

PHOTO BY SHANNON ROONEY

15 MINUTES

Cacao to craft cocoa

Matt Armstrong's love for making craft chocolate can be traced to 2010, when he traveled to Panama to visit his brother, who was working with cacao farmers in the Peace Corps. Armstrong had just graduated from Chico State with a degree in communications, and he found his career path after learning from indigenous tribespeople how to make chocolate in their traditional way. Upon returning to California, he and his brother opened a wholesale drinking-chocolate business and cafe in Santa Cruz, which they sold in 2016. After a brief detour to Denver, where he joined forces with a different chocolate maker, Armstrong decided to come home to Butte County—he was born and raised in Paradise—and start his own company, Armstrong Chocolate Co. One thing he's maintained along the way is a commitment to purchasing top-quality cacao from ethically sound farms. You can find him most Saturdays at his vendor table at the Chico Certified Farmers' Market, where he sells drinking chocolate as well as bars. He's happy to chat with customers about anything related to chocolate—he uses a cacao bean, bigger than his hand, to spark conversation—and he often offers samples. Go to armstrongchocolate.com for more info.



You buy cacao beans from places like Costa Rica and Belize. How do you choose?

Some [of the things I consider] include proper management of trees, watering, shade, correct harvesting practices, and especially fermentation, with five to seven days the average.

What have you learned from visiting cacao farms?

I've learned to assess cacao Assessment includes aromatics, taste, textures, what it visually looks like, fermentation—when it has a good ferment, it has a very fruity smell. If it's musky, you know something went wrong. You can't always know what happened, but you have to know what off-quality looks like.

How do you buy the cacao you use?

I work with a broker who visits the [cacao] farms and does an evaluation. Working with a broker is critical. It's not unusual for an armed person to be with the cacao. In some countries,

you can't be a foreigner with no established connections [and visit the farms].

How do you hope to share what you do with Butte County?

I like to teach chocolate classes, talk about chocolate, and share with youth the importance of travel. That one trip [to Panama] changed me in the direction of chocolate. I'm available to visit classrooms and talk about chocolate in relationship to topics like chemistry, history and more. I'd also like to team up with some restaurants.

What's the status of craft chocolate right now?

Craft chocolate is where craft beer was about 10 years ago. Before, you couldn't get machinery that was scaled down. A person in Washington state started making things like a winnower, refiners and grinders. He just started experimenting, asking, "What can I build to make chocolate in my home?"

—SHANNON ROONEY

THE GOODS

Building an empire



by
Meredith J. Cooper

meredithc@newsreview.com

In early November, I got word that local health-coach-turned-food-guru Amy Lacey had taken a career leap—she'd parlayed her business, **Cali'Flour Foods**, into a brick-and-mortar cafe, **Cali'Concept Kitchen**. Her grand opening was planned for Nov. 13; then the Camp Fire hit and everybody's plans changed.

The news of Cali'Concept Kitchen's opening inside **New Earth Market**—it took the space previously occupied by **Rolling Stone Pizza**—got lost amid the brain fog that followed Nov. 8. Then, with the new year came a package in my mailbox: It was Lacey's cookbook, **Cali'Flour Kitchen**, filled with recipes for and using cauliflower pizza crust, pasta and rice.

Last week, I finally made it over to Cali'Concept and got to chat with Lacey and her cafe manager, **Lora Adams**, both of whom were bubbly and enthusiastic about the business, which has taken off over the past year as the vegetable has gained popularity. "There are 35 cauliflower products on the market," Lacey said. "When we first launched this product way back in 2016, there wasn't even cauliflower rice. It's been crazy."

Lacey got into the health field after being diagnosed with lupus, an autoimmune disease. She discovered cauliflower, a natural anti-inflammatory, happens to make a great pizza crust, minus the gluten and sugar that trigger her lupus. A business was born.

After buying out her partner in 2017, Lacey said, she switched up nearly everything, from her crust recipe—she now offers several options, such as spicy jalapeño and dairy-free—to her assembly process, which now utilizes the stems in addition to the flowers. She moved her operations from Chico to Salinas because she'd outgrown her facility here—and it brought her closer to the cauliflower fields. She even added products, including crackers and pasta.

Now, Cali'Flour Foods is in stores across the United States. But Lacey holds a special place in her heart for New Earth, the first. "We weren't a proven concept and there was nothing else out on the market," Lacey said. "They took a total chance on us. And we get to do this now, so my loyalty to them is huge."

Rolling Stone Pizza gave her a shot, too, serving her crusts and inspiring her topping combinations. She and Adams insisted I try a few, including the delicious **Popeye's Cadillac** (spinach, chicken, tomatoes, mozzarella and feta). I look forward to trying out recipes in Lacey's book, too. She tells me she's been tapped to write a second and her next product line likely will be frozen dinners. So, stay tuned!

The cafe is open daily and also hosts classes. Go to califlourfoods.com or caliconceptkitchen.com for more info.

TOOL TIME Chico is once again home to a **True Value Hardware**, which opened earlier this month in the **SaveMart** shopping center off East Avenue. In addition to all the traditional True Value inventory, it's also the new home of **Holiday Pools & Spas**, which opened in 1958(!) and relocated from East and Cohasset.

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