



# Make Nice with Vanilla, Chocolate & Spice

By Bill Guyton



**V**anilla, chocolate, and spice are the building blocks of baking—and they're in serious trouble. Some of the best quality baking and pastry ingredients are sourced from the humid tropics and, unfortunately, the fragile environments where vanilla, spices and cacao are grown are facing increasing threats due to climate change, deforestation and biodiversity loss. Equally daunting is the fact that the environment isn't the only thing that's at risk.

Communities of farmers whose livelihoods depend on these powerhouse products also face social and economic hardships. From income dependency on one crop, to lack of access to training, to limited financial resources, farmers are bearing the burden of a seriously broken supply chain—as well as a climate that's rapidly changing.

How and where these ingredients are sourced matters in terms of quality, flavor, and in some cases, the ethical nature of their production.

Vanilla, for example, is native to Mexico, but today it's mainly grown in Indonesia and Madagascar. Spices such as cinnamon, black pepper, nutmeg and cloves are cultivated throughout South and Southeast Asia as well as parts of Africa and Latin America. All of which are zones and growing communities that struggle not only with unfair trade practices but also the climate crisis.

Knowing where your spices originate is about both transparency and flavor, because the flavor of the spices is largely influenced by where they're grown.

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*Single origin ingredients are connected to a place and a tradition, and direct supply chains are incredibly effective at encouraging growth in the communities who initiate them.*

– Ethan Frisch,  
Burlap & Barrel



As Ethan Frisch, co-founder of the sustainable, direct-trade spice company Burlap & Barrel, explains, "spices have terroir, just like wine grapes and cacao beans. You can taste the growing conditions, the minerals in the soil, the unique techniques the farmer used to grow and process them.

Previous Page:  
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Akesson's  
Organics

This Page:  
*Selfie  
from the  
Cinnamon  
Fields in  
Quang Nam,  
Vietnam:  
Burlap  
& Barrel  
Founders  
Ori Zohar  
(L) and  
Ethan Frisch  
(R) travel  
around  
the world  
to directly  
source from  
farmers.*

Image courtesy  
Burlap & Barrel

We see consumers looking for more information about where their spices come from because they appreciate their ingredients even more knowing who grew them. Single origin ingredients are connected to a place and a tradition, and direct supply chains are incredibly effective at encouraging growth in the communities who initiate them.”

Specialty cacao grows in a variety of locations in much the same way, each region with unique flavor profiles and characteristics. These attributes help differentiate fine cacao from mass market counterparts. “Treating a fine flavor chocolate as a nuanced ingredient can add a whole additional layer of complexity to a recipe,” says Simran Bindra of the cacao supplier Kokoa Kamili. “For example, fine chocolate made from our cacao tends to have these delicious red-fruit notes that can add a fun, fruity twist to a tray of brownies. A bean from Papua New Guinea can add smokey notes that could give your s’mores campfire feel without leaving your kitchen.”

Understanding how choosing products from different regions can impact the flavor of different baked goods is important, but it’s even more crucial to understand how these commodities impact the people that live there and grow them.

Facing the environmental and economic issues associated with these ingredients and supporting farmer communities is a challenging and lengthy process that ethical food companies cannot solve on their own. This is why many are reaching out and taking the lead to develop innovative partnerships and joint investments with public sector organizations.

Take for example what’s happening in Madagascar, an interesting case study for the future of key baking ingredients.

As an important origin for high-quality cacao, vanilla, and spices, Madagascar plays a prominent role in producing fine flavor ingredients.



*Farmers drying cacao beans in the Madagascar sun.*

Image courtesy Åkesson’s Organic

At the same time, the island-nation remains one of the ten poorest countries globally, with over 75% of the population living off less than \$2 per day. Madagascar has already lost over 75% of its forests and habitat for lemurs and other endangered species.

The effects of poverty, deforestation, plague, and undernutrition have been and continue to be devastating to the well-being of Malagasy communities and the environment’s biodiversity.

In an attempt to help improve forest conservation and the well-being and prosperity of local communities in Madagascar, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is working with specialty chocolate and spice companies in a new innovative partnership called the TSIRO Alliance.



### *Farmers in Madagascar managing the cacao fermentation process.*

Image courtesy Åkesson's Organic

TSIRO will directly reach over 2,000 farmers in up to 30 communities, planting over 1.5 million trees (endemic, cacao, food, and other spice crops) to build livelihoods and enhance the area's biodiversity. "TSIRO" means "flavor" in Malagasy, representing the specialty cacao and spice supply chains that will be part of this integral biodiversity program.

Unlike many other development programs, TSIRO takes a market-driven approach, building stronger linkages among farmers, business partners, and consumers. The goal is to create a long-lasting impact that can be replicated over time.

The Alliance's private sector partners include Madecasse-Beyond Good (M-BG), Guittard Chocolate, and Åkesson's Organic, who will be

engaged in farming, processing, and buying cacao and spices from the intervention areas. The non-profit partners, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Fine Chocolate Industry Association (FCIA), and the Heirloom Cacao Preservation Fund (HCP) will provide farmer training, consumer education, and preservation of genetic cacao diversity, respectively.

Collectively, all TSIRO partners hope to set the farmers and their communities up for a better future while conserving the environment's biodiversity, and setting a solid example for positive progress.

James Hazen, Chief of Party at TSIRO partner Catholic Relief Services, who also oversees the Securing and Protecting Investments & Capacities for Environmental Sustainability (SPICES) program, explained the unique challenges of the vanilla farmers in Madagascar. "Many farmers in TSIRO zones struggle to get the best quality vanilla they can and end up falling for lower prices early in the season. TSIRO will support these farmers on production techniques, curing practices and engaging with the private sector to form mutually beneficial long term relationships. By building vanilla into larger integrated agroforestry systems, farmers can also maximize the use of their farms while diversifying their products for sale or consumption throughout the year."

Ryan Kelley of TSIRO partner Beyond Good, who produces chocolate from Madagascar beans, echoed these goals for the program. "TSIRO encourages farmers to adopt improved agroforestry models, incorporating cacao with other spices such as vanilla, wild pepper, cinnamon, and chili peppers. Farmers can also plant fruit trees, including bananas, oranges, mango, jackfruit, and breadfruits with cacao. This type of mixed farming system is better for the environment and will help farmers diversify their incomes."

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- Ryan Kelley, Madecasse-Beyond Good

While focusing on present threats is critical, it's also essential to anticipate future challenges. As John Kehoe of Guittard Chocolate explains, "we are excited that TSIRO is a comprehensive program, offering not only improved environmental practices and cacao quality training, but also educational opportunities for youth and adults in remote areas of Madagascar."

As promising and as powerful as these types of initiatives and organizations can be, they aren't the only avenues for effective change—every consumer has the power to make a difference. There are several ways home bakers, professional pastry chefs and chocolatiers can positively impact and help change the vanilla, chocolate and spice trade.

First, seek out and support companies with a strong track record of ethical and transparent trade that benefits growers and their communities. Simply demanding a better system by deciding where to spend your dollars is a proven path to progress.

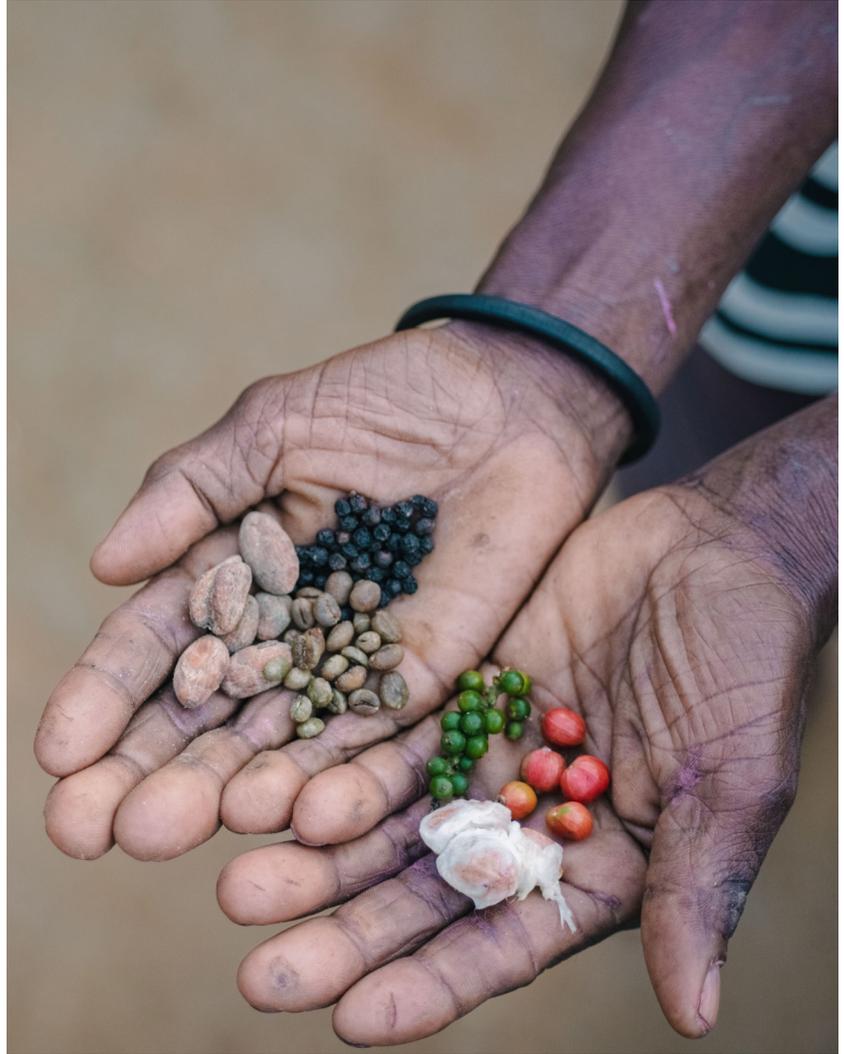
*Be a part of positive change by seeking out and supporting companies that sell sustainable, ethical baking ingredients like Madagascar Vanilla Beans from Beyond Good.*

Image courtesy Madecasse-Beyond Good



Second, get active in Madagascar's TSIRO Alliance program as well as other advocacy programs that are making a real impact on the ground. Third, consider supporting organizations like the Heirloom Cacao Preservation Fund, an organization dedicated to the preservation of fine flavor cacao. HCP even offers an "adopt a cacao tree" program where you can directly help Heirloom farmers in the growth and prosperity of their farm by adopting one or more trees.

There are many ways—directly and indirectly—to support growers, their communities, their futures, and to make nice with vanilla, chocolate and spice. It starts with conscious consumerism and consumption, partnering with programs, and simply spreading the word and passing knowledge on to the next generation. By acting together, we can build a better future for quality baking and pastry ingredients that are not only more flavorful, but also more ethical and sustainable. ●●●



*The FCIA recently launched a consumer-facing website called [MakeMineFine.com](http://MakeMineFine.com) that lists dozens of fine-chocolate companies who are making a difference in various ways such as involvement in supply chain programs, engaging in fair and direct trade, and obtaining certifications such as B-Corp and Fair Trade Certified. You can also search the Fair Trade Certified Products page, as well as the World Fair Trade Organization's Supplier Search.*

*A farmer in Madagascar presents the fruits of his labor, raw and dried cacao, coffee and black peppercorn.*

Image courtesy  
Catholic Relief  
Services / TSIRO