"All the News That's Fit to Print"

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Northern California: Partly sunny in the Bay Area and Central Valley. Turning cloudy, showers arriving along coast north of San Francisco this afternoon. Details, Page B19.

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When Chocolate Is a Way of Life

By JILL SANTOPIETRO

ON an island in the Napo River in Ecuador's Amazonian rain forest, in a tin-roofed hut on stilts, live some of the world's most unusual chocolate entrepreneurs.

César and Magdalena Dahua grow cacao, along with pineapples, vanilla, avocados, cassava, coffee, oranges and plantains. As they hack off the football-shaped fruit of the cacao trees, their three youngest daughters run barefoot nearby. The girls stop to suck the sticky white pulp that envelops the cacao beans in the pods. It tastes like Sour Patch candies.

For Quechua people like the Dahuas, cacao has always been a treat — the pulp a tart candy and the purple bean, when ground to a paste and mixed with hot water and a little sugar, a rustic hot chocolate.

But mostly, the beans were a commodity, sold for about 20 cents a pound to men who would bring them to the port of Guayaquil. From there they would be shipped around the world to be turned into mass-produced chocolate. Every once in a while the Quechua might even taste it.

But the Quechua grew tired of making such a meager living from so highly valued a product. With the help of volunteers they eliminated the middlemen and created their own chocolate. Now Kallari bars (pronounced kai-YAH-ri) — named for the cooperative they formed — are being sold throughout the United States. People in the chocolate industry said they knew of no other cacao farmers who were making and marketing their own chocolate.

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The cooperative uses an unusual blend of cacaos that grow on the Quechua land — fruity Cacao Amazónico, nutty Criollo, Forastero Amazónico, Tipo Trinitario and, most important, a rare variety that flourishes around their homes, Cacao Nacional.

"They have a certain smell and taste that is herbal, flowery but also savory, like black pepper," Tomas Keme, a Swiss chocolate expert who consults for Kallari, said of the Cacao Nacional beans. "It's the same taste I find in a Californian cabernet."

The chocolate is smooth, rich and straightforward. The 2.47-ounce bars, in 75 and 85 percent cacao, sell for as much as $5.99 at Whole Foods.

To become chocolate makers the Quechua first had to decide to be more than just farmers. But they didn't have the knowledge or experience.

"We wanted change," said Carlos Pozo, Kallari's marketing director, "but we didn't have the capital or anyone who would trust us."

Then in 1997 they met Judy Logback, a lanky Kansan with wild blond hair who was volunteering for a foundation promoting biodiversity in Ecuador.

"I didn't show up with a plan," Ms. Logback said. "I asked them what they wanted." Mr. Pozo and others said they wanted to sell directly at markets and learn how to grow better, more desirable cacao. They wanted to find a way to survive and thrive as they faced pressure from companies that sought to log their hardwood trees, drill on their land for oil and mine for gold.

Ms. Logback first helped them take their beans over 250 miles to Guayaquil.

"We received threats that the intermediaries would rob or hijack our trucks," Mr. Pozo said. "In the first years, Kallari was so united that the intermediaries realized they could not break through this union."

They watched their profits from cacao more than double as they got 48 cents a pound in Guayaquil.

Four years later, they established Kallari, which in Quechua means both "to begin" and "the early times." The name seemed fitting, Mr. Pozo said: "In the present, we are valuing our past." With Ms. Logback's help, the cooperative now includes about 850 families.

"Judy really sacrificed a lot for us," said Elías Alvarado, Kallari's director of production and natural resources. "The people in the communities really love her for what she has done."