

THE CHOCOLATE GODDESS

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Telos: You and your sister Janett were born in New York to Dominican parents. Both attended the Fame School in Manhattan and studied performing arts and dance. However, you ended up working at Human Ventures, whereas Janett in the health sector. And then the pandemic arrived.... What happened?

Erika Liriano: I was at Human Ventures working with startups in the accelerator program and a project manager. Janett was working at a biopharma company called Cambrian. Janett and I had been working on our business plan and doing our research during our non-working hours and weekends for several years before we decided to move forward with incorporating and starting the INARU. When the pandemic happened, we decided now was as good a time as ever to focus and get to work. It was a really interesting time because we moved from NYC to the Dominican Republic to be there full time, deepening our relationship with our farmer partners and get started on operating. There was a strict curfew when we moved due to the pandemic and so we had to be very efficient with our time and plan everything well in advance. I think it helped us to really focus on what was most important when we were starting and let us have the time to build thoughtfully. Starting a company during a pandemic was certainly more stressful in some ways but in many ways really helped us with focus and allowed us to start building a remote team where possible which in the long run has been very helpful to our business today.

What is INARU?

INARU is a vertically integrated chocolate company in the Dominican Republic focused on bringing high quality chocolate with no compromises to the market. Chocolate was originally considered the food of the gods, and consumed as a luxury treat. INARU believes that chocolate should be a treat that does not come with any compromises, hence our belief that true luxury does not come with compromise. For us this means that throughout our entire process, no stakeholder should have to compromise, not the environment, the farmer and his wallet, and not our customers with taste. INARU takes special focus on the farms, cocoa prices and environmental impact to do our best to ensure that when someone is enjoying an INARU treat, it comes without guilt but with pleasure in knowing that you are consuming chocolate that was sourced and made thoughtfully at origin.

We rarely wonder where our food comes from. Much less all that comprises the production chain to get them to our table. Cocoa is one of those products. What is the environmental and cultural impact of cocoa in Latin America?

Today, in the Dominican Republic specifically, cocoa is a very important product. As an economy that is heavily reliant on tourism and agriculture, cocoa takes on a really important role. As one of the top 3 major agricultural exports, cocoa also plays a unique role in both the environment and the economy. Most cocoa is harvested by farms that are less than 3 hectares and are grown in what is called an agroforestry system. In the Dominican Republic, cocoa production is often seen as a way to preserve more biodiversity as traditionally it is not grown in the plantation method. While environmentally cocoa production in the DR is certainly one of more environmentally friendly types of farming due to multispecies farming, many of the farms are in need of renovations and better resilience planning in the changing climate to make those lands sustainable for agricultural production. Additionally, while cocoa farming is seen as a beautiful thing to do and most Dominicans view it as a point of pride, cocoa farming is often not economically viable and as such, the cocoa industry is seeing rural youth leave the countryside for the cities in search of better paying opportunities. If the economic factors that keep youth away from farming are not addressed, more and more farmland that was once agroforest will continue to be cleared in favour of less environmentally sound farming such as cattle and monocrops. INARU has invested in 3 model plots in different regions to both test different agroforestry models that include cocoa but increase farmer resiliency by increasing the diversity of crops grown on the farms and introducing methods that help to show how to implement practices that are more drought resistant.

INARU is not only a revolutionary idea in the economic area. It is also revolutionary in the gender equality movement. Why?

INARU actually means ‘woman’ in the language of the Taino, the indigenous people that inhabited the island prior to Columbus. Since agriculture and manufacturing in general has traditionally been a male dominated field, Janett and I felt that more women and women’s input should be present in the industry, hence our company and the name. Apart from our company being founded by two sisters, the majority of our company is also composed of almost entirely women, not that was done intentionally, it just worked out that way. We also specifically seek to source and support from women owned farms when we can, like Iluminada Ortega from Florencio Ortega (her farm name which she took over from her father and diligently works to grow and ferment and dry amazing cacao) and Altair Rodriguez from Finca Tierra Negra (a beautiful regenerative farm in the

Dominican Republic, where she is dedicated to showing several models and methods of agroforestry farming for the benefit of anyone looking for better ways to farm and grow food). We are really proud when we look at our team and sourcing partners and are always keeping an eye out for more amazing women doing amazing things we can partner with.

Marco Sonsini

Editorial

Science tells us that chocolate produces emotions that are very similar to love and joy. Eating it strongly stimulates our sense of smell and taste, releasing a host of hormones into the body. And those of us with a sweet tooth will use any excuse to avoid feeling guilty about gorging ourselves on this “food of the gods”. Talking with Erika Liriano, co-founder of INARU and PRIMOPIANOSCALA December guest, makes us feel a little less guilty. And even less so if we go to the trouble of finding out about chocolate’s origins and the production chain that brings it to our tables, especially during the holidays. Chocolate has its origins among the ancient Mayan and Aztec civilisations, who cultivated cocoa and used it to prepare a bitter beverage that the *conquistadores* brought to Spain. Later it spread throughout Europe in its sweeter version with added sugar and spices.

The goal of INARU, a company founded by the Liriano sisters Erika and Janett in their parents’ home country, the Dominican Republic, is to produce this delightful treat but “*with no compromise*”.

Sure, it is a little hard to imagine two born and bred New Yorkers who even attended the high school from the legendary, ever-popular film-turned-TV-series *Fame*, up to their elbows in cocoa and chocolate. And yet they have thrown themselves wholeheartedly into this adventure, which has turned out to be an extraordinary success. Their experience is rooted in their innate sense of solidarity, nurtured in a family that always valued the community success.

This mix of Dominican and American culture, embodied by their parents, has enabled them to focus on how their actions impact the community. And this approach works.

Just to mention two of the accolades they have received, in 2022 Erika was inserted in the **BBC 100 Women**, their list of the most influential women in the world, due to her work channelling wealth back in the Dominican Republic by investing in the land and its farmers. While in April 2023 *Forbes* named Janett one of their **Top 30 Under 30 in Manufacturing and Industry**. Together, they are changing the world.

Through her work, Erika has shown her complete understanding of the needs of the entire production chain, and she has also invested in “3 model plots in different regions, (...) to test different agroforestry models that include cocoa” on the island.

She tells us about the extraordinary women farmers who provide the cacao used to make INARU chocolate and their dedication to regenerative agriculture, a little-known farming method focussed on bringing back traditional agricultural practices used for millennia by indigenous cultures throughout the world and improving them using modern techniques in order to protect and enhance, not deplete, natural resources and make nutrient-rich products.

After reading this interview, with each chocolaty treat you enjoy, we are sure you will imagine the people who helped to create it, and it will give you a wonderful feeling.

The 2023 covers of PRIMOPIANOSCALA aim to create something akin to museum merchandise by personalising an item each month using the black and white face of our guest. In this way, a t-shirt, a magnet or a shopper becomes a memory, an experience, a symbol. Our guests transform into true icons, not unlike the works on display in a museum: Da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man*, Van Gogh’s sunflowers, Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel...

We’ve chosen a t-shirt for Erika, with her smiling face “surrounded” by cocoa beans. Well, no explanation needed for that, but since we think Erika is a true icon, we’ve also decided to turn her into a pop star singing on social media. The song we’ve chosen fully reflects her commitment. Just wait and see...

With this December edition, all of us here at Telos A&S would like to wish you a very merry and very *chocolaty* Christmas as well as a peaceful 2024. It is our hope that in this coming year, there really will be, as the Gospel says, “*peace on earth and good will toward men*”.

Mariella Palazzolo



Erika Liriano is a cocoa and chocolate entrepreneur, who runs an export company, based in the Dominican Republic, aiming to reimagine the cocoa supply chain. Liriano co-founded **INARU** with her sister, Janett, with the aim of making the production and distribution of cocoa fairer and more sustainable. It’s not the first time that they worked together, they were colleagues at **Loomia**, an e-textile business.

Daughters of a cocoa farmer in San Cristóbal, a region in the south of the country, the two sisters, born in Queens, New York, spent a significant amount of time in their parent’s homeland. Erika began to unearth issues like miscommunication between cocoa farmers and the exporter-appointed middlemen, as well as exploitative practices, for example, the lack of transparency around the price of cocoa. INARU partners with women-run farms and co-operatives across the country.

In 2022, INARU raised **US 1.5 million** in financing, partly used for a cocoa butter factory built to avoid exporting raw cocoa beans at low prices. In the same year it gave ecological certification to 300 farmers and secured exclusive contracts for 500 tons of cocoa.

She graduated in **Performing Arts** from the *Fame School* in Manhattan. From her times as a dancer Erika learnt that: “*competing with the goal of beating or being better than another person is limiting to growth. Instead, best is to focus on competing with yourself.*”

Erika, 28 years old, is one of 5 sisters, who have all weighed in on the business, along with their parents.

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