



Traditional method of testing for tea quality.

# THE FUTURE OF fair trade

How an international grassroots movement is shaping the way the world shops

Rajah Banerjee, the owner of the Makaibari tea garden in India's rural Darjeeling hills, started a computer center for local children. La Cooperativa de Trabajadores del Sur, a banana cooperative in southern Costa Rica, installed recycling systems and purchased long-awaited school supplies for the area's kids. The 35,000-member Kuapa Kokoo cooperative in Ghana, which grows and sells cocoa, bought new scales, gained access to banking and credit services, and now has true pride in its Twi-language motto: *Pa Pa Paa* ("the best of the best"). There are similar stories coming out of Ethiopia, Columbia, East Timor, Brazil, and Thailand. But what unifies them isn't an influx of developed-world aid or an odd lucky strike. These farmers all grow and sell fair-trade-certified goods, and as a result, they are able to live lives that most of us take for granted—with safe working conditions, honest compensation, and, above all, dignity. ➤



A co-op member harvests cacao pods under the forest canopy.

PHOTOS: TOP, MAREK VIERMISE; RIGHT, FAIRTRADE FOUNDATION

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## The future of fair trade

### Seeds of fairness

As an idea, fair trade—with principles like guaranteed minimum prices, sustainable farming methods, prohibition of forced and inappropriate child labor, and direct trade—has been around since 1946, when the Mennonites, through a nonprofit now called Ten Thousand Villages, created a supply chain for handicrafts made in the developing world. The first so-called Worldshop, run by volunteers protesting European colonialism and hoping to lift up underdeveloped regions, opened in the Netherlands in 1969.

But these outposts were inconvenient for consumers and too specialized to gain momentum, and it wasn't until 1988 that a



Fair trade provides school supplies for kids.

For more on fair trade, go to ...



#### ■ TransFair USA

[www.transfairusa.org](http://www.transfairusa.org)

Read producer profiles, catch up on news, and learn about fair-trade principles.

#### ■ SCS

[www.scs-certified.com](http://www.scs-certified.com)

Third-party certifier behind the new "Fair Labor Practices and Community Benefits" standard.

#### ■ Eco-Labels

[www.eco-labels.org](http://www.eco-labels.org)

Research the legitimacy of labels, including Rainforest Alliance Certified, Demeter Certified Biodynamic, OneCert, and Fair Trade Certified.

solution was found: What about creating a label to mark everything that is truly fair-trade-produced and then distributing those products worldwide? The first initiative brought coffee from Mexico to mainstream stores in the Netherlands.

Since then, the idea has picked up hundreds of thousands of devotees. In 1998, when TransFair USA unveiled its certification label, it imported 76,000 pounds of coffee from growers in Central and South America and Africa. By 2006, "Fair Trade Certified" was stamped on 64.7 million pounds of beans, representing 7 percent of gourmet coffee's market share. Cocoa, which was certified in 2002, has jumped from 14,000 pounds to 1.8 million pounds in five years. And fair-trade tea increased 187 percent in 2005 and continues to thrive.

### Gaining ground

In the United States, you can now buy fair-trade vanilla, rice, sugar, bananas, mangoes, pineapples, and even soccer balls (check out [www.fairtradesports.com](http://www.fairtradesports.com)). In Europe, the list of stuff tagged with the International Fair-

trade Certification mark is even more extensive: honey, herbs and spices, fruit juice, nuts, flowers, quinoa, and wine, to name a few.

In some ways, Europe's jumpstart is merely a reflection of broader differences in cultures and politics. "In general, Europeans are more globally aware," says Reem Rahim, co-founder of Numi Tea, a fair-trade purchaser. "They have more of a pulse on other countries, politically and socially—whereas here, people are generally more isolated, and a smaller percentage are global citizens."

Rodney North, spokesman for Equal Exchange, the oldest U.S. fair-trade coffee company, thinks that Europe's colonial past has influenced Europeans' awareness of being tied economically to the fates of millions of farmers in former colonies. "They're less enamored with free-market capitalism and quicker to see when the free market pits the poor in a losing battle with rich and powerful corporations," he says.

But fair trade is picking up serious momentum in the United States, too—in part on the heels of the booming >

## More and more people want to know where their food comes from.

organic industry, which totaled \$15.7 billion in sales in 2006, according to *Nutrition Business Journal*. “More and more people want to know, ‘Where does my food come from?’” says Anthony Marek of TransFair USA. He points to the huge increase in U.S. farmers’ markets, which have doubled in number since 1994. “You can get back to the basics and look people in the eye. And since you

can’t fly to Rwanda or Nicaragua to sample coffee, fair trade provides that link.”

### What’s to come

There are still some growing pains to deal with, however—mostly in unifying the standards of what makes fair trade fair. Though TransFair USA’s Fair Trade Certified label is the most ubiquitous, it’s not yet a true

national, consensus-based certification program—it certifies a limited number of products and works with a specific list of farms and growers. In response, third-party certifier SCS Certified, Numi, and a few other organizations unveiled a new label in March 2007, with the tagline “Fair Labor Practices and Community Benefits.”

“Some of our longtime qualified gardens were left off TransFair’s lists and couldn’t get their seal, and it didn’t seem fair,” says Rahim. “We need the system to open more doors.”

Whole Foods recently launched Whole Trade—which recognizes companies that adhere to fair labor practices—with the goal of having 50 percent of its imported products qualify. Another initiative, called Domestic Fair Trade, aims to translate international fair-trade principles into local arenas, so small farmers in the United States can be treated the same way as, say, sugar cooperative members in Malawi. And while they aren’t officially certified yet, there are already some products (roasted pecans, dried cranberries, tamari almonds) on the shelves. “Trade should be fair no matter where it takes place,” says Erbin Crowell, Equal Exchange’s domestic fair-trade manager. “Local attention is the next big step.”

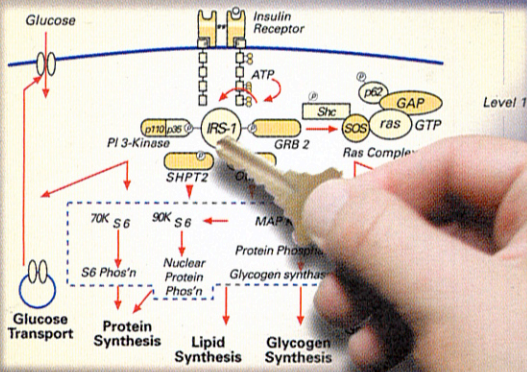
If you’re confused by the number of players, you’re not alone: The United States doesn’t yet have a truly national, transparent certification scheme. “Right now, consumers are overwhelmed by labels,” says Ted Howes, a VP at SCS Certified. “They’re thinking, ‘Are all these things the same?’”

In a few years, proponents hope that fair-trade designation will be more clearly defined. And whether they sell wine, flowers, or macadamia nuts, as long as growers are fair and want to get certified for it, they can. “Before we know it, these principles will apply worldwide,” says Rahim. That means that a stroll down the grocery aisles will come closer to the ideal of meeting the people, face to face, who produce what we eat and drink.

For now, your best bet is to research any new label you see, decide what issue is most important to you, and try to learn about the people who produce, process, and sell what you buy. “We think there’s a positive side to globalization,” says Marek. “And that’s when it turns into a global farmers’ market.” ■

Evelyn Spence contributes to *Outside* and *Skiing*, and is an editor at *Backpacker* magazine.

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