

# CONNECTING COMMUNITIES THROUGH CACAO



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At 16, my life was unquestionably changed by chocolate. A random stop into a chocolate tasting in California led to a passion for quality in the sweet which plagued everyone's childhood. Three years later, after hearing countless stories of the farmers and makers behind this earth-shifting chocolate, I finally got to meet some of these farmers. Luckily for me, many of those same farmers have also become the chocolate makers, the people responsible for turning their crop into a finished, value-added product—I wouldn't even have had to leave the farm.

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Guatemala

Ecuador

Peru



Thanks to support from my Burch Fellowship, I had the chance to get to know some of these people and explore what I could of Guatemala, Ecuador and Peru during my seven months abroad. What actually happened differed from what I had anticipated, but in most ways it was better than I could have ever planned; going to each new place was a terrific adventure. I became a godmother in Peru, visited



the Galapagos Islands, saw one of the Seven Wonders of the World, attended wine tastings, and helped make chocolate across a continent.

I had never been to Latin America before this year, and once I got there I seemed to just fall into the language. But my fellowship goals extended beyond practicing my Spanish: I wanted to find my place in the world of chocolate. A rather elusive community, the chocolate-obsessed have outposts in every country, usually in the form of cafes. I happened to work in three of these, starting in Guatemala as an intern in a chocolatería in Guatemala City, the capital of Guatemala. Carlos, the owner of Danta Chocolate, was generous enough to thoroughly train me in the art of chocolate making for two months during the summer.

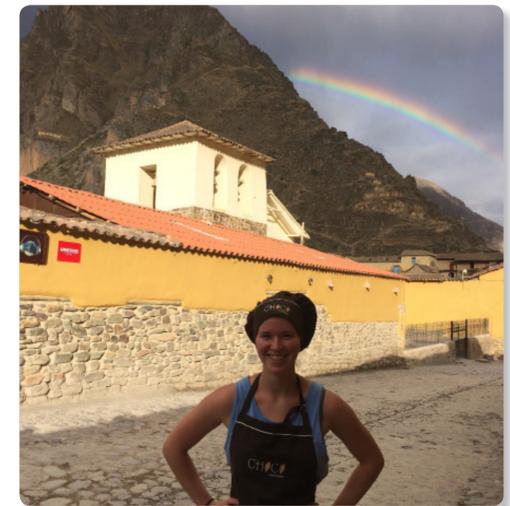
Not only did I help make chocolate as part of a team, but I visited cacao plantations and learned what it takes to build and run a successful chocolate business.

When heading to Ecuador, I expected my base to be the cacao plantation Finca Buen Consejo in Pacto, a village two hours north of Quito, where my boss's Café Dios No Muere is located. However, my shifts in the café in Quito ended up constituting a majority of my time, with four or five weeks on the farm dispersed over my three months in Ecuador. On the farm I did nearly everything under the sun, most of it involving either a machete or a shovel. Most consistently, we made chocolate, and we picked and fermented and dried and roasted the farm's coffee. But as a server at the café I prepared food, talked to customers, spoke to tourist groups about cacao, and made hundreds of cups of the aforementioned coffee. The fluidity of my jobs in Ecuador added to rather than impeded my ability to improve my boss's tree-to-bar chocolate operation. And though my Ecuadorean co-workers gave me invaluable firsthand knowledge on how to care for cacao before and after harvest, after my work in Guatemala I was able to advise them



on what a chocolate maker looks for when buying raw cacao.

Working at the ChocoMuseo in Ollantaytambo, Peru brought together both of my previous experiences. The three-part internship involved working in the café as well as in the store and museum; giving tours and workshops, clarifying and selling products, and making and serving food. Of all of my internships, the one in Peru was most true to my expectations; it was the setting which surprised me the most. As a very small town on the path to Machu Picchu, it was somewhat isolated. In the end I found that my favorite thing to do after work was visit with my coworkers and their families. I have hope that in the future I'll be able to open a café similar to the one I worked at in Peru, not only working to source cacao directly from the farmers,



but training local people and adding another dimension to the community.

An impactful takeaway from my Fellowship journey was the importance of both making the product accessible and educating the people who are buying into this model of direct trade; it's one of the foundations of being able to continue crafting effective change through food. Ultimately, my Burch Fellowship taught me about agriculture and commerce and budgeting and culture, yes, but it also allowed me to learn the gratefulness and humility I need to have to be the best person I can be on a daily basis. We all think that we're kind and caring people, and most of us are, but travel makes you more aware of the other kind and caring people on this planet, and I couldn't have started mine without the help of Lucius E. Burch III.