

OTTAWA, ONTARIO

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La Siembra Co-operative/Camino

People with sweet teeth are connected across the world by a popular treat – chocolate – and the cocoa and sugar that make it so much fun to eat. But how often do we stop to think about how those rich ingredients are produced, and how much of our purchasing dollars ends up in the hands of the people working so hard to supply it for our enjoyment?

Founded in 1999, La Siembra is an Ottawa-based co-operative that recognizes the entire cycle of chocolate production; it starts with farmers, moves to cocoa beans, then to chocolatiers, next to chocolate wrappers, and finally to those who can enjoy the finished product. La Siembra is also committed to the fact that ethical purchasing must recognize the value and exchanges at each of these stages. This co-operative, intent on reconnecting consumers with family farmers in a sustainable manner, is the creator of Cocoa Camino (known as Camino as of Fall 2010) chocolate and sugar products, which

are organic and fair trade certified.

La Siembra is a Spanish word that means “sowing” or “planting time”. This name is suggestive not only of the connections made with family farmers, but it also symbolizes “seeds of change” that are sown through fair trade practices, educational efforts, and co-operative activities. La Siembra envisions a world where people collaboratively build vibrant local and global communities, fostering diverse and sustainable economies through equitable trade and environmental stewardship. →



➔ The idea for La Siembra came from the co-op's three founders, who had worked overseas and were familiar with the exploitive nature of trade for many overseas producers. Because of this, and because of the lack of options for fairly traded luxuries like chocolate in Canada, the founders decided to provide Canadian consumers with an alternative to conventionally traded products. Connections with co-operatives in Costa Rica and Paraguay were established, a small mixing machine was bought, space in a community kitchen was arranged, a recipe for organic chocolate was developed, and the worker-owned co-operative was open for business.

At this time, there was no fair trade certification system for cocoa, chocolate or sugar in Canada, so guidelines of the Fair Trade Foundation were adopted. In 2002, however, La Siembra worked with TransFair Canada to create a certification system for cocoa, chocolate and sugar products in Canada, and became the first registered importers of fair trade cocoa and sugar in North America.

As a co-operative supporting other co-operatives around the world, La Siembra's governance structure mirrors that of their partners; family farmer co-operatives. They have adopted a democratic, participatory and transparent model where employees are also member-owners who participate in the operation of the company. Membership is open and voluntary, and requires that workers both invest financially in the co-op and participate in its governance. Each member-owner has a vote and can run for board elections. Members of La Siembra believe that the worker co-op model contributes to sustainable economies, and demonstrates that democratic and equitable business practices can help to build better communities for both family farmers and consumers. Together, workers at La Siembra are guided by seven principles, which

include Fair Trade, Healthy Communities, Inter Co-operation, Open Membership, Democratic Control, Economic Participation, and Independence.

La Siembra has gained considerable attention for not only their impact in the chocolate industry, but also for their governance model. In 2002, they were the first Canadian company to win the Socially Responsible Business Award at the 18th Annual Natural Products Expo in Washington, DC. In 2008, 2009 and 2010, they were among the winners of the WorldBlu "Worldwide Award for the Most Democratic Workplaces," and were also awarded the On Co-op "Co-operative Spirit Award for Co-operative Social Responsibility."

With over \$6 million in annual sales, La Siembra is the largest importer and distributor of organic and fair trade certified cocoa and sugar products in Canada. As such, they have a strong presence in Manitoba ensuring that all of us can participate in this fair trade and co-operative economic activity. There are nearly 40 retail outlets selling Camino products in Manitoba including many in Winnipeg as well as Brandon, Steinbach, Winkler, and more. Large retailers such as Safeway, Mountain Equipment Co-op, Ten Thousand Villages, and many other local CED businesses and co-operatives carry the products.

As workers at La Siembra continue to connect with co-operatives of family farmers around the world, the process of chocolate making becomes more meaningful and more transparent. Consumers are linked with producers, and educated about the real costs and processes involved with the treats they enjoy. Knowing the cocoa and sugar we consume has been grown and purchased fairly throughout its production cycle makes chocolate-eating even sweeter!