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Jeff Stern turned his hand to chocolate making in Quito, Ecuador.

Embracing the “Sweet” Life in Quito, Ecuador

By Jennifer Adams

In the modern world, you live to work, but in Ecuador, you work to live,” says Jeff Stern of his new home in the country’s colonial capital. Becoming a successful chocolatier who creates artisanal chocolates is just the latest twist in Jeff’s journey.

A San Diego native, Jeff first visited Ecuador in 1994 when studying for a Master’s degree in community and regional planning. After a short career in foreign aid development, he changed course in 2001 and started down a culinary path. Jeff worked in restaurants, catering, and as a personal chef before a part-time job in a chocolate store opened his eyes to the world of chocolate.

“I got really interested in it and started playing around with other methods and creations,” says Jeff. He was visiting Ecuador regularly at the time, as his wife, Maria, is Ecuadorian. The family was thinking of moving to give their children a life outside the U.S.’s consumer-oriented culture, but they needed a destination. Looking at Ecuador, Jeff discovered it was the world’s largest producer of fine-grade cacao. The chance to be in gourmet cacao country and give his children a life with their extended family made Ecuador a natural choice.

“While the U.S. offers perhaps more predictability and stability in some ways, I feel it lacks spontaneity and is often too “future oriented.” Ecuadorian culture is much more focused on the here and now and living in the present,” says Jeff.

He and his wife opened Gianduja Chocolate in Quito to create fine chocolates using local ingredients. They make individual chocolate pieces, bars, and novelty items to fulfill contracts with restaurants, boutiques, and artisanal markets in Ecuador. Their specialty items are chocolate bonbons in exotic flavors like passion fruit and Andean blackberry made with Arriba Nacional cacao.

Though he had lived in Ecuador and Latin America before, Jeff had never dealt with the bureaucracy of business operations head-on. He laughs that even now they’re not 100% sure they do everything the “right” way. “My advice is just to plow ahead and do the best you can. Don’t give up. Jump and the net will appear. It’s hard, it’s risky, but don’t think it can’t be done, because it can.”

The family lived on savings as they built the business to a point where it made a profit. “If you plan to open a business in Ecuador or any other country, make a budget for business and living expenses. Then figure you need three times the amount you calculated, and give yourself three—if not five years—before you are in the black,” says Jeff.

Along the way, build connections and enjoy the country. Jeff’s family has a much wider circle of friends and a tighter sense of community than they had in the States. The lower cost of living allows him to give his children a private education with more personal attention than they would have received back home.

Owning and operating their own business also gives them more time to spend with family, entertain friends, and explore Ecuador. “It’s easy to hop in your car and be outside of Quito in under an hour, and there is a wide variety of destinations and climates in Ecuador. Beach, jungle, mountains, rainforest, it’s all nearby and easily accessible.”

Jeff’s deepening roots in Ecuador and his skill as a chocolatier continue to open doors. In addition to tastings and tours by appointment at his Gianduja Chocolate workshop, he has partnered with three local tour agencies to offer specially-curated chocolate tours in 2012. These three- to five-day tours will include visits to cacao plantations, trade centers, artisanal producers, and chocolate tasting sites, with Jeff on hand as an industry expert.

“My advice? Just plow ahead.”

Both domestic growers and cacao buyers worldwide increasingly turn to him for advice on marketing, partnerships, and development opportunities in the bean-to-bar space. It’s an investment in a lifestyle as a transparent producer of fine chocolate

that is finally paying off.

Jeff encourages anyone with a dream of a new life and new business abroad to make the leap. “While there are a lot of tough challenges navigating Ecuador’s continually changing business regulations and consistently sourcing top-quality ingredients, there is also a world of good people out there willing to help. It’s easy to remember the good stuff about what it was like back home. Like any relationship, you have to be committed to making it work!” He adds, “Ask yourself, if I fail, what’s the worst that can happen... having to return to your home country? If you don’t go, will you be asking yourself the rest of your life, “Why didn’t I try it?”” ■

Editor’s Note: For more on Jeff and his Ecuadorian chocolate business, see: Giandujachocolate.com or visit his blog: Destination-ecuador.net.