Cocoa Through the Lens: A Photographer's Visit to the Dominican Republic

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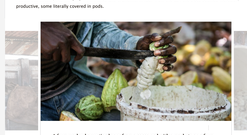
Sharing the Story of Cacao

An employee at BOXC in San Francisco de Macorís, tasting cacao beans from a Dominican farm. Photo by Lucy O'Bryan.

With my previous experience in the region, in countries like Grenada, St. Lucia, and Haiti, I was already a big fan of Caribbean chocolate. So, presented with the opportunity to visit the Dominican Republic to photograph cocoa producers in February 2019, I jumped at the chance. The Dominican Republic is known as the tenth largest producer of cocoa in the world, and a major source of organic beans. The country is also recognized as an important source of fine flavor cocoa, with 40% of its exports supplying these premium markets according to the International Cocoa Organization (ICCO). According to Sarao Rib, a cocoa expert who previously worked with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and helped organize my visit, about 40,000 farmers in the Dominican Republic grow cocoa, most organized into associations and cooperatives. With her help, I was able to visit two distinct cocoa growing regions and witness the diversity of the country's cocoa sector.

San Francisco de Macorís

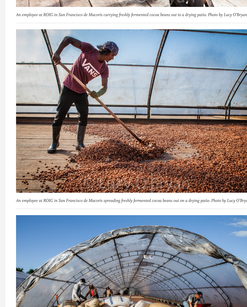
My first visit was to San Francisco de Macorís, a small town located about an hour and a half south of the country's northern coastline, and home to Roig Agro-Cacao S. A., a World Cocoa Foundation member, one of the country's leading exporters of cocoa beans, and one of the largest organic cocoa exporters in the world. People I spoke to in the capital, Santo Domingo, often referred to this area as the 'heartland' of Dominican cocoa. As we approached San Francisco, the rolling plains gave way to stands of cacao, and the reason for this became apparent. Soon, dense groves of cacao trees lined both sides of the road, like one vast forest stretching on for kilometers. Here and there, I could see cocoa pods hanging from trunks and branches. In fact, from the car, the trees seemed incredibly productive, some literally covered in pods.



A farm worker harvesting beans from a cocoa pod with a machete on a farm near San Francisco de Macorís.

Photo by Lucy O'Bryan, San Francisco de Macorís, Dominican Republic, March 2019

Alberto González Hernández, the Manager of Quality at Roig greeted me upon arrival and explained that the impressive productivity I had seen from the road was the result of breeding programs and dissemination of high-yield varieties by companies like Roig in the area. He had arranged a visit to a couple of nearby farms his company works with, where harvesting was taking place. Compared to the smallholder sites I usually photograph, the farms we visited seemed vast and the proliferation of pods was incredible. In fact, I was amazed that the owners could find the beans during the harvesting, which was deep inside the plantations. Next, we visited the fermentation center and drying patios. At this point the air around us was infused with the wonderful rich scent of the beans. With all this cocoa everywhere, I was thrilled when Alberto suggested I visit the company's on-site laboratory to try a cocoa liqueur Roig has under development and a "test" bar of chocolate. It was sheer chocolate bliss.



An employee at BOXC in San Francisco de Macorís carrying freshly fermented cocoa beans out to a drying patio. Photo by Lucy O'Bryan.

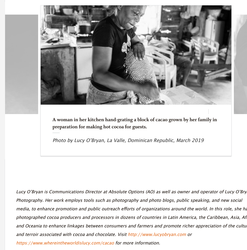
An employee at BOXC in San Francisco de Macorís spreading freshly fermented cocoa beans out on a drying patio. Photo by Lucy O'Bryan.

Employees at BOXC in San Francisco de Macorís bagging freshly fermented and dried cocoa beans. Photo by Lucy O'Bryan.

La Valle

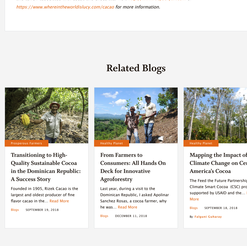
The next area I visited was the remote community of La Valle, in the far eastern province of Samana. We left early in the morning for the visit, driving through a verdant landscape of lush mountains where small farms were dotted across the hillsides growing a variety of traditional Dominican crops such as tubers, citrus trees, and cocoa. I met Yohanny Almonte, the Executive Director of the *Asociación de Productores De Cacao Orgánico De Castillo* (APCOC), in the old port town of Samana, located on the southern coast of the Samana Peninsula. From there, we made our way even farther east along more mountain roads to a narrow unpaved turn-off where we had to precariously ford a couple of shallow rivers to reach the community of La Valle. Along the way, Yohanny explained to me how her and a group of other cocoa producers had formed APCOC in 2012 to join forces in obtaining organic certification for their product, and in order to improve access to new markets by aggregating their beans. The association now has 154 members, 104 of them already certified organic.

A farmer showing me his just opened cacao pod in La Valle. Farmers in this remote region mostly produce banana and tubers, as well as coconut for oil. Cacao production is only recently expanding as organizations like the Asociación de Productores De Cacao Orgánico De Castillo (APCOC) link farmers to markets for the beans. Photo by Lucy O'Bryan, La Valle, Dominican Republic, March 2019.



A group of farmers resting in their cacao grove in La Valle. Although farms in the remote region are often over 80 years old, cacao production is only recently expanding as organizations like the Asociación de Productores De Cacao Orgánico De Castillo (APCOC) link farmers to markets for the beans. Photo by Lucy O'Bryan, La Valle, Dominican Republic, March 2019.

When we arrived in La Valle, we were warmly greeted by a family that had worked with APCOC for a number of years. In one home, we met Marjo Severino, whose family act as local aggregators for the community. Freshly harvested cocoa beans were fermenting in covered plastic barrels in the front yard of their cozy but rustic house. The family also produces cocoons, from which it manufactures coconut oil, marketing the husks for firewood as well to make ends meet. Marjo immediately went to work making traditional Dominican hot chocolate, hand-grating the cinnamon-infused blocks into powder to boil and then sweeten, producing a delicious rich warm beverage that she served with fresh homemade bread for dipping. Next, we visited a series of small farms, mostly under a quarter of an acre. Most of the farmers in La Valle have only a few trees, planted over the hillsides above La Valle, but are gradually expanding their groves as they gain confidence in the market, or as they put it, "timidly" expanding their cocoa farms as they learn more with the help of organizations like APCOC.



A woman in her kitchen hand grating a block of cacao grown by her family in preparation for making hot cocoa for guests.

Photo by Lucy O'Bryan, La Valle, Dominican Republic, March 2019

Lucy O'Bryan is Communications Director at Absolute Options (AO) as well as owner and operator of Lucy O'Bryan Photography. Her work employs tools such as photography and photo blogs, public speaking, and new social media, to enhance promotion and public outreach efforts of organizations around the world. In this role, she has photographed cocoa producers and processors in dozens of countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, Africa, and Oceania to enhance linkages between consumers and farmers and promote richer appreciation of the culture and terroir associated with cocoa and chocolate. Visit http://www.lucyobryan.com or https://www.wheresintheworldislucy.com/cacao for more information.

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