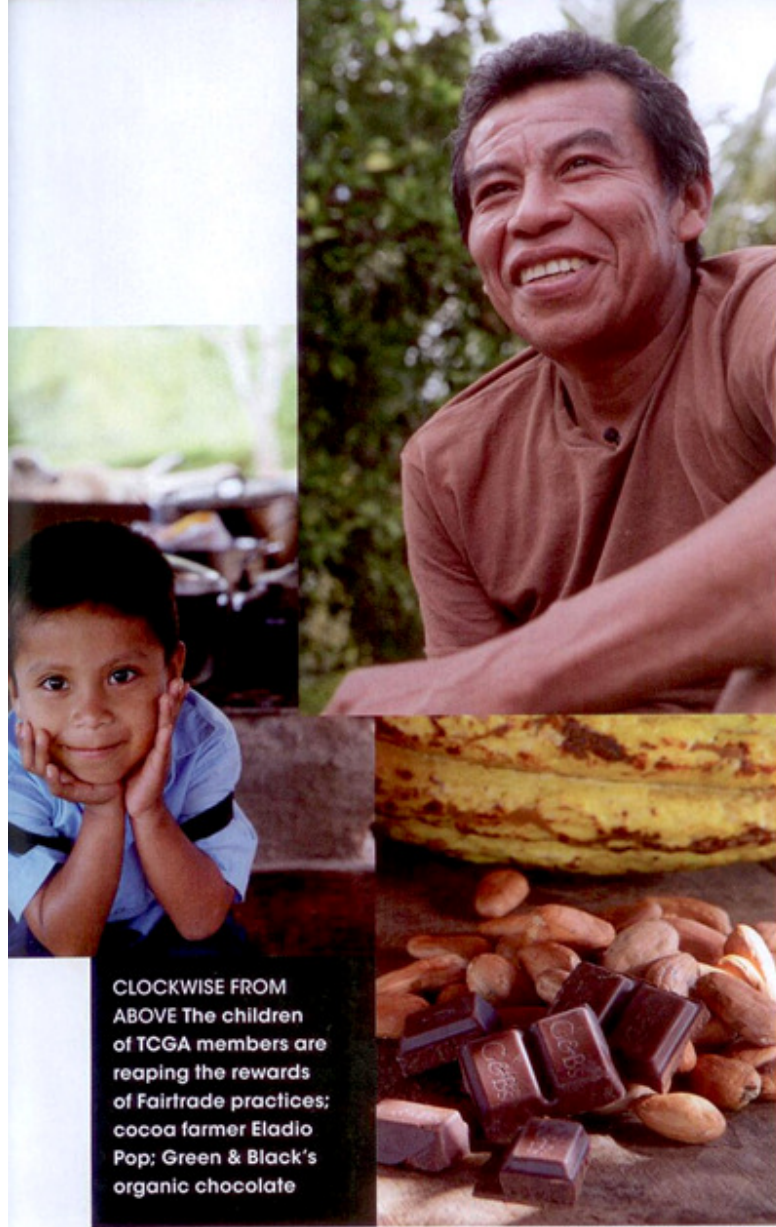
Gesturing happily towards the sky above his hut in the jungle of southern Belize, the 49-year-old father of 15 conveys genuine enthusiasm about the product he relies upon for his modest living. "Cocoa is so pure, you can do so many things with it. It's good for your heart and your health; it has to be from the gods."

Bumping along the jungle roads an hour earlier to reach Pop's farm, I, too, had been thinking about the gods. Admittedly, my thoughts were slightly less appreciative, as I sent out a request for a few less potholes. The journey, however, was worth the discomfort, especially for my tastebuds: Pop's cocoa beans will eventually land on supermarket shelves as the vital ingredient in one of my most revered foods: chocolate.

Leafy, attractive cocoa trees are easy to spot; most of them dangle dozens of large, oval cocoa pods from their branches. Inside each pod nestle up to 50 slightly bitter beans, cushioned within soft, lychee-flavoured flesh. It's the drying, fermenting and processing of these beans that turn them into chocolate as we know it.

Like many farmers in Belize's Toledo region, Pop is of Mayan descent, and his ancestors have a long relationship with cocoa. While my devotion to chocolate is orientated around eating it, Mayans have been drinking cocoa for





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE The children of TCGA members are reaping the rewards of Fairtrade practices; cocoa farmer Eladio Pop; Green & Black's organic chocolate

Most grow rice or corn, and sell it to the government at prices providing a hand-to-mouth existence.

Potential prosperity lies with the international market. But there's a long history in this part of the world of multinationals doing the wrong thing, as Craig Sams, founder of Green & Black's, discovered when he set up a Fairtrade relationship with TCGA's farmers 15 years ago.

"Some were suspicious we would be like all the others, coming down, making them big promises, and then disappearing," Sams tells me over a meal of rice and beans in the sleepy town of Punta Gorda.

The five years it takes for a cocoa tree to reach maturation must seem an eternity for a farmer relying on a stranger's word. To counter scepticism, Sams offered TCGA's farmers five-year rolling contracts for their cocoa beans. Bizarrely, aid workers in the area tried to talk the farmers out of the deal, but finally they've changed their tune.

"The same people who were telling farmers not to listen to us in 1993 are now sending experts here to study the project, so they can use the lessons in their own development work elsewhere," says Sams.

As with most commodities, cocoa prices fluctuate wildly and may drop from as high as US\$3000 a tonne to less than \$1000 a tonne. Fairtrade provides the developing world's farmers with a level of security, by paying a guaranteed minimum of \$1600 a tonne for their beans (more if the market goes higher), plus a premium of US\$150 per tonne (US\$200 if the cocoa is certified organic). TCGA's farmers grow organic, so their beans attract the additional premium. Pricing is complicated, but the worst-case scenario means these farmers earn slightly above Fairtrade prices, and in good years, such as 2008, will almost double it.

After sweating your way along a jungle track to reach a remote plot of less than a hectare, it's gratifying to know the producer is being rewarded. Like all farmers, cocoa producers are dedicated; pruning the trees is physically demanding, gathering and harvesting the pods to extract

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more than 1500 years, originally by the elite during ceremonial occasions. The tradition of drinking it remains, although now, it's across society and simply for enjoyment.

Aside from sugar, water and fermented cocoa, there is no one recipe for the warm beverage known as *kuku*. Pepper, vanilla or other herbs may be added, depending on what's in season, which ensures that every batch is unique.

Sipping Pop's own creation, a sweet, grainy liquid served in a large gourd, I'm quietly amazed that someone with so many children can appear so relaxed. The farmer seems to be reading my mind.

"I have 15 children and all are healthy. No cripples, no problems; I think it is the cocoa. It's all I drink, because it nourishes my brain, my heart and my mind." He smiles broadly, and his happiness is contagious.

There may be an additional explanation for his satisfaction. Pop and his fellow growers are part of a unique, symbiotic relationship between a local cooperative and the Western consumer. Pop grows his cocoa for the Toledo Cocoa Growers' Association (TCGA), a non-profit group that coordinates the buying and selling of Fairtrade, organic cocoa beans to Green & Black's for their Maya Gold Dark Chocolate.

The hilly fields dotted with the small farms of about 900 TCGA members offer a glance into Fairtrade at its source. Belize, a tiny country on the Caribbean coast between Mexico and Guatemala, is filled with farmers.

the seeds is time-consuming, and the drying and fermentation process requires a keen and experienced eye to guard against any mould or insect damage.

Rewards flow to the younger generation. Farmer after farmer, whose own education typically stopped at sixth grade (usually between age 11 and 12), conveys real pride, talking of their ability to send their many children to high school and even university. Still, retirement isn't typical.

"I'm 63 years old," says Margarito, one of Pop's peers. "I'm now trying to save some money for myself and I want to pass my farm lease on to my grandson."

While the farmers' success is gratifying, it's also satisfying to see the relationship between the TCGA and its buyer at play. Sams' opinion seems to carry no more weight with the farmers than anyone else standing under these shady trees, and as a believer in trade, not aid, it's the way he likes it.

"These are the only farmers in Belize who stand on their own feet and don't need help from the government. In a little area like this, money circulates; it changes hands and everybody's the richer for it."

Back on Eladio Pop's small farm, I'm reminded that in some cases at least, these farmers rely on cocoa for more than an income. "When my wife is having a baby, we don't leave the house. I just feed her some cocoa drink and then the midwife comes for a couple of hours; that's all we need."

More information, visit greenandblacks.com and fairtrade.net. VE♦