FEATURES

People of Trinitario exhibit at Medulla Gallery

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Lawrence James keeps the spirit of his father alive in Brasso Seco. - Photos by Denise Speck

In the old days, cocoa created villages for the year-round tasks on the estates – caring for the trees, harvesting, fermenting and dancing the cocoa. Today, it's calling together a global community, from the Trinidad rainforests where the natural Trinitario hybrid was born to the cities which made an art of the golden bean.

A Story of Trinitario celebrates this new cocoa village and will be presented from October 2-7 at Medulla Gallery, Fitt Street, Woodbrook.

More than ten years ago, Rene Sperber and Tobias Schulze Frenking came to Trinidad on a mission from a German chocolate company. After the project ended, they stayed for the EU-funded programme to help develop the International Fine Cocoa Innovation Centre at the Cocoa Research Centre.

RAZOR

Dr Stephanie Omardeen finds solace in cocoa. -

Their company Ubergreen Organics has attracted a Trinidad cocoa collective – a fine cocoa cluster – that comprises growers, chocolate-makers and innovators to model the new cocoa village.

Sperber and Frenking bring business and innovation backgrounds and understanding of global cocoa and chocolate industry to link local producers with international markets. Ubergreen has produced the first cannabidiol (CBD extracted from hemp) chocolate bar made at origin in a fine-flavour-cocoa country. With funding from IDB Compete Caribbean Partnership Facility, Ubergreen led the process of implementing the Organic Fine Cocoa and Chocolate Cluster (OFCCC) project, which transitioned to the Original Trinitario Cocoa (OTC) Education Foundation, which now has over 15 cocoa members and corporate support.

Tobias Schulze Frenking and Rene Sperber bring innovation to farmers like Aaron. -

The members of OTC believe Trinitario is a treasure that must be preserved and celebrated. Trinitario was hybridised by nature and enhanced through selective breeding, and has provided planting material for estates around the world.

OTC identified some challenges and is working to resolve them: availability of planting material; field-management practices; post-harvest practices; low productivity; and unavailable labour.

Javed Omardeen manages the 20 acres of Little Hermit Estate. -

Sarah Bharath, soil and crop consultant, and Junior Bhola, who devised the Bhola Method of plant propagation, work with the members to provide training on the ground.

OTC currently comprises a handful of small farmers, entrepreneurs and cottage businesses operating in the cocoa sector. They know TT is fortunate in its biodiversity – flora and fauna as well as human – and believe in the resilience of community.

Its new model village will be on show at Medulla in the heart of the House of Cocobel fine chocolate built by Isabel Brash.

Martin and Jacqueline Matthew raise a family in cocoa. -

The architect-turned-cocoa entrepreneur and chocolatier has created a brand that is more than cocoa and chocolate production. She says it reflects the entire TT foodscape and cultural collective: “The whole story in one bite.”

The exhibition is the work of Denise Speck, a thesis for her postgraduate degree in digital storytelling. She set out to tell the story of Trinitario, the tree that united and influenced the culture of TT. She has collected the stories of the membership, which include photographs and a short film, Trinitario – On the Edge. These are stories of family, small estates, business and production lines that integrate agriculture, artisanal practices, innovation and art.

Sparkle Charles and her specialty chocolates. -

The exhibition will take visitors through rainforest estates, into country kitchens and see the output of a dozen small businesses. They'll be able to sample and purchase products – cocoa and chocolates – at the cocoa fair on October 7, and meet some of the new cocoa entrepreneurs.

Martin Matthew retired from oil and gas offshore. and now the Matthew family works ten acres in Talparo, producing Tamana Mountain Chocolate. Jacky anchors the chocolate-making process. Oshu, 19, has been trained in post-harvest processes. Zari is providing home-cooked meals, and, with Megan, is figuring out their places in the cocoa world.

Stephanie Omardeen is a practicing doctor, who learned her love for the land and cocoa in Belize. On Tinamou Estate in the rainforest of Brasso Seco, she grows cocoa and other tree crops with a permaculture approach.

Farmer and chocolate maker Nikita Nath is growing into the future. -

“I am a soil farmer,” she says.

In the same area, her son Javed Omardeen manages the 20 acres of Little Hermit Estate. He is, he says, cultivating harmony...with everything in its place. Chocolate made from Tinamou and Little Hermit is marketed under the Omarbeans label.

Richard de Verteuil is in the Central Range, retired from a career in the oilfields. His family has cultivated cocoa for at least three generations so it was in his blood to move to the San Antonio estate, offering organic production since 2019.

Lawrence James practises agroforestry on ten acres which he works with his mother Josephine, in the memory of his father. He is part of the North Ridge Cooperative. He believes there’s a future in cocoa for younger generations. Associations are necessary: he longs to meet other cocoa farmers, to share ideas. His roucou trees provide shade, fertiliser and sauce; trees are very important to the environment. He hopes to expand revenue from his estate through tourism.

Retired oilfield worker Richard De Verteuil returns to cocoa. -

Nikita Nath has accepted responsibility for the past, present and future of cocoa at the Ortinola Great House and Estate, 365 acres in Maracas Valley St Joseph. The biggest investment and challenge, she says, was putting in 5,000 trees in one year to make sense of the high cost of producing cocoa. Ortinola is an old Cadbury estate. Nath is now farmer and chocolate-maker.

Daniel Barcant and Christopher Boodoosingh created Cocoa Republic in 2016, in Diego Martin, crafting award-winning chocolate from single-origin Trinitario cocoa. Roland Thomas is the manager.

Colleen Malwah-Aqui started processing organic skin care and beauty products from Trinitario cocoa butter, establishing her business in 2005 in Trinicity. She grew up in cocoa in Tobago and imbues her products with well-being derived from her experiences and memory of harvesting, sucking the beans from freshly opened pods and dancing cocoa.

Sparkle Charles is an IT professional who believes her Sparkling Gold Chocolates reflect all of Trini culture. Her chocolate kitchen caters to private customers. Her entrepreneurial journey began in 2016.

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