

Cloud 9 Rising with Potential

Bringing back a product that had been lost years ago: a Jamaican-made, pure-ingredient chocolate bar from St. Mary Jamaican cacao trees.

Cloud 9 Chocolate has been launched in Jamaica after a two-year process involving both U.S.-based individuals and industry associations.

BEGINNINGS / PROCESS

“Stop the bus!” Bruce Smith shouted, when he saw the cacao trees growing in the wild. Smith, a retired chocolate man on his first volunteer mission to Jamaica, was aware that the country had been known for its fine-flavored criollo cacao. In recent decades the cacao crop had been devastated by disease (mostly frosty pod) but he saw that some trees still flourished. Smith was in Jamaica as a volunteer with American Caribbean Experience (ACE), an NGO based in Atlanta, Georgia, serving in the parish of St. Mary in Jamaica.

His excitement was unrestrained: “If cacao is still growing here, couldn’t we teach local residents to produce chocolate?” he asked ACE executive director Marla Fitzwater. Her response, as it usually is to ACE volunteers with a good idea, was “When do we start?” This project would meet the criteria set by ACE for approved projects.

Smith spoke with Andal Balu and Balu Balasubramanian of CocoaTown at a Philadelphia Candy, Gift and Gourmet show. Their Alpharetta, Georgia-based business produces the bean-to-bar equipment needed for this type of endeavor, and also offers engineering advice. Smith himself would provide the chocolate-making expertise and experience.

That one-week volunteer trip to Jamaica for Smith has turned into the creation of Cloud 9 Chocolate, and serves to revitalize the chocolate industry in the parish of St. Mary.

Many former cacao-growing areas had been turned



from www.cloud9chocolatejamaica.com

Welcome to Cloud 9 Chocolate!

Our decadent Cloud 9 chocolate is made from some of the finest cocoa beans in the world—found right here in St. Mary, Jamaica!

This women-owned and operated business is run by single Jamaican mothers trained by a world-renowned chocolatier. Every ingredient is locally grown and every product locally made, providing jobs and revitalization for this beautiful parish.

Organic. Premium. Delectable. Go ahead, try it. Let the rich Criollo beans and cocoa butter fill your mouth and senses with pure extravagance.

Cloud 9 Pure Jamaican Chocolate.
We bring Bean to the Bar.

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into banana and sugar plantations instead. Pockets of existing cacao trees could again provide beans for the next microbusiness effort in St. Mary, Jamaica, Smith and Fitzwater reasoned.

Bruce Smith's experience: One Key to Success

Smith's experience in chocolate includes decades with Nestlé Peters, Cargill and Barry Callebaut as well as the Philadelphia National Candy Show, PMCA and Retail Confectioners International. Since that one-week volunteer trip, Smith has visited Jamaica six times and will be on a seventh when this article is published. He is hooked on the ACE Experience ...and anxious to hook others.



"After my wife died, this project gave me something meaningful to do." With his expertise and industry contacts, he has done a great deal more than just get out of his house to serve others. His excitement is contagious. Anyone willing to listen will hear about the lives that Cloud 9 positively affects and why the project matters.

Fitzwater said, "Bruce has contributed hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of hours to this effort. Plus many trips here at his own expense."

American Caribbean Experience

ACE is an independent nonprofit organization focused on helping single moms and families who were financially challenged earn an income to support themselves and their children. The outreach ministry is dedicated to community transformation. Founder

Industry associations get involved
Members of the Fine Chocolate Industry Association, PMCA and Retail Confectioners Association of Philadelphia all worked in tandem to return chocolate processing to a country whose cacao crop had been devastated.

Empowering the impoverished

Challenges for many Jamaicans involve limited education, no income for transportation and the other obstacles families in poverty face daily.

A few ACE business incubation models:

Galina Breeze hotel, Cloud 9 Chocolate and Galina Bees (see acexperience.org)



and executive director of ACE, Fitzwater realized decades ago that to make an impact in the lives of individuals, their most basic needs must be met: education, healthcare and enterprise.

Cloud 9 Chocolates is the latest microbusiness that can be credited to ACE volunteers using their talents and interests to encourage and empower Jamaican nationals.

Volunteers

Approximately 1,000 volunteers (usually in groups of 15) come from the U.S. to Jamaica under the auspices of ACE each year. ACE volunteers usually spend about a week on the island: one day is spent helping at local schools, one day at the infirmary, one day at church, one day at the beach, and usually one day training (which could be in canning, beekeeping or chocolate-making).

Know-how of the volunteers helps provide self-sustaining solutions to local problems, and in turn, empowers the people of St. Mary.

The primary spoken language is Jamaican Patwa —

“We all av gud memories of wi Gran madda reaping chocolate pods from the yaad and then mek them into rich chocolate balls for tea. Sip-pin on di veranda in di evenings over sunsets and a sumptuous meal dat only wi Gran madda can mek.

St. Mary Cocoa a di best chocolate in the world, mi madda seh. Years past and while gran madda done gaan to heaven, har chocolate stay wid mi.

We country girls still believe inna mi gran madda cocoa. So here it is. Cloud 9 chocolate bars. Nabady nuh do dis since been doing this since 1994.

We use only di real tings whey grow in a Jamaica, mek a Jamaica and dem ago sell in a Jamaica. Come taste our Jamaica in wi yaad and see if you naa go carry some a yu yaad suh yu can share wid yu pick-neys and yu ney-bors.

Dis a fram we to yu. Real good stuff. Cloud 9, a piece of heaven from wi island to yu.”



A major focus is on the children currently enrolled in sponsor programs. As the next generation is helped to advance in education, the potential for rising out of poverty is increased. High standards are set for the sponsored families: children must attend school and be appropriately clothed and one parent must be employed at least part-time.

That is where Cloud 9 Chocolates and other ACE business incubation efforts come in — training and empowering Jamaicans in a gainful business to help get them out of poverty. Because St. Mary is one of the largest agricultural parishes, many of the business incubators are related to farming or tourism.

Awareness and acceptance of people (both nationals and volunteers) are vital elements to the success of each short-term project — encouraging each person to grow and use one’s gifts. ACE leaders are keen to match volunteers’ interests and local needs — urged to find one’s niche and see what can happen.

So far a hotel, infirmary, school, restaurant and training facility have begun in St. Mary because of ACE, mainly in Galina, Jamaica. This investment has paid off by helping children stay in school and helping their parents get gainful employment, all while teaching about a good work ethic and productivity and service. This focus is especially helpful for single moms who want to help their kids.

Quality Time and Positive Energy

ACE has seen its efforts pay off in successful community outreach. Videos telling the stories of how families have been impacted are on the ACEExperience website.

When Fitzwater first started bringing volunteers to work in Jamaica, she would observe on subsequent visits that the local community had not experienced lasting change. Despite the projects and improvements, the community inevitably returned to a poverty state physically, mentally and spiritually. She also learned that lack of healthcare and education was a reality — without improvements in those two basic areas, people just wouldn’t have a chance to grow and flourish.

A new strategy for outreach was needed. Four main areas of impact are needed: education, healthcare, enterprise and discipleship.

Fitzwater said, “Too often single moms have no means of supporting their families. Education levels, poverty levels and transportation are all considerations. The educational component is vital so they learn about an actual job, running a business, calculating costs, formulating business plans, marketing and quality production.

PAST

For a variety of reasons, the cacao industry of years ago had dried up; farmers stopped cultivating the

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trees and frosty pod took over. Although Jamaican cacao used to be sold to prominent producer Cadbury (Smith saw a faded sign from that company on one of his trips), that level of production had been a thing of the past.

Smith returned several times to St. Mary parish, meeting with farmers, government representatives and ACE leaders.

In August 2018, Allen Fitzwater (husband of ACE's executive director) came to train on the equipment at CocoaTown in the United States. Then, Allen and Bruce continued the training of employees to process chocolate "bean-to-bar."

PRESENT

As of May 2019, two women now run a chocolate operation in a 12' x 16' room. Only 70 percent dark chocolate bars are being produced at this time. Similar to the production of fine wines, the flavors can't be exactly duplicated every time. Four varieties are produced to start: plain 70 percent, coffee, almond and coconut. All inclusions for the bars are grown in Jamaica. The product will only be sold in Jamaica—grown, processed and sold entirely in-country.

Recently, the ACE administrators procured loans to purchase more property close to current ACE facilities. A farm of 830 acres, including eight buildings, is now available to the Cloud 9 project and other future microbusinesses.

The process of transplanting cacao seedlings from other farms has begun. As a cooperative is set up and a new fermentation facility is developed, the chocolatiers at Cloud 9 will be in better control of the process and the final product.

Marla Fitzwater repeatedly says, "We couldn't do this without Bruce." Smith's connections with various chocolate experts and sources has been invaluable.

As funds become available, ACE is purchasing and shipping equipment to Galina where there is now a factory and a handful of employees. Nearby farmers are willingly selling their cacao beans to the ACE project because of the NGO's reputation of helping their parish.

Right now there are more orders than can be filled

(only 187 bars per week). Their goal is to increase production to 2,000 bars per week with the help of additional equipment and more employees.

As new equipment is purchased and installed, Fitzwater notes, "More chocolate bars mean more people put to work."

FUTURE

Eventually, Cloud 9 bars will be sold in Jamaican airports to capitalize on the tourist market and its high-end hotels. Funds will be used to enlarge the business.

Once the business consistently turns a profit, they will be under the auspices of ACE and beyond the scope of the business incubator.

Eventually the leaders hope to offer plantation tours and tie them in with pirate legend Captain Henry Morgan, whose estate's ruins are nearby the current ACE property. Hands-on chocolate-making would also be a feature of this tourist option.

Rich soil taken from Morgan's former estate is now being used to help transplanted cacao seedlings get a healthy start in their new home.

Others from the confectionery industry are welcomed to help in this revitalization of cacao in Jamaica and encouragement of a new business. Sharing one's expertise can be rewarding in this agricultural and business development effort.

One large gap in the revitalization effort is the fermenting process for Cloud 9 Chocolates—they currently use a facility that was built in the 1950s. The quality of fermentation from this facility is sorely lacking. When Smith took samples of the chocolate to Darin Sukha, an authority on cacao trees at the University of West Indies, during a Fine Chocolate Industry Association (FCIA) regional meeting, Sukha identified the chocolate sample as "overfermented."

Jamaican cocoa has been rated among the best fine-flavored cocoa by the International Cocoa Organization. Smith, Fitzwater and Cloud 9 Chocolates hope to bring this revitalization of unique native flavor to Jamaican cocoa lovers of "di real ting." □

www.acexperience.org