



EQUAL EXCHANGE

Uniting Local and Global Communities through Coffee

By Kate Strassel



For many people, a day simply cannot be started properly without a cup of coffee or tea. But for locavores—people who are committed to eating locally grown and produced food—purchasing coffee and tea becomes somewhat of a dilemma. How does one continue to support local farmers while consuming beverages brewed from ingredients grown thousands of miles away? Luckily for those of us living on the South Shore, there is a West Bridgewater coffee roaster that has been providing us with the answer to that very question for over twenty years: Equal Exchange.

When Rink Dickinson, Jonathan Rosenthal, and Michael Rozyne founded Equal Exchange in 1986, their mission was simple: to trade food “in a way that is honest and fair, a way that empowers both farmers and consumers.” Equal Exchange now offers a selection of over fifty organic coffees, all of which are roasted in the state-of-the-art, two-story roaster located in the West Bridgewater facility. They also offer organic tea, organic cocoa (both drinking and baking), organic chocolate bars, and snacks such as organic cranberries (some of which are grown in southeastern Massachusetts), almonds, and conventional pecans—and every single product is Fair Trade Certified. This means that each and every small farmer is paid a just and guaranteed price for their crop, providing them with a stable income and the ability to give back to their communities in the form of improved social services such as education and health care. Also, a higher percentage of the money paid by a consumer for a Fair Trade Certified product actually reaches the farmer because there are fewer “middlemen,” making the choice to buy Fair Trade Certified products one that customers are proud to make.

In addition to being the first and among the largest Fair Trade Certified food and beverage brands in the United States, Equal Exchange is also a worker-owned cooperative. Whether the employee is a warehouse worker in the West Bridgewater facility, a sales rep in St. Paul, Minnesota, or a barista in Seattle, Washington, each employee has the same four rights: the right to vote (one vote per employee), the right to serve as a leader on a board, the

right to information, and the right to speak his or her mind. Everyone at Equal Exchange is constantly encouraged to offer ideas, suggestions and feedback. Education about the company’s products and Fair Trade is a high priority as well, and during the weekly “Exchange Time” sessions, worker-owners are presented with information on a variety of industry-related topics. Employees enjoy

coming together to share meals or to play games to let off a little steam. “We’re like a family,” says Rodney North, Equal Exchange’s “Answer Man” (the official title on his business card). “We need to know each other because we need to make decisions together.”

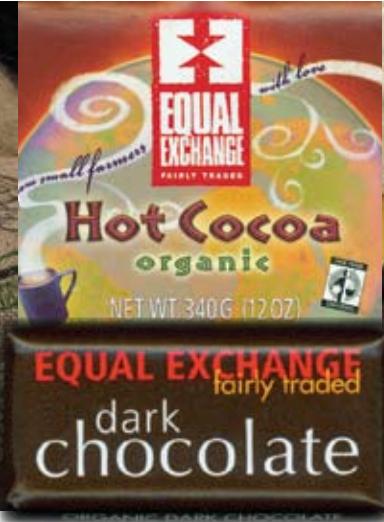
On a local level, Equal Exchange believes in the power of the local food movement. A wonderful example of this is the relationship between the coffee company and Eva’s Garden, a certified organic farm in Dartmouth that supplies restaurants with herbs, flowers, and specialty greens. Faced with the problem of how to dispose of the hundreds of empty burlap sacks that are left over once the green coffee beans are poured into the roaster, and also the chaff produced when the coffee beans are roasted, Equal Exchange turned to the local farming community. A message was posted on the FMFM (Federation of Massachusetts Farmers Markets) website asking if anyone had any use for the bags or the chaff. Eva Sommaripa of Eva’s Garden responded to the query and began sending a truck weekly to Equal Exchange to pick up the empty sacks and chaff that most other roasters would throw in the dumpster. Eva uses the burlap sacks as mulch for her garden beds, while the chaff is added to her compost heaps.

Equal Exchange also partners with Red Tomato, a non-profit organization based in Canton that was started by Michael Rozyne, one of Equal Exchange’s co-founders, in 1996. Red Tomato strives to bring together local farmers and local markets and to steer consumers towards the fresh fruits and vegetables grown on



these family farms through marketing and education. And while it is widely agreed that purchasing locally grown food strengthens our communities and reduces our impact on the environment, North points out that we are still connected to a larger, global community of farmers. Just as there is a person behind the table at the Plymouth Farmers Market, "there is a person behind all of our products," says North. "We try to be an international farmers market. The coffee farmers aren't going to show up in Plymouth. We can be the next best thing."

Not surprisingly, Equal Exchange's mission to provide support for a fair and just food system does not end with their products. North himself is continually amazed at how "information-rich" their organization is. Their website is loaded with information about Fair Trade Certification, worker cooperatives, product descriptions, and profiles of coffee, tea, and cocoa farmer cooperatives in Central and South America, Africa, and Asia. On the inside of the wrapper of each chocolate bar, consumers can read about the specific cooperative which supplied the cocoa for that bar. Similarly, consumers can enter the "Best By" date located on the back of each package of almonds, pecans, and cranberries to learn more about the farmers who grew the snacks. Online, Equal Exchange is using the current social networking craze to reach people across the globe via their MySpace community and Facebook fan pages. Similarly, Equal Exchange's two blogs—Coin and the Common Wealth, a blog about investing in Equal Exchange, cooperatives, and fair trade, and Small Farmers. Big Change, which informs readers about the need for a green and just food system—highlight important issues while providing a forum for feedback and discussion among like-minded people. Consumers also have the option to keep up-to-date on the latest developments in Fair Trade, the coffee industry and other related issues by subscribing to the e-mail newsletter What's Brewing.



Most recently, Equal Exchange sponsored the 2008 48-Hour Film Project Invitational, an annual film making competition where the best teams from past 48-Hour competitions go head-to-head to create a three-minute film based on a designated theme. This year's theme, chosen by Equal Exchange, was aptly named "Dangerously Disconnected From our Food." The short films effectively use entertainment as an alternative medium to reach those consumers who may not have the time or patience to wade through written information. "These are some very innovative, funny, even outlandish films," said Rink Dickerson, co-founder and Executive Director of Equal Exchange. "But more importantly, even when they make you laugh, they also get you to stop and think about your relationship with food." All of the thirteen entries can be viewed online at Equal Exchange's website at www.equalexchange.coop/48hr.

Equal Exchange's coffee, tea, and other products can be found in grocery stores, food cooperatives, cafés, and at their online Retail Store. Equal Exchange also teams up with faith-based relief, development and human rights organizations to help communities of faith learn about and promote fair trade through their Interfaith Program. And children are given the opportunity to learn about Fair Trade while earning money for their school or group through the new Fair Trade Fundraiser Program. For more information about Equal Exchange, their products, and Fair Trade, visit their website at www.equalexchange.coop.

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