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Fairly Traded Products Now Part of Commercial Landscape

By Zack Gross

Twenty years ago, when fair trade food, handicrafts and other products first became available, no one knew what the words meant and few people would buy them. Fair trade products – whether coffee, chocolate, basketry, clothing or other – bring the producer a fair wage, allow for production in a clean and safe environment and have a portion of their proceeds set aside for the health and education of the families of those involved.

Ten years ago, fair trade became a blip on the commercial radar screen with non-profits in particular leading the way. Ten Thousand Villages, the Marquis Project, Oxfam and other groups had set up stores that filled “a niche market”, attracting a small portion of the public who had heard about fair trade through their churches, universities or social action groups. Fair trade stores were an extension of Third World development projects, helping rural communities and co-operatives and urban workshops to market the products of peasants, women’s and disabled groups, young entrepreneurs, and others.

Today, the fair trade market is taking off, both in the number of products available and in the growing buy-in of the merchant community. It is no longer an isolated act of charity to buy fair trade products – it can now be an every day “normal” activity! In our province, Fair Trade Manitoba is leading the promotion of these products with a web site (www.fairtrademanitoba.ca) and shopping guide, to be launched on October 17th, the United Nations’ International Day for the Elimination of Poverty.

Putting the shopping guide together carried some surprises with it. Most people, when asked how many merchants carry fair trade products, might have guessed a dozen or maybe twenty in the province. But the list grew quickly to over one hundred – grocery stores, specialty shops, cafes, craft shops, consumer warehouses, clothing stores, red carpet services, travel & outdoors activity stores, and many more. FTM sees itself working with all sides of the marketplace – suppliers, merchants and consumers.

Canadian National Railways recently committed to serving only fair trade coffee and Costco markets at least two brands as well, one in collaboration with Starbucks. Safeway, Co-op Marketplace, Sobeys, Harry’s and Two Farm Kids are carrying fair trade. The Assiniboine Credit Union, soon to be Manitoba’s largest with 100,000 members, has a staff specialist promoting socially responsible investment, including the purchase of fair trade products.

Even those not carrying fair trade, such as Tim Horton’s and Second Cup, are trying very hard to look like they are! When questioned, these chains argue that they have arrangements with their suppliers that make their system just as beneficial to Third World communities, economies and environments. There is a fair trade certification

process, officially, in our country provided by Transfair Canada, but Fair Trade Manitoba accepts other certification such as American, European or country of origin. It is yet to be seen if Tim's will meet any of these criteria.

Fair trade products used to mean coffee and tea. Now, in foods, there are also chocolate products (bars, cocoa and other), dried fruit, sugar, bananas and more. Fair trade cut flowers are also available. Non-food items include many varieties of handmade items, plus clothing, accessories and sports equipment. All fair trade products now are organically grown, as well. Suppliers of fair trade food products, such as B.C.'s Kicking Horse, Ontario's Cocoa Camino and Dagoba in the US, are winning awards for their new lines of coffee, tea and chocolate.

This doesn't spell the end of the challenge for fair trade. There is still a lot of promotion to be done to get the word to all levels of consumers. The perception is – and to an extent it is true – that fair trade, organic products are harder to find and more expensive to buy. But prices are coming down as supplies and availability increase. People are often loyal to certain conventional brands and some people just don't like to change. Often, consumers don't realize the incredible hardships endured by Third World producers who face grinding poverty, human rights abuses and child slavery in the jungle cocoa and sugar cane fields of West Africa, the coffee and tea plantations of the Horn and East Africa, and the factories of South Asia.

To bring this message to the public, Fair Trade Manitoba is screening a new film, *Black Gold*, about Ethiopian coffee and the struggles endured by those who produce it and those who try to market fair trade Ethiopian brands. This event will happen, along with the web site and shopping guide launch, on October 17th in Winnipeg and November 9th in Brandon. The organization is also planning One Month Challenges during the winter, working with a variety of groups to switch their consumption habits to fair trade.

Fair trade is an idea long nurtured that just won't die. Our purchasing decisions in Manitoba can help to turn around the lives of poor farmers and factory workers overseas. Shopping doesn't have, any longer, to be a selfish act!

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