

## FCIA Goes to Ecuador with ECOM Cocoa & Agroarriba



Left to right, back row: Daniel Domingo, ECOM Cocoa; Glen Davies, Wild Mountain Chocolate; Karen Urbanek, flying noir; Karen Bryant, FCIA, Rob Greenhow & Brett Mohr, Chocxo Bean to Bar Chocolatier; and Justin Henk & Peter Maccaroni, BT McElrath Chocolatier. Left to right, front row: ECOM staffer Patricio Espinoza and our guides Kate Cavallin & Pamela Schreier, Agroindustrias Arriba del Ecuador (ECOM Trading)

Eight hardy FCIA Members, led by FCIA Board Member Daniel Domingo of ECOM Cocoa, stepped onto planes this past September and headed to Ecuador for an adventure.

**Our mission?** Learn about the beans that come from Ecuador, meet the farmers, gain insights into the pre- and post-harvesting processes and acquire a better understanding of how to source beans from this area. In essence – experience origin up-close-and-personal.

**The result?** An experience of a lifetime. Bonding with fellow chocolate professionals. Connecting with the farmers and the land. Experiencing Ecuador. Flooding the senses with sights, sounds, tastes. Ecuadorians opened their farms, their homes, their shops. They gave us rides in their trucks, walked us through their farms and offered up meals, drinks, insights. In short, they provided a human face to go with the beans.

This was the first time that FCIA, in partnership with ECOM Cocoa, offered members such an experience. It was an experiment. We crossed our fingers. And none of us were disappointed.

## Highlights of our five-day Ecuador experience

FCIA Board Member Daniel Domingo of ECOM Cocoa and our tour guides from Agroarriba (ECOM), Kate Cavallin, Country Manager and Pamela Schreier, Regional Sustainability Manager, welcomed us weary travelers with appetizers and cocktails at our first destination, the Hilton Hotel in Guayaquil, Ecuador. This was the first time we got to meet and greet each other and get more details about what the next few days held in store for us.

We were scheduled to depart the next morning. Although the hotel was lovely and we all had a good night's sleep, we suspected it wasn't going to be Hilton all the way. But that was half the fun – not knowing.



Once we left our comfy hotel in a three-car caravan, we were out in the countryside and away from any semblance of big city. Our adventure had begun. Driving was hypnotic – roads lined with mango trees, rice paddies, teak, skinny dogs and cattle, dragon fruit, bike taxis and street vendors, with each community offering their specialty. One community offers racks and racks of honey, another melons, another some beverage we can't identify. We just had to stop for the maize tortilla filled with queso.





We finally arrived at Servio Parchard Vera's farm, Finca Sarita, in San Miguel de Sarampion, Calceta, Manabí for a look at his fermentation process. It felt like we had walked into the rainforest exhibit at Disneyland, complete with lush vegetation and a thatched treehouse built in the canopy of a mango tree.

But this is a serious business – Servio, an agronomist, university professor and post-harvest expert, is also the production manager for [To'ak](#), one of the [Heirloom Cacao Preservation](#) designees, who demands and gets \$300+ per limited edition bar.



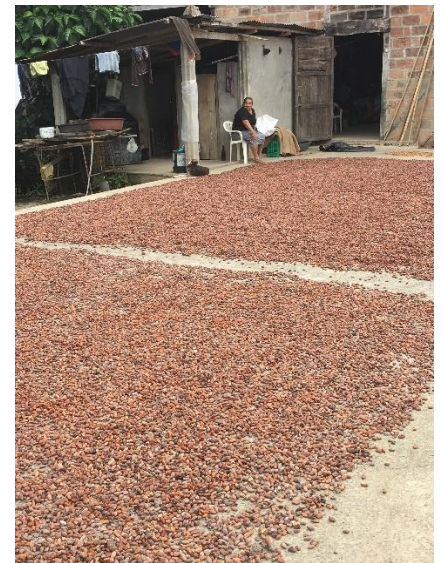
Servio walked us through his fermenting and drying process, explaining through our interpreter, "Post-harvest is where the best flavor is created." His refined protocols monitors the internal and external temperature which manages the microorganisms during the fermentation process. He illustrated how the wet beans are put into the top boxes of a wooden fermenting structure and then carefully lowered into the boxes below again and again at precise intervals. His drying process is up off of the ground on a mesh bed.



This was a great way to begin our education, but it was only the beginning.



We then drove down the road a bit to visit Arnoldo Ganchoso, the HCP winning farmer in Piedra de Plata, where To'ak was born from a rainforest conservation project in the coastal region of Ecuador where co-founder Jerry Toth began cultivating cacao trees and making chocolate. This farm, approximately 100 years old, has 400 trees on two hectares, four of which are designated HCP. We learned how labor intensive it is to manage Witches Broom and Monilia, two fungi that can be devastating to cacao farms.



Another HCP recipient, Samel von Rutte of Hacienda El Limon, is world renown and controversial. Originally from Switzerland, he's been living with his family in Ecuador for the past 25 years making his home among the farmers. He shared with us his views that post-harvest is more important than terroir and that CCN51, if grown and harvested properly, has an important place in the chocolate world. That rocked my understanding, having only heard negative comments about CCN51. But Samel and many others in Ecuador understand that good flavor and a robust economy don't have to be in battle with each other.





Samel walked us through his farm and provided us a lesson on how to properly cut open a cacao pod so as not to injure the beans. We all had an opportunity to try our hand with a machete.



He then gave each of us a chance to roast, crack and grind some of his beans all by hand. And then he fed us like visiting royals, topped off by chocolate mousse made from Samel's prized beans. Amazing!





We visited other farmers, like Freddy Chele and his clonal garden in La Rita and Yuri Loor and his demonstration farm in Campo Verde where they both showed us techniques to increase yields and quality in beans to provide farmers a more profitable living. And as an example of the ultimate production yields, we visited Esteban Saenz and Hacienda Palo Santo. We were driven around his plantation on a tractor-pulled tram to see this incredible example of technology at work creating extraordinary yields (2 ½ tons per hectare).



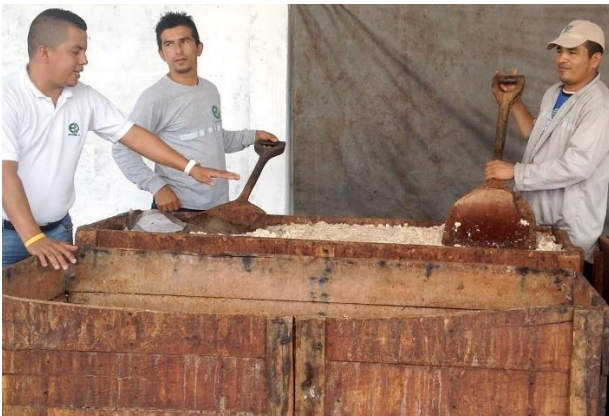
Then we visited a nursery managed by Agroarriba where we all had the opportunity to try our hand at grafting.





## Bean processing at Agroarriba.

And where do all these beans go to be processed and how do they get to chocolate makers around the world? That was a revelation when we visited Agroarriba. We saw truckloads of beans arrive, beans in the fermenting process, beans drying in the sun, beans being tested and evaluated and then bagged and ready to ship.



Our group was given a special honor – a chocolate liquor tasting lead by master taster Silvia Bano, who has worked with Agroarriba for three years.





We met farmers who represented associations of hundreds of other farmers and listened to their stories. Proud farmers who knew just where “their beans” were out in the football stadium-size Agroarriba drying patio. Men who have worked the land for decades and young men bringing new ideas to this ancient tradition with their university training.



We also met individual farmers bringing in one or two bags of beans they had just harvested. We followed them through the process of weighing their beans, sorting and evaluating and then, receiving their check.



It was a revelation to understand that for these Ecuadorians, it wasn't so much about seeing their chocolate in beautiful wrappers being enjoyed by people around the world. It was putting food on their family's table for another month.



## We had some amazing meals.

Our tour guides from Agroarriba took good care to see that we not only learned a lot but were satisfied deep in our bellies and souls. Like, the traditional farmhand meal called Tonga (rice, chicken, polenta, sweet plantain and peanut sauces wrapped in a banana leaf).



The local eatery that Agroarriba staff frequent with traditional lunch for the 9-to-5ers enjoy while the locals catch up on the popular telenovela.



We even had the Ecuadorian version of Chinese and a cold beer.





But the pièce de résistance was the exquisite chocolate inspired meal at La Tasca de Carlos: appetizers consisting of beef carpaccio flavored with cocoa, curry and smoke and warm octopus salad with caramelized onions with a 77% chocolate vinaigrette, followed by sea bass with a squid ink mole and vegetables risotto with cocoa nibs, pork ribs cooked in roasted vegetable, nibs and chocolate sauces, and topped with a 55% dark chocolate brownie with coconut ice cream or chocolate mousse and orange cake.



The entire cultural exposure we got helped us understand the farmers and their lives.





## What our participants had to say . . .

The Ecuador tour was an out-of-the-ballpark experience. We not only learned more than we could have ever asked for in a short amount of time, but we made lifelong friends and connections with people in the industry. The hospitality and knowledge from everyone at ECOM, Agroarriba and FCIA was out of this world and more than we could have ever asked for! We were lucky that we could spend such quality time with the next generation of faces that shape the chocolate industry.

**Justin Henk and Peter Maccaroni**  
BT McElrath Chocolatier, Inc.



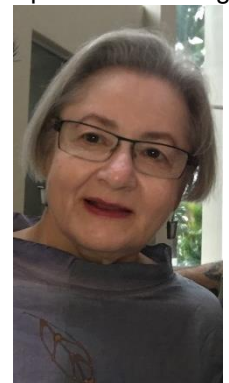
As a chocolate maker looking to experience the origins of the bean, farming methods, harvest and post-harvest practices, this tour delivers! The small group format is excellent for intimate tastings and a real hands-on education in how cocoa goes from pod on the plant to being graded and ready for export.

The ECOM staff were also exceptional with a wealth of progressive, sustainable and ethical techniques that is the fundamental basis for their business in Ecuador. This is only surpassed by their warm nature, local knowledge and passion for being great hosts! Can't wait to do it again!

**Glen Davies**  
Wild Mountain Chocolate

While the trip was short, each day was well planned, packed with essential experience so that the cost seemed quite reasonable. Expenses for almost every part of each day were covered as were many extras. ECOM staff worked very hard to maximize exposure to all aspects of cacao in Ecuador, researching answers to specific questions, all the while making it fun. Such a dense experience meant a shorter time away from my business – very important.

**Karen Urbanek**  
flying noir



I have been in the chocolate industry for over 30 years and this was my first trip to cocoa farms. I had such a great experience as the group was small enough we could all get to know one another, something missed in large groups. We got to go to the farms in the organizers' personal cars. I felt like a local, not just some tourist. Everyone was fantastic.

**Rob Greenhow**  
ChocXO Bean to Bar Chocolatier

I honestly had the time of my life. I learned so much and met great people. If you want to learn about sourcing, the pre/post-harvest processes and all things cocoa from people who are passionate about preserving fine flavor beans, definitely consider the FCIA for all your cocoa expeditions.

**Brett Mohr**  
ChocXO Bean to Bar Chocolatier





This was my first trip to origin, as well. I will never eat a chocolate bar again without thinking of the sundried faces of the farmers we met, their pride, their humanity. This tour gave me the opportunity to experience “origin” up close, learn about the processes, see the different levels of sophistication in farming, fermenting, drying, etc. and have a better understanding how all of that impacts taste.

**Karen Bryant**  
Executive Director  
Fine Chocolate Industry Association

Karen also blogs as [Red, White & Chocolate](#)

FCIA thanks our good friends at ECOM Cacao and Agroarriba for making this tour of Ecuador cacao farms possible for our members. Thank you, Dan, Kate and Pam, for providing us all an experience we’ll never forget.



Daniel Domingo, ECOM Cocoa



Kate Cavallin, Agroarriba



Pamela Schreier, Agroarriba

We hope that you will join us for our next adventure. Stay tuned.

Until then, please join us [for FCIA Elevate Chocolate – Winter 2017](#) on January 21<sup>st</sup> in San Francisco as we kick off our year-long 10-year anniversary celebration!

