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Thomas Fricke and Sylvia Blanchet: ForesTrade

by Joyce Marcel

On Christmas Day, 2004, Thomas Fricke and Sylvia Blanchet had no way of knowing that their award-winning import company was about to be hit by a tsunami.

ForesTrade, Inc imports organic spices such as allspice, cinnamon, cardamom, black and white pepper, ginger, cloves, mace and nutmeg, plus organic vanilla, spice oils and coffee from Sumatra, Java, Bali and Lombok in Indonesia, and from Guatemala, Grenada, Uganda, Sri Lanka and India.

Until December 26, most of the world had never heard of the province of Aceh in northern Sumatra. Then a massive earthquake struck under the sea near there, generating tsunamis that killed hundreds of thousands of people throughout East and Southeast Asia. But Blanchet and Fricke know Aceh well and raced to help.

"Being engaged in Aceh and Sumatra for the past 10 years, through some very tough and trying times, we've persisted and created a platform which we can parlay into reconstruction and sustainability," Fricke said. "For the last five years Aceh has been under a state of siege. So we're

well rehearsed in disaster relief, because many, many times our warehousing has sheltered victims of ethnic cleansing and the burning of houses and schools due to the conflict. We were primed for immediate response."

ForesTrade's Brattleboro headquarters smell of cinnamon and cardamom, hinting that the heart of the company lies in far more exotic places than Vermont. I spoke with Fricke in the conference room on a bright, snowy February morning. Blanchet joined us by phone from her office in Padang, Sumatra. It was morning for us but nearly midnight for her, and her legs were draped in a sarong to keep the mosquitoes away.

Fricke is tall, sandy-haired and intense. He has one foot in the business world and another in non-profit development, so he juggles his jargon, sometimes talking about "vertical integration" and other times about "platforms of sustainability." New Age-y themes occasionally creep in as well, such as when he describes his and Blanchet's two grown children as "very wonderful, delightful self-actualized beings."

There is no doubt, however, that Fricke is brilliant, dedicated, hard-work-

ing, honorable, sometimes arrogant, and frequently ahead of his time.

Blanchet, 52, and Fricke, 54, have been married for 28 years. They both have extensive backgrounds in agriculture, environmentalism and Third World development, and have spent most of their lives living and working in the non-profit sector.

After years of experience there, Fricke realized that most development projects are flawed and fail.

"That's because they are based on the flavor of the month, the immediate concepts out there," he said. "What they were ungrounded in was a bottom-line motivation. I felt the only way to get people to protect resources and support conservation was if they were able to get a financial return – if it helped improve their lives and their own bottom line."

Applying business principles to rural development projects is something new in the world; in a real way, it combines doing good with doing well. In Vermont, social responsible business is a lifestyle choice. But in the developing world, it may be a necessity, because the alternatives are oppression, colonialism, exploitation and domination by

multinational corporations.

In 1996, Fricke, who calls himself an "ecco-preneur," and Blanchet left the non-profit world behind. They borrowed money from their family and friends, and started the very-much-for-profit ForesTrade. They had decided to try nothing less than a new model of globalization.

Fricke describes it this way: "All the different stakeholders are recognized and rewarded for their contributions. That would include the farmers and their communities at the origin, local business partners and cooperatives, the logistics infrastructure, the customers, and most importantly, the consumers who are driving this whole thing. We specialize in countries having bumpy transitions to democracy and facing serious economic, political and environmental challenges. For us, business is really a tool for conservation, social improvement and also sustainability."

So far, the new global business model is working out. The privately-owned company had sales of \$10.4 million last year. It employs about 200 people around the world. It has wholly-owned subsidiaries in Holland, Indonesia and Guatemala. It is one of the fastest-grow-

ing companies in Vermont, averaging 30 percent growth a year, and has won *Vermont Business Magazine's* 5x5x5 award for the past two years (5 fastest growing companies in 5 categories over 5 years; for 2004, ForesTrade was the overall fastest growing company in the state at a whopping 275 percent).

ForesTrade sells to more than 100 companies, including in Vermont to Ben & Jerry's Homemade Ice Cream and Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, which bankrolled the beginning of ForesTrade's Aceh coffee-growers cooperative, PPKGO. It also sells nationally to Tazo Tea (a division of Starbucks) and Stonyfield Farm, among other companies.

In 2002, it won the prestigious World Summit Business Award for Sustainable Development Partnerships from the United Nations and the International Chamber of Commerce.

ForesTrade has big plans for expansion. Fricke wants to extend the brand to consumer goods and is currently looking for new investment partners.

"We're shooting in the next three or four years to be a \$20 million company, have much more vertical integration, provide finished products, and be actively involved in the sales channels," Fricke said.

After the tsunami, ForesTrade's North American clients quickly lined up to contribute to rescue and relief efforts. Green Mountain Coffee Roasters alone donated \$45,000. In the end, Blanchet and Fricke collected over \$300,000, in part because ForesTrade's customers feel a personal connection to the region.

"We were fortunate that our vanilla growers were high up in the mountains and didn't get affected," said Skip Roskam, the president and COO of David Michael & Co of Philadelphia, a 108-year-old family business which supplies flavoring ingredients to the food and beverage industry; the company buys organic vanilla from ForesTrade.

"Our clients were calling, concerned about the people. Not the products. The people."

The grandchild of one of ForesTrade's California clients read about the damage and went door-to-door collecting money to buy teddy bears for the orphans.

"She raised about \$130, and Thomas and I were able to purchase 300 teddy bears," Blanchet said. "We took them to a tent where maybe 300 children were. And I tell you, they needed teddy bears. It was amazing to see the smiles on these children's faces. It was a real privilege to be a vehicle for this little girl's vision."

Blanchet was in Sumatra to handle relief and reconstruction, but she had planned to be there even before the disaster. The company has recently received a grant from the Dutch government to build an organic center and processing facility for spices and extracts in Sumatra, and Blanchet had planned to find land, design an office and a factory, and purchase equipment. The tsunami added "a whole other dimension," she said.

"There's a whole population that has been traumatized," Blanchet said. "Everybody lost family or friends or busi-

ness associates. Yesterday I was reading in the paper that many people came back from the Haj pilgrimage, and while they were in Mecca, their entire families were wiped out. They were sitting in the airport of Banda Aceh waiting for somebody to pick them up, and for some people, no one did. It was the saddest, saddest thing."

Since coffee is grown in the mountains, most of the PPKGO cooperative farmers survived. But almost everyone there has lost friends or family members.

"What was so awful for us is that many of our farmers' children were in school in Banda Aceh," Blanchet said. "So there was a period right after when they all went down to try and find their children. And some did, and some didn't."

Prompt military assistance in the region from the United States, France, Australia, Singapore and Pakistan "was probably the most benevolent example of military intervention in history and saved hundreds of thousands of lives," Fricke said. "But one of the things omitted was the need to respect local customs and religious ritual. Our farmers are devout Muslims. First they were able to collect food from their own farms for the displaced people. Then they did the gruesome work of recovering the bodies. They bought Muslim prayer clothes and mullahs along to minister the last rites. So they really closed a gap in the relief efforts. And since we have warehouses and trucks and a lot of people working, we were able to respond very quickly and channel the resources where they're most urgently needed."

Through Blanchet and Fricke, ForesTrade's North American clients have been able to develop strong feelings of connection with farmers on the other side of the world.

"First of all, I find Thomas a rare individual," Roskam said. "Thomas and Sylvia's main mission in life is to help other people, and that's a rare commodity today, especially in a business environment. I have a lot of respect for their ability to run a business based on social responsibility. Thomas is honorable and enjoyable to do business with. He's an entrepreneur who recognizes that he's not a proficient business person as he could be, and he's smart enough to surround himself with people who can do those jobs."

Early Life

Blanchet was born in Wellesley, MA, and grew up in Washington, DC, the oldest girl in a family of five. Her father was a State Department diplomat who worked on disarmament issues and who helped negotiate the Geneva Conventions. Her mother was a Quaker who studied in Holland and was also deeply interested in international affairs.

"In college, my mother began to set up her own international exchange for students," Blanchet said. "Later, she wanted work that was flexible and responsive to the schedule of her five children, so she became a vice president of Smith Barney – at a time when there weren't

women doing that. She was one of the first people doing social investing for clients who were little old ladies, or for people for whom every dollar made a difference. She was a wonderful model for me."

Blanchet's first job was running a lemonade stand when she was five or six. Then she graduated to baby-sitting and other odd jobs.

"I enjoyed putting myself into as many projects as I could to learn about different people and cultures," she said. "Washington, DC, was a great place to do that. I worked behind counters making sandwiches, I worked in offices, I had my own little company with my sister where we did landscaping and painting houses. I can't even remember all the jobs."

With the money she earned, she traveled – hitch-hiking across the country in high school, and traveling around Mexico. She also helped pay for college at Bryn Mawr, which she graduated in 1974.

As Blanchet got older, the jobs got odder. One of her more memorable ones was living in a tree house on a Georgia island and taking care of a breeding colony of apes. She also worked with animal behaviorists doing studies on wild boars and sea turtles.

"I also had a very weird job as a Colonial housewife – I ran this living history museum outside of Philadelphia, where we had to recreate 18th Century lifestyles," Blanchet said. "It created a lot of empathy in me for women in developing countries. So I went from that to a training in appropriate technology and sustainable development in California. That's where I met Thomas."

Fricke

"I'm a Cold War baby," Fricke said. "I'm a refugee from behind the Iron Curtain. I was born of German and Jewish parents in East Berlin."

During World War II, Fricke's father, whose mother was Jewish, survived the Nazis by "black marketeering, smuggling, and living underground – at one point very close to Gestapo headquarters."

Fricke's father and uncle created two businesses, but unfortunately, after the war, their part of Berlin disappeared behind the Iron Curtain.

"They were a retail fish and a retail fowl business," Fricke said. "My father bought his products from individuals who were going fishing in the rivers or from backyard chicken operations. But that ran against the whole collectivization approach to government, and eventually his two stores were seized. When I was three, in the middle of the night, my father abandoned his businesses and his home for a new life in West Germany. That was in 1953."

When he was eight, his family boarded a boat for New York City. They settled in Chico, CA.

"I was taught about survival in terms of food production and commerce by my parents, and then, further, the Central Valley of California took me from my very European, urban roots into a rural and

quite Hispanic culture," Fricke said. "I worked with migrant farm workers. I liked to tell them that I'm a wetback too, but I came across the Atlantic, so I'm a lot wetter than they are."

In California, Fricke's father started life again as a janitor, took night classes, and eventually opened a delicatessen selling imported goods from far away places like Sumatra, Kenya and Guatemala – places Fricke dreamed of visiting.

His dreams were further stimulated by his hobby of stamp collecting.

"I created imaginary voyages of discovery," he said. "Also, I would take the globe and spin it, and wherever my fingers stopped, I would do this intensive study and then a visualization of myself living and working and being part of that culture."

One of Fricke's first jobs was a paper route. He also picked fruit, pruned roses, and planted peach trees. Then he shifted from the farm to the factory and started working in canneries. The money he earned paid for travel – going to Europe "to reclaim my roots there," down to "the tip of South America," and in Asia. It also helped pay for his education. He went to Stanford University from 1969-1974, often working three jobs to pay his tuition.

"Among my many jobs, I sold encyclopedias," Fricke said. "I quickly learned I was really selling self-advancement and educational opportunities. I had to get inside the psyche of the person I was selling to, and sell a vision – probably because I was selling something they already had or really didn't need. The vision I was selling was that their children could better themselves and rise above their circumstances."

Did he believe in this vision?

"No, and I stopped selling encyclopedias and speed-reading courses because I felt they weren't really needs," Fricke said. "But in my many incarnations since, I've become pretty good at selling vision and values. You have to have a strong and unshakable faith in the rightness of your vision and values, plus a healthy dose of chutzpah."

After Stanford, where he studied architecture and engineering, Fricke went to Bali as an "appropriate technology" volunteer for a Quaker-inspired alternative-Peace Corps called Volunteers in Asia. It was a "hardship post," Fricke said – "the hardship was leaving the place."

His job there, a typical one in development, was building bio-gas plants to convert manure into usable energy and fertilizer. That's when he learned that the big motivators for people in developing countries are the same ones we have in America: money and market opportunities.

In 1976 he took a MS degree in agroecosystems management from Antioch University West, which prepared him to be a development professional.

As A Couple

Between their early interest in travel, international affairs, and doing good in the world, Blanchet and Fricke were an obvious match. They met at a conference

on using agriculture as a tool for transforming the developing world.

“As it happened, we were both recruited by these people with a project in Tanzania,” Blanchet said. “Then they started some very heavy matchmaking. We fell in love right away. We ended up getting married, but we didn’t go to Tanzania because the project fell through.”

After they were married, Fricke worked for a variety of development organizations and colleges, including the Farallones Institute in Berkeley and the University of California at Santa Cruz. His life changed one day on the beach at Santa Cruz, when his sister-in-law encountered by chance a headhunter from the United Nations.

“The headhunter was looking for a specialist in alternative technology who could work for a UN development program in Indonesia,” Fricke said. “They had been unable to find such a person. Within a week I was off to New York, Vienna and then Djakarta, to be the specialist designing a multi-million-dollar program in building materials and energy sources all over Indonesia. I remember going to Aceh and developing ferroceement (reinforced cement) fishing boats.”

During the 1980s, Fricke worked for a variety of development organizations, including Appropriate Technology International in Washington, DC. He did a project in Sumatra for the World Wildlife Fund, was a consultant to the World Bank’s Office of Science and Technology and worked with USAID, the Asian Development Bank, OXFAM, and other organizations.

In Washington, the couple lived on an organic farm “right next to the CIA.” Blanchet cared for their children and did volunteer work.

In 1985, Fricke took a job with The Experiment in International Living – now called World Learning, Inc – in Brattleboro. His assignment was to help develop projects in agriculture, rural development and business development in Southeast Asia. He and Blanchet moved to Marlboro, where she became a family therapist. In 1989, she received a Master’s in Organization and Management from Antioch “that helped to flesh out our ability to work together,” Fricke said.

When World Learning relocated Fricke’s department to Washington, he left the organization and became a consultant again, or, as he puts it, a “non-government individual, an NGI.”

He worked for the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, and also for Cultural Survival Enterprises, Inc in Cambridge, MA.

“Cultural Survival was a famous Cambridge-based organization that created the rain forest products marketing wave with things like Ben & Jerry’s Rainforest Crunch, and The Body Shop,” Fricke said. “I was their business manager for Southeast Asia and was actively developing sources and products and business partners in the private sector. I’d actually gotten money from Citibank and the John Merck Foundation to develop a con-

cept called ‘Forest Flavors’ – flavors, fragrances, spices, oils, essences – that could be used to promote conservation of resources as well as the botanical base of those products. I was trying to get big companies like McCormick’s and Sarah Lee and Coca Cola into the act. It didn’t work. They weren’t ready. They didn’t see how it would benefit their businesses. In fact, they were concerned it would detract, because if you have this wonderful ‘green’ line of products, then what about all the rest?”

Cultural Survival had a glorious heyday and a big collapse, Fricke said, because it was essentially built on niche markets and novelty products.

“It was not a solid business proposition,” Fricke said. “It became obvious to me that I had to create my own business model and my own business. What I wanted to do didn’t exist, and you could see the market was ready to take off.”

Fricke even worked for a company that wanted to develop a rainforest-scented trash bag because “Americans don’t like smelly garbage.”

“The company went bust, but it helped to spin off ForesTrade,” Fricke said. “It provided us with our first \$16,000 from the sale of gurjun balsam oil, tapped from the tallest trees in the rain forest on the coast of Sumatra.”

Non-Profit To For-profit

Fricke’s first for-profit company – formed with five partners, \$500,000 in loan funds from an environmental investment group, and grants – “failed spectacularly,” even though it had “the sexiest and highest-potential product,” Fricke said. The product was a coconut husk substitute for peat moss, which is used by farmers, nurseries and gardeners all over the world.

“Most people are not aware – and certainly don’t care – that peat moss is produced by strip-mining a very fragile and valuable ecosystem and helps accelerate global warming,” Fricke said. “We created a company in the Philippines to manufacture from coconut husks this product called ‘cocopith’ or ‘Ecopeat,’ as we called it, which was produced by the 50 billion coconuts currently rotting on the farms and around the shores of the world. We thought the world would snap it up.”

The partners built a factory and started buying coconut husks from 20,000 farmers.

“I thought we had a fantastic product opportunity and I put my heart and soul behind it,” Fricke said.

When he started selling Ecopeat in supermarket chains in Japan and Germany, and to nursery-growers groups in the United States, however, he discovered a flaw in the business.

“Peat is very convenient and cheap, and people were unwilling to pay more for something that didn’t have a perceived value,” Fricke said. “The product was ahead of its time, and it would cost us way too much money to succeed. We’d never get there. What I learned is that it’s really what you put in your body and on your body that people are willing to pay a premium for.”

Forestrade, Fair Trade

In the course of the Ecopeat disaster, Fricke was approached by Cultural Survival contacts who were interested in organic spices, and ForesTrade was formed – originally the letters were an acronym for “fine organic and environmentally sustainable essences and spices.”

From the beginning, the goal was the organic market – which, at the time, was virtually non-existent. Fricke’s interest in organic agriculture dates back to his days working with migrant farm workers in the fields of California.

“We would get dusted by pesticides,” Fricke said. “In several instances I had to fight off crop-dusters. It left a deep impression. Then I worked for an organization promoting organic gardening. That’s how I met Sylvia. And over the years we’ve lived on organic farms. It was clear to me that organic-slash-sustainable products were the wave of the future.”

Fricke and Blanchet threw themselves into the new company.

“This is not just a consulting gig,” Fricke said. “I’m not just serving as a product development consultant to companies. This is a business model. This is a business concept. I went in with a vengeance to re-establish my networks and alliances out in the field.”

Start-up funding was \$50,000 in loans from family and friends and \$16,000 from the scented trash bags.

“Sylvia kind of leapt in, bringing in her family,” Fricke said. “Her mother had just passed away, and so she used her inheritance, and brought in other family members, and mobilized a whole array of angel investors. They would always come just in the nick of time. They have really believed in us and our vision. We have about 37 corporate and individual investors. Three or four environmental organizations invest, like the Nature Conservancy and Conservation International, for example. We have foundations and venture investment funds. We also have individual investors. We raised almost \$2 million in equity in the company over the past several years, and last year we put in place a \$5.3 million loan guarantee with the U.S. Overseas Private Investment Corporation. So we’ve been bootstrapping, and incrementally lining up loans and investors and getting customers.”

“Pre-financing” has played a major role in the company’s growth. For example, in 1997 the company was sputtering along, kept afloat by its spice sales in Europe, when a client came to Fricke with a business suggestion: get into drugs.

“What he meant was stimulants like coffee, cocoa and sugar, with a much greater market potential,” Fricke said.

Fricke immediately introduced himself to the people at Green Mountain Coffee.

“Thomas came to us and told us that his business was finding and importing organic oils and spices,” said Rick Peyser, GMCR’s director of social advocacy and public relations. “And in his travels to Sumatra, he’d come across a group of about 100 small-scale coffee growers who needed assistance to have their coffee

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organically certified. We agreed to fund it, and made a contribution of \$15,000. That co-op, PPKGO, grew over time. It was in two communities and now it's in 24 communities. It's grown from 100 members to 1,900 members. It's become the largest Fair Trade coffee cooperative in Sumatra and accounts for over 10 percent of the Fair Trade coffee imported into the US."

GMCR does not have a financial stake in ForesTrade; ForesTrade is their broker, or middleman, to the PPKGO cooperative.

"Forestrade has been a terrific partner," Peyser said. "Thomas has, in my mind, gone way above and beyond the relationship we have with many vendors. He has provided not only wonderful organic Fair Trade coffee, but been a link to the communities and the people who grow this coffee. He's also brought members of the cooperative to visit us in Waterbury, and has been very, very helpful in building the strong relationship we have with this cooperative."

"Fair Trade" is an international licensing program based in Germany which creates standards and certification programs for specific products, especially coffee. Its core principles are fair pricing, fair labor conditions, working with cooperatives, and providing pre-financing to get rural farmers out of a debt-bondage situation. For a while, ForesTrade was working in parallel to the Fair Trade movement; when it started with coffee, the lines converged.

Soon the company had morphed from a few customers and products to a broad-based business. Fricke was working himself hard, finding talented people who could mobilize farmers to do the baseline work of organic certification on the supply end, and going to trade shows in Europe and the United States to search for customers on the demand end.

The work is challenging and complex. In Aceh, for example, Blanchet and Fricke work with collectives of farmers who represent nineteen different ethnic groups and all the major religions.

"So you have devout Muslims working with Christians and shamans interfacing with us Americans," Blanchet said. "It's very rich, very challenging."

ForesTrade buys directly from growers, usually organized into producer groups or cooperatives. In Indonesia, they buy from over 100 in as many locations.

"We collect the products either through our own facilities or local business partners," Fricke said. "Often we process it. In the case of coffee, we're converting the raw fruit, the cherry, into a finished green bean ready to be sent to roasters and importers. In the case of cinnamon, basically the bark of the tree is being dried, cut, sifted, bagged and, in some cases, ground. Increasingly, we're adding more value to the raw ingredients. And we pack and ship."

Development work comes with the territory.

"In Guatemala, for example, we have a partner who does most of the purchasing and processing for us, but we do all

the quality assurance and certification compliance," Fricke said. "We do a lot of development-type activity – training, extension, new product development."

One of ForesTrade's clients, Starbucks' Tazo Tea division, works with the company in Guatemala.

"We buy botanicals from ForesTrade," said Keith Hutjens, Tazo's manager of tea procurement. "For example, we make a chai, a spiced tea with cardamom, cinnamon and pepper in it. We buy the cardamom and cinnamon from ForesTrade because of the sustainable agricultural practices they are promoting out in the market. We just did a trip to Guatemala with ForesTrade to get a feel for the origin of these products."

A good example of the way ForesTrade works is in Guatemala, Hutjens said, where Fricke is trying to get USAID funding to place dryers in cardamom-growing regions.

"These help add value," Hutjens said. "Most of the cardamom is carried down by workers to a main transportation link. When you dry the cardamom and take away the excess moisture, you're allowing the farmer to get more value for the product, along with him being able to carry more of it."

Another product for which ForesTrade has an enthusiastic client is organic vanilla. Skip Roskam of David Michael & Co. hooked up with Fricke in 1998 to develop a market for organic vanilla extract in North America.

"Thomas had a relationship in Sumatra where he was growing organic vanilla beans," Roskam said. "He had a group of a couple hundred farmers. We developed a strategic alliance, where we became their exclusive customer for organic vanilla beans in North America. I committed to buy the entire annual crop of the farmers. I did that before my company had ever sold any organic vanilla extract. Then we went out to our client base and promoted the use, and hopefully we helped to develop that market. Thomas and I have continued in our business relationship in organic and other types of vanilla beans."

Through relationships like this, ForesTrade has become the main supplier to Ben & Jerry's Social Mission Vanilla.

"Ben & Jerry's multi-national owners made a decision to maintain the company's social mission aspect, and they put the vanilla out to bid," Fricke said. "We won in a competition against McCormick's and Virginia Dare, very big companies. We won because we had the ability to demonstrate direct relationships with growers."

Although there was virtually no organic spice market in 1996, today ForesTrade is facing increasing competition. It has about a 25 percent market share for spices and oils in Europe and a 50 percent share in the United States. Competition comes from "origin sellers" who grow spices and vanilla in countries like India, Madagascar and Vietnam. In the United States, other distributors and importers now compete with ForesTrade.

The Future

The tsunami disaster illustrated how quickly and deeply world-wide sympathy can be mobilized. Fricke wants to translate that consciousness into long-term development.

"I don't want it to sound as though we're being opportunists about the disaster," Fricke said. "But harnessing that type of energy by directly linking to products that are sourced with integrity at the origin will create a much greater public awareness and support for long-term reconstruction activities that are really needed. It also can promote our brand identity and create more income and employment opportunities."

For example, 10,000 hectares of abandoned and degraded land in Aceh is now being used to resettle displaced tsunami victims; the idea is that the land can be reclaimed by these farmers and put into coffee. A separate project funds vanilla farmers who are working on increasing production and controlling plant disease.

"We're looking at how to build on the work we've done in the field to create new products and new opportunities," Fricke. "These high-profile and high-value products like coffee, vanilla, spices and oils can contribute to reconstruction and long-term industries."

Over the past few years, ForesTrade's growth has been "breathtaking," Fricke said. He would like to see it slow it down so he can shift from being an ingredient supplier to a consumer product manufacturer.

"The biggest question after you create something is can you scale it up," Fricke said. "I don't think we are capable of scaling it up to where it needs to go. There's this divide between so-called niche and mainstream, and we realize we have to bridge that. We want to build alliances. We want to determine who our right partners would be. We have a diverse product line, so it's not entirely clear who all those partners will be in terms of investors and market channels. But we see the need to expand and magnify the impact on the ground at both ends."

One potential partner would be the US government.

"We recognize there's a role for the private sector," Fricke said. "The current administration is very much promoting private sector involvement and public-private alliances. And that's the heart and core of what we do. We are working now to get US government funding in Guatemala to develop sources for exciting new products. One of them is the ramon nut from the heart of the rain forest in Central America, which was the subsistence food of the ancient Mayas."

In the end, Fricke and Blanchet are trying to help transform the world, one spice at a time.

"Thomas is doing wonderful work, and we're thrilled to be working with him," said Peyser of Green Mountain Coffee Roasters.

"ForesTrade represents, in addition to great coffee, a type of values that

Green Mountain Coffee Roasters is proud to be associated with. It's complex work, and ForesTrade does it with the utmost integrity. And perhaps most importantly, through their efforts at facilitating communication, they make the world smaller."

Joyce Marcel is a freelance writer from Dummerston.