

GROWING ORGANIC QUINOA: A TRADITIONAL CROP FINDS NEW MARKETS

Jose Balla diligently prepares his field for this season's planting of quinoa. "Before, our ancestors planted just a little for personal use," the small Chimborazan farmer says. Today, two-thirds of his three-hectare farm is dedicated to producing the grain for export.

Jose is just one of more than 4,000 small agriculturists around the Sierran provinces of Chimborazo, Tunguragua, Bolivar and Azuay who are profiting from growing and exporting

organic quinoa. He and other farmers would have never even tried to market the protein-rich grain if it hadn't been for the collaboration between Peace Corps Volunteers and a well-respected Riobamba institution.

When Josh Busby entered the Peace Corps in 1997, he was assigned to a community in the province of Tunguragua that was interested in exporting quinoa. Eager to help, Josh learned that a pair of former Peace Corps Ecuador

Volunteers had a small import business in the United States. Bob and Maggi Leventry served as small business and health Volunteers from 1993 to 1996. Soon after returning to Chicago, the Leventrys created The Andean Partnership. After importing artisan goods, they were interested in branching out into organic quinoa from Ecuador. "We had always wanted to import quinoa," Bob says. "My wife had fallen in love with the grain while a Volunteer." Marketing studies confirmed what Maggi, a registered dietitian, had always suspected. "Because of the growing number of vegeterians, we knew there was going to be a market for a high-protein grain," she says.

In order to import the product, the Leventrys needed both a reliable supply of quinoa and one that met the organic requirements for the U.S. market. Josh soon realized, however, that his small group of farmers by themselves would never be able to produce the large quantities of quinoa The Andean Partnership required. In addition, each farmer had to receive certification indicating that the quinoa was indeed produced without chemicals. While looking for a company that could provide certification, Josh came in contact with Escuelas Radiofonicas Populares del Ecuador (ERPE) in Riobamba.

For 40 years ERPE has provided educational radio programming for indigenous communities in the central Sierra. Starting with a literacy program, ERPE's attention eventually shifted towards agriculture. By the time Josh made contact with ERPE, the institution had nearly a decade of experience promoting organic farming among small agriculturists. ERPE had an organic certification contract with a German company and was looking for overseas markets to sell quinoa and other natural products but with little success. When Josh proposed the idea of exporting quinoa through the Leventrys, ERPE was interested in participating.

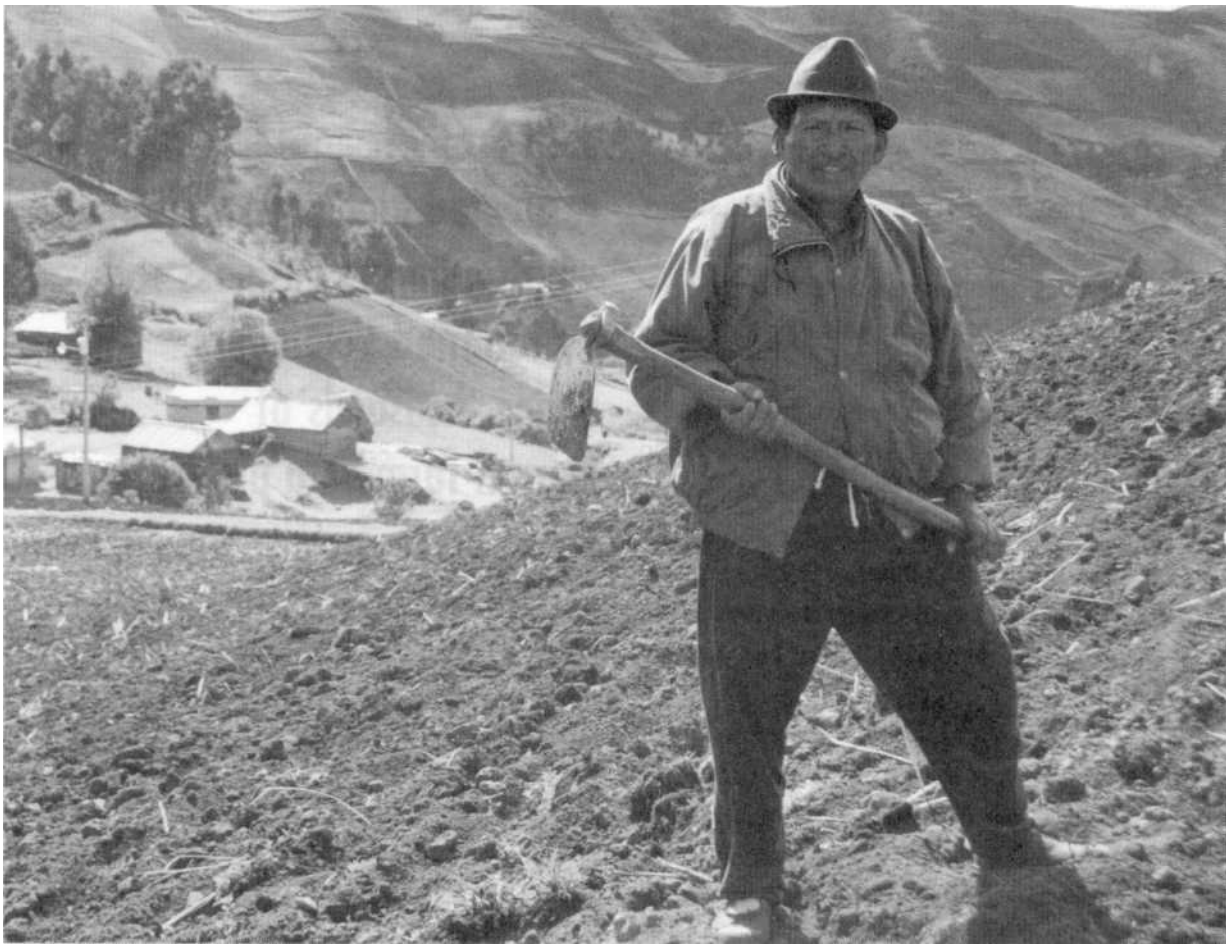
Josh Busby helped link a respected Riobamba institution with an import business run by returned Volunteers, giving thousands of Sierran farmers a profitable incentive to grow organic quinoa.



Maggi and Bob Leventry created The Andean Partnership after completing their Volunteer service in 1996. Their import business now buys more than 400 tons of organic quinoa from Ecuadorian farmers.

In the early stages, Josh served as an intermediary between The Andean Partnership and ERPE, negotiating a fair price for the product and handling other details. "Josh negotiated as if he were a member of ERPE," Juan Perez, ERPE's director, says. "During the entire process he defended ERPE's interest and the interests of the farmers."

Once the deal was made, ERPE went to the airwaves promoting the benefits of quinoa and educating farmers in its production. Switching over to planting organic quinoa wasn't a hard sell. Because of ERPE's influence, farmers had already come to realize the benefits



Jose Balla is just one of more than 4,000 small Sierran farmers who are profiting from growing and exporting organic quinoa. Two-thirds of his three-hectare farm is dedicated to producing the high-protein grain.

of planting organic crops. For health and economic reasons, many farmers had shifted from using hazardous and costly chemicals to the more environmentally-friendly organic approach. With ERPE's team of professionals offering technical assistance, certification and a guarantee to buy the product at a fair, fixed price, farmers were excited about their prospects.

During the agricultural cycle of 1997 -1998, 250 families signed on to export 27 tons of quinoa. With the success of the first harvest, interest throughout the region grew exponentially. During the 1998-1999 cycle, 450 families produced a total of 55 tons. The following year, the number of families grew to 1,200 and production increased to 125 tons. In 2001, 2,600 families from 115 communities produced 260 tons of quinoa. For the 2001 - 2002 cycle, 4,025 families will export more than 400 tons.

Based on studies performed by ERPE, local families have increased their yearly income from \$230 to \$365 since exporting quinoa. During their frequent business visits back to Ecuador, Bob and Maggi have seen the transformation of communities where the grain is grown. Thatch huts are being replaced by cinderblock homes. In addition, a clause in the sale of the quinoa requires families to keep a portion of their product, encouraging the consumption of the protein-rich grain in a population where malnutrition is extremely high.

ERPE is currently looking for other organic products to export through The Andean Partnership in order to increase diversity and encourage crop rotation to prevent soil depletion. As for the Leventrys, the couple looks forward to doing business with Ecuadorian farmers for years to come.