

Farm retail is growing

I'm writing this sitting in our office come farm store waiting for the paint to dry on our new product cabinet where we are showcasing our cocoa and vanilla. We started our farm store about a year ago, and it's taken quite a mindset change, even for someone like me who used to work at a large chocolate company.

For months have been obsessed about getting shade trees in the ground for our cocoa and vanilla, mopping up after Hurricane Julia and other farm related issues (which is basically fixing broken things). So when tourists show up to buy our chocolate it takes a bit of code switching (and hand washing) to get into sales mode.

When you are surrounded by luxury tropical tourist resorts, the bar is pretty high on your Front of House. We've been landscaping and putting up signs, installing bathrooms and are working on an Instagram wall. Yep, that was not part of my Ag Science curriculum. Nor was Point of Sale, or sourcing merchandise ("merch") like tshirts.

For our farm tours for vanilla and cocoa, we are writing scripts for our tour guides, and putting together responses to questions that visitors may ask. When you are here every day it's easy to forget that not everyone knows about the nuances of vanilla pollination or why we don't have any tractors. The story has to flow, so you can't start at harvest, even if it's going on, and then go back to planting. You need a rainy day tour as well as a midsummer, boiling hot tour (hint, wear long pants either way).

Perhaps the most challenging and rewarding has been training our farm workers in retail. When you go into most stores in Belize, there is this whole process of being ignored by the salesperson on the phone to their mum and about 3 steps from the order person, to the person who writes the invoice, to the cashier. Losing your patience slows it even further. There is no such thing as internet sales. When that is the standard, it takes a lot of training to raise the bar to what international visitors expect.

On the other side, some customers want to speak to the owner, others are happy with interacting with our office staff. Some want to see allergen statements, others just want free samples which is fair enough. The vast majority are engaged, happy to see bean to bar chocolate right on the highway 15 minutes from their resort and very interested in hearing our renewable agriculture story.

And while I judge it a modest success at the moment, we have a long way to go. The gold standard is repeat customers. Belize has lots of retirees from North America, and lots of professionals travelling on the highway between the resort towns and the major cities of Belmopan and Belize City. For this market we have created a monthly chocolate microbatch with different flavors (orange, ginger, coffee etc). When they come back, we know we are doing the right thing. And that means making it seamless, or as my partner says, "don't make people wait in line to give you money". It's strange being on the other side of the credit card machine.

When we Tino and I were at Nestle, there were armies of product development teams getting new offerings to market. Now it's our chocolate maker, our bookkeeper, Tino and me. Shipping packaging from the US is about a 6 week lead time, so if you get the pack size wrong, it's months before you can get product back on the shelves. Market research consists of some pretty detailed sensory analysis at

the farm, then taking some samples to the local bar and asking for feedback (all our field workers just want the sweetest chocolate you can make).

We have created a phone based survey where our trained sensory analysts can enter ratings for each recipe we make using about 30 different data points based on new international standards for chocolate. That helps us compare our chocolate between batches, our competition and interesting bars we bring back from the US. But what our in-house chocolate snobs like may not be what your average vacationer from Houston on their annual fishing trip might like with a shot of rum after dinner.

Right now we are on the fence about pop-up markets and farmer's markets. We have two extremes here in Belize – high end markets at resorts attended by short stay wealthy tourists and expat retirees, and farmer's field days with farmer customers and a lot of kids. They require very different approaches, but both take a lot of setup, travel (we are paying nearly USD 7.00 a gallon for fuel) and our chocolate does not do well when exposed to the heat for too long. If it's too wet or too hot, attendance drops a lot. We see it more as an opportunity for promotion to get buyers to either come to the farm or look for our product in local stores, rather than a route for direct sales. And everybody wants a free sample, unlike the guy selling vegetables.....

A lot of farms are now doing the direct trade route to their customers. It doesn't make sense for everybody, but we have a good product, a dedicated team and great road access (and clean bathrooms). If you're a sugarcane farmer in the Burdekin in Australia 60km from the highway, it just doesn't make much sense unless you make yourself a destination with a truly unique experience.

I follow Conor Crickmore of Neversink Farms in Instagram at @neversinkfarm as a great example of what to strive for. He's got both his farming and his marketing working in a very efficient system. I don't know how he finds the time to manage his social media feed. We are just on Instagram (@corridgeree) until I can recruit one of our phone obsessed workers to be our Minister of Social Media. That's one job I'm looking forward to handing on to someone else.

The long game here for us is threefold. One, getting a greater understanding of the flavor profile of our Belizean cocoa beans, and maintaining our fine flavor premium. This is becoming quite a crowded field, and there are hundreds of bean to bar chocolate makers just in the US seeking quality cocoa beans with a good story to tell.

Number two is to upskill our field and operations team by creating meaningful work that retains them here in the local area. We compete with resorts for staff, but we have had more than one "recovering guest services worker" return to the farm.

Lastly, it's a lot easier to finance your business from sales than raising money. That is hell. More on that next time.

	
<p><i>You have to start somewhere – prototype for our 2 pack of vanilla pods</i></p>	<p><i>Virginia, our chief chocolate maker with our sample board of chocolate</i></p>

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