

# Beans, Birds and Business Savvy

In the midst of a pandemic, a family with Connecticut ties continues its quest to make the world a better place

By CAROL LATTER

**T**he Inman family has never been known for backing away from risk, especially in support of a good cause. And not just any cause – one designed to reboot the environment, economy, and wildlife habitat in nation after nation.

Over the last 25 years, Crist and Amie Inman have worn a variety of hats: consultants to national governments and private business investors ... designers and managers of hotel, resort, and lodge projects ... and operators of their own eco-businesses – all built around a singular concept that was the focus of Crist's mid-1990s doctoral dissertation at Cornell.

His research demonstrated that conservation efforts could be significantly broadened if the private sector could be persuaded to invest in eco-friendly development, complementing what governments and philanthropies were already doing to preserve and protect the environment. “Sustainable development” has become something of a buzzword since then, but Crist's conceptualization of “entrepreneurial conservation” was unusual at the time, he says.

Once put into practice, this concept would not only benefit the environment, as it turned out, but help to create a novel business ecosystem aiding everyone from local farmers and artisans to the hospitality industry.

It all began when Crist was invited to Costa Rica in 1995 to give a presentation on his big idea. “And before Amie and I came back home to Ithaca, New York, I had a verbal offer that if I wanted to spend a year or so down in Costa Rica, there was going to be a real concerted effort on the part of the new president to make tourism part of his sustainable development plan. I accepted the offer.”

The couple joined Costa Rica's tourism industry as it



**GREAT DAY FOR A STROLL:** Crist, Amie, Seth, and Milo taking a walk in one of their favorite wooded areas near their home in Costa Rica. Photo by Diana Terán Victory

built from virtually nothing to become one of the country's most important economic drivers. They have also helped replicate these entrepreneurial conservation efforts in such far-flung locations as India and Croatia.

Now, after years of traveling the globe to put their game-changing ideas into jaw-dropping practice, Crist and Amie have teamed up with their oldest son Seth, 28, to launch a coffee business called Organikos. And, of course, it's not just any coffee – it's coffee with a mission, designed to help reinvigorate ecosystems in their adopted country of Costa Rica.

The Organikos coffee brand officially debuted on Thanksgiving weekend, 2019 as the centerpiece of a plan by Amie and Crist to feature locally sourced products in gift

shops that they conceptualized, created, and continue to run at two Marriott luxury resorts in Costa Rica.

Both the coffee and distinctive handmade wares at their “Authentica” branded shops proved hugely popular through March of this year, giving the Inmans the “proof of concept” they were looking for.

Now the Organikos brand has come to America.

## THE CONNECTICUT CONNECTION

Seth – who was just four years old when his parents took him and his younger brother Milo to live in Costa Rica, and who has lived and worked in several countries since then – has been active in La Paz Group, his family's global hospitality business, since he was quite young.

He is currently based in New Haven while wrapping up his graduate degree at the Yale School of the Environment, having previously completed his Bachelor's degree in history at Cornell while working at the Lab of Ornithology.





**GROWING GREEN:** Coffee at Villa Triunfo is harvested between November and February. This estate, in Costa Rica's West Valley growing region, has pioneered sustainable growing methods under the shade of high-altitude forest canopy. Photo courtesy of Villa Triunfo



The original concept for Organikos stemmed from projects he became involved in while his parents were immersed in ecotourism development projects in countries around the world. Seth had been interested in – and had laid the groundwork for – sustainable coffee production in South America, and particularly Costa Rica, through his work there over a number of years. This included encouraging local growers to switch to shade-grown coffee on farms where the natural environment had been eroded by a more aggressive farming approach. The shade-grown model allows coffee plants and birds to happily co-exist.

After nearly a decade developing lodges in India, Amie, a self-professed “Air Force brat” who was born in Alaska, and Crist, who grew up in Greenwich, Connecticut, decided to return home to Costa Rica in 2019. Knowing that Seth still needed to finish his studies at Yale, they offered to help keep the wheels turning on his planned coffee venture by procuring the beans and arranging to have them roasted and packaged while they waited for him to return. After landing the contract with the Marriott properties, the couple offered to showcase

**LOVE TAKES FLIGHT:** Amie and Crist met in September 1983 in the TWA terminal of New York's JFK Airport, where they were both waiting to board a flight to Athens, Greece. They have been traveling together ever since. Photo by **Diana Terán Victory**.





**BRINGING IT STATESIDE:** Seth Inman's vision for Organikos, a company offering the highest quality shade-grown Costa Rican coffee, has come to fruition. Organikos coffee is now available in the United States. Photo by **Stan Godlewski**



**LIQUID MEMORIES:** Organikos showcases “taste of place” from several of Costa Rica’s outstanding individual coffee estates, and from several of its prize-winning regions. Photo by **Alejandro Moreno Bianchi**

Organikos coffee in their newly minted Authentica gift shops, where it practically flew off the shelves.

Over this past summer and fall, as COVID-19 outbreaks have ebbed and flowed in every American state and around the world, Seth has been working part time with Amie and Crist to get the U.S. division of Organikos off the ground. In between classes at Yale, he has pitched in on everything from helping to create the package labels and website ([organikos.com](http://organikos.com)) to strategizing about the best way to get the word out to potential customers.

So far, most marketing has been through word of mouth – to relatives, friends, colleagues and, most recently, former guests at some of the hospitality destinations they’ve designed or managed around the world.

Its four best-selling varieties are currently available in the U.S., and next year, the family hopes to add four or five more. Seth says he and his folks have been careful to set a fair price point, to ensure people receive a high-quality product at a reasonable price. “We want our customers to know that they are not paying ‘extra’ for the environmental aspect,” he says.

The response has been very promising so far, with many repeat customers. “Things are going well,” says Amie. “People seem to love it.”

## NOT YOUR AVERAGE COFFEE

So just what is it that makes Organikos so special?

It’s a good question, with a complex answer.

Seth says first off, all of the profits are earmarked for investment in bird habitat regeneration, which is explained on the Organikos website and illustrated through its social media. “This is what we mean by 100% Forward, the commitment we make on our labels,” he says. The first investment they have made is rehabilitating an organic coffee farm on land the family purchased in 1998. Coffee sales from the first year funded planting shade trees in 2020, with coffee seedlings to follow in 2021.

Second, Organikos is made from the highest quality beans, roasted to preserve their smooth, distinctive flavors. The raw or “green” beans, grown by Costa Rican farmers and transported to the U.S. by ship, are processed by a third-party, certified organic roaster in North Carolina. The beans are then placed in packages that contain virtually no plastic and are sent directly to customers, using shipping labels created by Seth and his parents in response to orders through their website. All of this helps keep the company’s environmental footprint small.

Third, for some buyers, Organikos may be a sentimental choice of coffee brands, bringing back fond memories of their visits to Costa Rica – especially now, when such exotic vacations are difficult or impossible. For tourists who enjoyed the Innans’ coffee while in Costa Rica and hoped to buy more once they got home, the virtual Organikos storefront allows them to do just that.



Fourth, as Organikos continues to grow, the family hopes the company will also help provide a much-needed boost to Costa Rica's economy and its people, who depend to a huge degree on both coffee sales and international tourism to make a living. In recent years, several million tourists have visited from around the world, patronizing the hospitality industry, touring the lush and scenic countryside, and taking tours of local coffee farms. While there, many people sample the coffee and take some home, either for themselves or as gifts for friends and family, along with local handicrafts and other goods. In 2019, tourists purchased roughly 1 million bags of coffee on their way out of the country – an important source of funds for both the local growers and the proprietors of shops where the coffee is sold.

Not only that, but when people give it as a gift, “that has a really important impact on exposing others to the fact that Costa Rica produces good coffee. Tourists will also share the story from their vacation. And so coffee becomes a taste-of-place ambassador for Costa Rica as a place to visit,” Crist says.

growers afloat while also benefiting environmental tourism and conservation – all causes dear to the Inmans' hearts.

## FULL STEAM AHEAD

Some people might think twice before launching an international business venture in the midst of a global pandemic. For Crist and Amie, it was something of a no-brainer. In fact, not only has the devastating impact of COVID-19 over past nine months failed to stop these entrepreneurs in their tracks – it has actually accelerated their timeline.

The original plan was to begin selling Organikos coffee online in 2021, after plenty of exposure from its sales in Costa Rica. But then the unexpected happened.

“Our two new shops were fully open after renovations last November,” Crist recalls. “And by the end of February 2020, they were doing very well. We were able to say to ourselves, ‘We were right to do what we did – basically leaving everything we’ve done before in the hotel development and management field behind for now, and focusing everything



**THE GENUINE ARTICLES:** The Authentica shops at Marriott Hacienda Belen and at Marriott Los Suenos offer locally made artisan handicrafts, including Ceiba Design Collective's kitchen utensils made from recycled fine woods, and Wagat Upcycling Lab's fancifully conceived re-use of plastic waste. Photos by **Alejandro Moreno Bianchi**

The arrival of the global pandemic in early March 2020, and the closure of Costa Rica's airport soon after, brought international tourism – and the accompanying coffee sales – to a screeching halt. Crist says coffee revenues “went to zero” after the borders closed. Next year, visitor numbers are expected to be much lower than 2019's totals, and coffee sales will track that visitation. Making Organikos available online to American buyers will help to keep the coffee

on this new concept called Authentica, which we decided upon because we knew that other hotels in Costa Rica would want to do the same thing that these two Marriotts did. There's a lot of talk about wanting to return to authenticity.”

On February 29, the family celebrated Amie's “leap year” birthday. “That was the last day of the old world,” says Crist. “Starting in March, everything changed. It would be very easy to tell a sad story about starting up a new business and





**WOODEN YOU LIKE IT:** Ceiba Design Collective's spice bowls and utensils (their coffee scoop, seen with Organikos coffee in the photo above, is a best seller) are treated with organic beeswax to provide a food-safe finish that allows the materials to breathe and age naturally. Photo by **Alejandro Moreno Bianchi**

then getting shut down by the pandemic, but I honestly don't feel that way."

For the next few months, he says, "we were basically forced to just slow down to practically a standstill and reflect. We could have said, 'Well, I guess we need to back out of this [retail operation] now because tourism is not only shut down for most of this year, but it's going to continue at a slow pace next year.' Instead, we decided to re-up our

commitment to what we were doing."

By July, Amie recalls, "we realized that one of the missed opportunities this year is not just our reduced sales, but the fact that Costa Rica won't sell anywhere near a million bags of coffee this year. And so we thought, 'What can we do? Not just for our own business, but for all those coffee farmers we have contracts with?' And we thought, 'Let's just experiment. Let's see if we can offer our coffee over the internet and make even a small dent in the lost sales for this year.' That was the impetus for this idea."

With travel restrictions making it difficult for Seth to travel back to Costa Rica, and realizing that he still had another semester to complete before graduation, "we asked him what he thought about spending some of his summer getting a head start on what might be the next most logical step for the coffee business."

Amie says she and Crist have always left the door open for Seth to change his mind about running Organikos after graduating from Yale – they would operate the business if he didn't want to. But Seth has been eager to move forward.

While his plans after his December graduation are not yet finalized, Seth says there may be an advantage for him to remain in Connecticut and oversee the U.S. operations. His brother Milo, meanwhile, is happily running an organic farm in Ithaca. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree," Crist jokes.

No matter what happens, it's safe to say that for the Inman family, another unusual but inevitably successful venture is just around the corner. ■