

FROM ECUADOR WITH LOVE: EMPIRE'S GROCER'S DAUGHTER

Chocolatiers in Northwest Michigan survive COVID with special local lending support and a delicious partnership with Ecuadorian experts.

EMPIRE, MICHIGAN, UNITED STATES, May 25, 2021 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Ecuador's history seems shrouded in a foggy jungle tangle as confusing as the trails of their rain forests that are shouldered by the Andes Mountains. It is thought that Asian nomads reached the South American continent around 12,000 BC, joined by Polynesian colonization followed by a Duchicela lineage for 150 years, then Spaniards and Pizarro and the spread of terror among the Indians. The history of this vibrant, beautiful country has been marked by fierce rivalry, occasional warfare and political instability. Today, though, Ecuador is peaceful and a safe country to visit.

Over 3,000 miles north of Ecuador, an entrepreneurial business, nestled in dune land in Empire, Michigan, is supported by a nonprofit lending institution to create an added slice of history dependent upon one of Ecuador's riches: extraordinarily fine chocolate. So good, in fact, that it was common practice in Mayan communities for people to exchange a cacao-based beverage as they cemented an engagement between man or woman. Pure chocolate for pure love.

With \$144,500 in lending support from [Venture North](#) Funding and Development, the Empire enterprise, Grocer's Daughter Chocolate, purchased 12 metric tons or over 26,000 pounds of organic direct trade chocolate from Ecuadorian farms. The inventory provides 24 months of production for Grocer's Daughter.

"We are one of the few chocolate businesses in the nation that offers delectable treats made only from premium quality, traceable cocoa," said Jody Hayden who has owned Grocer's Daughter Chocolates since 2013 along with spouse DC Hayden. "Ecuador is the top producer of fine cocoa in the world."

"A great company," says Laura Galbraith, president of Venture North. "Between 2019 and 2021, their revenues jumped 100 percent. By buying chocolate in this volume, they have a big savings. The project will save five jobs, create two new positions and 8-10 part-time positions in the Empire area. Galbraith said that profits and savings will also support a new building to accommodate new business and production and warehouse facilities.

Hayden talks glowingly about budding new products like chocolate gelato, "frooky and wooky"

(frozen and warm) chocolate laced cookies, ice cream bars and more, all with healthy doses of Ecuadorian fine chocolate.

But the best chocolate product and global partnerships could not outflank one foe: Covid-19.

“Covid devastated supply chains,” Hayden says. “What once took a day now takes three and the cost of shipments has more than doubled. The only silver lining was that the anxiety of Covid seemed to drive people to pamper themselves in ways that were safe and a bit extravagant. We were proud that, for some, this meant a moment to enjoy our products.”

Haydon approaches her work with vigor and discipline, including training on overseas trade, fermenting and roasting, mastering flavors and more. Always hands on, she has built relations like an Ambassador, with businesses in Mexico for supply of coffee to her present relationships and supplier in Ecuador. She and the company also do what they can to help preserve and support the Ecuadorian chocolate base, threatened at times by short-sighted plans to produce higher yield but far lower quality product. She also has plans closer to home, including a “Chocolate Garden” on a next-door lot.

The Village of Empire is a wonderful place with warm, caring people and a commitment to the betterment of their community. It is the jumping off point for millions making the endless pilgrimage to one of the most stunning places in the nation: Sleeping Bear National Lakeshore. It is also home base for Jody Hayden and family, career minded chocolate lovers, and a surprising connection with old fashioned affection and love.

All brought to us by Grocer’s Daughter and the finest chocolate that the Ecuadorian rain forests can provide.

About Venture North.

Venture North Funding and Development provides commercial financing and technical assistance to support business growth and job creation in their ten-county region, often in partnership with other financial institutions. As a Certified Development Financial Institution (CDFI), Venture North also focuses on providing support for underserved populations such as minority, women, and veteran-owned businesses in low-income communities.

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