

CASHEWS OF KARANGASEM

by stephanie m • images jill alexander

Drive an hour or two northeast of Gianyar's lush environs to the neighbouring regency of Karangasem in East Bali, and you will find a very different story. Here, lying in the rainshadow of Bali's holiest mountain, Gunung Agung, climatic conditions for most of the year are extremely arid, making it difficult to grow anything except for the hardy cashew. And although cashews can be a lucrative crop, farmers in the area have historically struggled just to survive. That is, until East Bali Cashews entered the scene.

If you had visited Desa Ban in the foothills of Mount Agung about five years ago, you would have found a smattering of villages connected by bumpy roads winding through the dry, dusty landscape. Many communities had no access to electricity or consistent sources of freshwater, school attendance was poor, unemployment was high, and gambling and alcoholism were rampant.

The villagers of Ban had been planting cashews since the 1970s, not only because the cashew tree is tolerant to drought, grows quickly and can produce fruit for decades, but because they also saw a huge demand for the nuts. However, the villagers had little knowledge or financial means to process the nuts, so the majority of the raw cashews were purchased by dealers or middlemen and then sent to places like Vietnam and India to be processed.

This was the state of Desa Ban when Aaron Fishman and his wife began volunteering here with a local NGO in 2012. Their contract happened to coincide with the cashew season, and so while they were teaching the



villagers about nutrition and public health procedures, the villagers were teaching them about cashews. It was easy to see that although this was prime cashew territory, very little money from the cashew industry trickled back to the villagers.

Aaron immediately saw the opportunity to open a processing plant in Bali that would function as a facility where they could produce a high-quality, unique local product and provide much-needed jobs and skills training to the people in the area. It only took a few months for Aaron to gain support of both local and foreign investors, and soon after East Bali Cashews was born.

From the beginning, Aaron envisioned East Bali Cashews as a social enterprise that would make a profit that could be returned to the community. He also saw it as a way to empower the local people of Ban. Aaron says, "I felt the best way to address the problems those people faced was to provide them with opportunities to work."

In the first year, the company employed 130 people from Desa Ban, and today that number has risen to 350. Many employees who started as cashew peelers have worked their way up the ranks to management positions. Moreover, 90 per cent of the employees are women. East Bali Cashews made this decision because they saw that there were almost no economic opportunities available to women in East Bali. Studies also show that women in developing areas are more likely to invest their income in education and health care than men.

All of the nuts from East Bali Cashews are sourced directly from cashew farmers within the community. The farmers gather the fruit by hand, remove the nut from the fruit, and then dry the nuts at community drying centres. East Bali Cashews supports the farmers by selling them materials to build cashew-drying centres on a debt-repayment system. This allows the farmers to produce better quality cashews that they can sell for more, and maintain autonomy over their own production.

Once East Bali Cashews buys the nuts, they are cleaned, roasted, shelled, cut, and peeled by hand in the factory. Then the nuts are flavoured with simple, natural Indonesian ingredients like sea salt, turmeric, kaffir lime, ginger, chilli and cacao. Finally, the nuts are checked for quality control, packaged and shipped to retailers here in Indonesia and abroad to Singapore, Japan and the US.

