



# on the rise

By LAUREL MILLER

## in. ecuator,

a growing taste for *maduro* (aged) cheese expands opportunity for farmers and food tourists



Upon my arrival at Hacienda Zuleta in Northern Ecuador, Fito, by way of greeting, takes my hand and leads me to my room. I am delighted, rather than taken aback by his brashness, despite the fact that my palm is left damp. Fito, you see, is the farm dog, a puppyish, brindled Great Dane-Golden Retriever mix. But even without Fito's attendance, I would still have been immediately charmed by this hacienda with its vast cobblestone plaza, its long, whitewashed adobe buildings trimmed with cobalt blue, and the hundreds of flowering geraniums lining porches, walls, and walkways. Zuleta is a living postcard of preserved Colonial architecture. And beyond its walls are steep Andean valleys lush with temperate cloud forest rising up from emerald pastures dotted with grazing cows and horses. It is as though I have arrived in a Happy Place of my own design . . . complete with cheesemaking.



Monica of Hacienda Zuleta holds a tray of cheeses produced on the farm: Herb Zuleta Jack, 1 year-old Andino, and Hot Pepper Zuleta Jack.

### First Family

Hacienda Zuleta is a 4,000-acre working dairy farm, as well as a 5,200-acre community in Ecuador's Imbabura province. The property is owned by the Lasso family, which purchased the sixteenth-century hacienda in 1898. Records show that fresh cheese was already being produced at Zuleta when the Lassos purchased it, but it wasn't until the arrival of Swiss cheesemaker Don Oskar Purtschert in 1952 that the dairy began to manufacture aged and semi-aged European-style cheeses such as Port Salut, Bel Paese, and a pleasantly stinky Danbo.

The milk for Zuleta's eleven types of natural and wax-rinded, semi-aged (*semi-maduro*) cheeses, yogurt, cream, cream cheese, and butter is supplied by the farm's herd of 275 Holstein-Friesian cows, supplemented by milk from cows owned by Hacienda employees and members of the surrounding communities, including the village of Zuleta. Eight employees work in the cheese factory, which, along with a one-room Museo de Queso detailing Zuleta's history as a dairy, is located behind the main house.

Today, under the guidance of head cheesemaker Fernando Polanco, Zuleta is producing some of the finest semi-aged artisanal cheeses in Ecuador, including their signature Don Galo. This stunning, natural-rind cheese with rich, caramel overtones and slight calcium crystallization is aged in seven-and-a-half pound wheels for seven months. A three-month old version is voluptuous and buttery, with a residual tang.



Pouring fresh milk into the bulk tank for chilling.

Don Galo is a commemorative cheese created by Polanco in honor of what would have been his grandfather's (Galo Plaza Lasso) one-hundredth birthday. It is an Andino, a Latin American style of semi-aged cheese that was first developed in the Peruvian Andes in the 1970s, according to Patrick F. Fox, author of *Cheese: Chemistry, Physics, and Microbiology* (Aspen Publishers, 2001). Polanco made his Zuleta Jack after an inspired visit to the renowned Vella Cheese factory in Sonoma, California. His is a creamy, waxed-rinded version infused with bright, herbaceous notes from the addition of Hacienda-grown rosemary, oregano, and basil. Most of the cheeses, including the popular Angochagua (the Port-Salut style named after the parochial district in which Zuleta is located) and Pategras, a mild, waxed Argentinean cheese similar to Edam, are aged between forty-five and sixty days before spending four to thirty-six hours in brine, just as they were when Purtschert first made them.

Ecuadorians do not have a tradition of producing aged cheeses—only five percent of the national commercial market is comprised of *maduro* (aged) or *semi-maduro* cheese. Culturally, the nutrients in fresh milk and cheese are immediate dietary necessities, and most rural families still operate farms for food and make their own cheese,



if they can afford a cow. But the country has a sizeable German-speaking community, comprised of expatriates and descendants of nineteenth-century immigrants from Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. Their collective presence has impacted the dairying culture of Ecuador, most notably with the introduction of aged cheese beginning in the early 1950s.

That said, high-end artisanal cheeses are still a tough sell in this Andean region, not just because of lofty price points, but because a rustic or imperfect looking product is often associated with a lesser quality. Zuleta is one of the few commercial dairies in Ecuador producing boutique cheeses of this type; its history and evolution speak to the country's burgeoning aged cheese industry.

### Property Value

Cheesemaker Polanco is the grandson of Galo Plaza Lasso, the former president of Ecuador (1948-1952). Plaza inherited Zuleta from his mother, and managed it until his death in 1987. Today, the Hacienda is owned by his five daughters and only son, Galo Plaza Polanco's uncle. A portion of the Hacienda is still a private home in which Galo Plaza lives, and to which other family members visit frequently. Polanco, his wife, Carolina Mosquera, and their two young sons also live in a small house on the property.

While Galo manages the farm, his nephew, Polanco, manages the cheese factory, trout farm, and tourism operations. The Lasso family also owns several other historic haciendas in Ecuador, some of which have been converted into high-end guest properties to supplement their breeding of horses (Andalusian-Thoroughbred-Quarter Horse hybrids known as Zuleteos) and fighting bulls.

Zuleta opened the doors to its first overnight guests in 1995, after a group of horseback riders needed accommodations as strikes were blocking the roads. Today, it is one of Ecuador's most famous and best-preserved haciendas, renowned not just for its cheese, excellent food, and carefully bred horses, but for its conservation and philanthropic programs as well. With fifteen simple, elegant guest rooms, decorated with family heirlooms and photographs and named for the relatives who were the original occupants, Zuleta feels less like a small hotel than it does a tranquil, private getaway—what Polanco calls an intimate encounter with the An-



Top: A local milking shed. Top right: Aerial view of Hacienda Zuleta. Bottom: The cobblestone courtyard at Zuleta.



Wrapping smaller Andino in cheesecloth before placing them in forms.



Production of young Andino: Top left, pressing curd under the whey. Above, cutting the curd. Left, placing the blocks of curd into molds.



des. An intense, passionate man with a down-to-earth demeanor and sly sense of humor, Polanco also acts as host, tour guide, and Zuleta historian. During dinner, in between enquiring who would like seconds or more wine, he is fond of sharing family anecdotes, many of them involving the Lasso family's love of food. (For a recipe for Ecuadorean *Sopa de Quinoa*, and more on the Lasso family's sustainable initiatives, visit [www.culturecheesemag.com](http://www.culturecheesemag.com).)

### From Pasture to Product

The rhythm of life at Zuleta revolves around the dairy. Each day, 5,400 gallons of milk pass through the three separate milking sheds spread across the property, yielding 1,200 pounds of cheese.

Zuleta's dairy and cheese factory, or *fabrica*, are considered small by commercial standards, though the top cows produce up to ten gallons of milk daily; the national average, by comparison, is just over two gallons. The pastured animals graze on abundant clover and *kikueo*, a grass native to Africa, which are supplemented by the organic compost produced on the farm. The grass eaten by the community cows up on the hillsides tends to be drier, which results in exceptionally rich milk.

Each of the milking sheds has different production capabilities and is located nearest the herd that supplies it to maximize yield, as cows lose milk volume when they walk. El Rosario, built in 2006, is the most modern facility, designed to meet international production standards, while El Ordeno Puro, located directly behind Zuleta's main plaza, is semiautomatic and used for the farm's top-producing animals. La Cocha is the most traditional of Zuleta's milking facilities, where all work is done by hand.

Seeing cows being milked right in the field was one of the most remarkable things I witnessed throughout Ecuador. Armed with nothing more than a bucket and short length of rope to hobble the hind legs, farmers milk their herds on perilously steep hillsides, in marshy pastures, and in front yards alongside busy highways. Zuleta's farmers deliver their milk to the *fabrica* by horse, motorbike, or pickup truck, though elsewhere in the highlands it is not uncommon to see donkeys, llamas, or alpacas delivering milk to local cheesemakers.

In the immaculate 1,300-square-foot, white-tiled *fabrica*, Zuleta's dairy technician Luis Paucar tests each batch of milk for fat, microbial, and antibiotic content (Antibiotics are the number one enemy of cheesemaking, Polanco states firmly). The milk is then pasteurized, vegetable rennet is added, and the curds are separated (the whey is sold to the community as a supplement to animal feed). Next, the cheeses are poured into molds and pressed to remove any excess whey before they begin their brining and maturation processes on native wood shelves.

The cheeses are then moved to their respective aging rooms, where they are treated with brine to assist rind formation. The brine helps to control the loss of moisture within the cheese and provides

a protective barrier. Natural flora present in the rooms work to give the cheeses their distinct characteristics, with the aid of thermophilic (high-temperature resilient) and mesophilic (moderate-temperature enduring) starter cultures. The finished cheeses are then washed, dried, and hand-dipped in wax before being readied for packaging and shipping.

In Ecuador, Zuleta dairy products are currently sold at specialty shops and major supermarkets; some market trials are being conducted in Peru. Most of the cheeses retail for about seven dollars a pound, which in Ecuador makes them a high-end product available only to a select economic group. As a result of both effective marketing and an increasing standard of living, the urban Ecuadorean palate has garnered a taste for semi-aged cheeses, and so they are being incorporated eagerly into the national diet. While Polanco still struggles to change the pervasive view that *handmade* equals low quality, mass-produced European-style cheeses are taking Ecuador by storm. It is, he says, only a matter of time and continuing education—and with cheese shops and specialty food delicatessens popping up throughout the country—before word spreads: artisanal aged cheeses don't have to look perfect to be considered premium product.

I want to provide cheeses that are available to a wider national demographic, he explains. We want Zuleta to grow sustainably, and we need to diversify our line, because our product is expensive. That said, our cheese production, from raw milk to end product, helps to support the community. It's a work in progress, as is the emergence of Zuleta cheese in the United States.

Polanco began sending his cheese to the United States in 2004, at the urging of a family friend, cheese buyer Doralice Handal



Top shelf: Angochagua, a Port-Salut style cheese. Lower shelf: Pategras, a mild cheese similar to Edam.

([www.doraliceimports.com](http://www.doraliceimports.com)). Handal, who was raised in Quito, has been in the cheese business for ten years, working for both Whole Foods and the Bay Area's Cowgirl Creamery. After tasting Zuleta's cheeses, she was so impressed that she made it her mission to bring them to the States. Handal encouraged Polanco to experiment with more aged (and thus more export-friendly) versions of his Don Galo (marketed as Andino in the U.S.) and Zuleta Jack.

In 2005, Handal purchased the Cheese Shop, an existing small retail outlet in Healdsburg, California. She transformed it into a charming space offering an impressive selection of well-kept domestic and imported artisan cheeses and cheeseboard items.

Dovetailing her interests in sustainable, artisan foodstuffs, her native Ecuador, and other South American countries, Handal started Doralice Imports in 2004. In addition to promoting varietal chocolate, Handal's goal was to bring international attention to Ecuador's fledgling aged-cheese industry.

To that end, the Cheese Shop's top seller is Andino. Similar to an aged Gouda, it possesses a natural rind, deep orange color, and sharp, slightly caramelized flavor—the distilled essence of Zuleta's beta carotene-rich grass. It begs to be eaten with crisp slices of apple or accompanied by a full-bodied red wine.

### From Other Fabricas

Handal also imports *Oxapampa*, a hard, Parmesan-like grating cheese, from Floralp Dairy. An immaculate factory located in the quaint Caranqui suburb of Ibarra, Floralp was founded by Zuleta's



Top and far left: Tools of the local cheesemaker.

Left: Wheels of another local specialty cheese, Canestrato.

Zuleta, produces a full range of moderately priced international cheeses, as well as queso fresco, yogurt, and butter. Floralp also owns a factory in Peru, which produces primarily Camembert, Andino, and Brie.

By contrast, there are hundreds of Ecuadorean cheese artisans, like Zuleteño Antonio Carlozama, who produces two different types of queso fresco in a tiny, two-room fabrica adjacent to his family home. Carlozama, 30, has been making cheese for more than twenty years; he took over the business from his father, a former employee of Zuleta's fabrica. Carlozama has always possessed a keen interest in cheesemaking, and today he produces eighty cheeses a day, seven days a week, from milk sourced from within the community. In addition to a traditional queso blanco he calls "queso picado," Carlozama makes a drier, semi-maduro queso de mesa that is compacted in a home-made press for four hours before being placed into round metal molds. Both cheeses, which are marketed under Carlozama's own label and are sold to small *tiendas* (shops) in Ibarra, as well as at the city's weekly market. Supplemented by his wife's embroidery income, and aided by the business and production training he received from a government agency, Carlozama is just able to support his family, which includes their three-year old daughter.

Like Rosita, Carlozama is part of Zuleta's new farm-tour program, which enables guests to visit local food artisans or participate in hands-on activities such as milking. A portion of the fee goes back to the host farmer as supplemental income, but, just as important, visitors are provided a glimpse of the hard work that goes into a globally vanishing way of life. Yet, for Carlozama and other proud Ecuadorean cheese artisans, such old world, hands-on traditions are proving to be a rare and valuable twenty-first century commodity. ■

► For more highlights of Laurel Miller's cheese tour in Ecuador, plus a recipe for Zuleta's Sopa de Quinoa, go to [culturecheesemag.com](http://culturecheesemag.com).

former cheesemaker, Don Oskar Purtschert, in 1965, after he immigrated to Ecuador in 1949, following training in his native Switzerland.

A Swiss dairy farmer in Cuenca was looking for one of his countrymen to produce cheese, says Purtschert, and "It was a golden opportunity—I had always been fascinated by world history, South America in particular. Back then, Ecuador didn't have access to starter cultures, so I had to make my cheeses completely from scratch."

Unfortunately, Purtschert and his employer were a few years ahead of their time, and so their business struggled; there were no aged or semi-aged cheeses being made in Ecuador at that time, and thus no market for them either. Purtschert took a cheesemaking position in Argentina but returned to Ecuador in 1953, after Plaza asked him to make cheese at Zuleta. The rest, as they say, is history.

A spry ninety years old, Purtschert is still president of Floralp, while two of his sons, Norberto and Rodolfo, run cheesemaking operations. A close friend of Plaza's until his death, Putschert has also been a mentor to Polanco, who learned the art and technical aspects of cheesemaking from him and Rodolfo. Since 1995, Floralp has been an associate of Zuleta's cheese factory, maintaining ownership of 40 percent of the business (the Plaza family owns the rest). Floralp helps to market Zuleta's product, and the two families remain close.

Today, Floralp owns a herd of 450,000 mostly Holstein-Friesians cows, and processes up to ten thousand gallons of milk per day, including surplus from neighboring communities. The company, which maintains the same responsible business practices as



Street scene in Quito.

### Visiting Hacienda Zuleta

Located two and a half hours from Quito, Zuleta is a bit off the beaten path. Look for the town of La Esperanza, just outside of Ibarra; it's approximately a one-hour bus ride to Zuleta from Ibarra's La Esperanza bus terminal (not the main Terminal Terrestre), at Parque Grijalva near Sanchez y Cifuentes. For Hacienda guests, transfers from Quito may be arranged, but any visit to the Hacienda requires advance notice, due to its operation as a working farm.

A budget-wise option is to stay in Ibarra (Hacienda Chorlavi, a seventeenth-century hacienda-turned-hotel, is charming, and \$45-\$50/night; +6-293-2222, [www.haciendachorlavi.com](http://www.haciendachorlavi.com)), and make a reservation to visit the Hacienda for lunch and a factory tour. Cooking classes, milking lessons, and tours of the community farms are also available by reservation (Hacienda Zuleta, Angochagua, Provincia Imbabura, +6-2662-182, [www.hacienda-zuleta.com](http://www.hacienda-zuleta.com)).

Few working dairies are open to the public in Ecuador, although some small subsistence farms rent spare rooms to guests. Others, such as Hacienda Hato Verde (right), have evolved into well-regarded *agriturismos* that feature their own dairy products on guest menus.

At right are places outside of Zuleta to see, stay, and get a taste of Ecuador's best cheeses as they play starring role in the regional cuisine. (As above, all phone numbers are listed as dialed within Ecuador, with the appropriate provincial area code.)

### Getting There

LAN Airlines offers nonstop flights to Quito, departing daily from JFK and Miami International airports, and from Los Angeles with connection through Lima, Peru ([www.lan.com](http://www.lan.com)). The Quito Tourism Board is an excellent source of information, and will assist in planning your trip: [www.quito.com.ec](http://www.quito.com.ec).

**CHILCABAMBA:** This intimate hacienda just outside of Cotopaxi National Park was built entirely by hand from reclaimed materials, and it has a panoramic view of four of Ecuador's most spectacular volcanoes. Swiss-Ecuadorean owner Reno Román is also a cheese enthusiast, as evidenced by his delicious, home-style dishes such as *sopa de quinoa* and Salinerito cheese fondue. European-style breakfast with Salinerito yogurt and butter, homemade muesli and preserves, and a front-row view of Volcán Cotopaxi (19,347 feet) are not to be missed (Loreto del Pedregal, +2-222-4241, [www.chilcabamba.com](http://www.chilcabamba.com)).

**HACIENDA HATO VERDE:** An hour south of Quito in the agricultural community of Lasso (named after that Lasso family), this tranquil, 120-year-old dairy and horse farm offers cozy rooms with wood-burning fireplaces and excellent, family-style regional cuisine sourced from the organic garden and surrounding farms. Proprietors César Morabowen and his wife, Maria del Rosario Mosquera, maintain one hundred head of Holsteins; Mosquera makes tangy, ricotta-like queso fresco and the highly addictive Ecuadorean condiment, *nata*, for her guests. Often used in place of butter as a spread or as a baking ingredient, *nata* is made from the skin skimmed off of boiled cream. Salted and left to ferment during the course a week, *nata* develops a texture and taste similar to that of a savory clotted cream. (Panamerica Sur km. 55, entrada a Mulalo, Lasso, Cotopaxi, +3-271-9348, [www.haciendahatoverde.com](http://www.haciendahatoverde.com)).

**HOTEL SAN FRANCISCO DE QUITO:** Clean, pleasant doubles for less than \$50 in this historic hotel located in the heart of Quito's Old Town—a UNESCO World Heritage site—a perfect base for exploring the city. ([www.sanfranciscodequito.com.ec](http://www.sanfranciscodequito.com.ec)).

**RUMILOMA LODGE:** In September 2008, husband-and-wife team Amber and Oswaldo Freire opened their eco-centric, hacienda-style boutique hotel on the eastern slope of Volcán Pichincha. Located within a hundred acres of forest and stocked with roaming llamas, Rumiloma affords stunning views of Quito. The adjacent two-year-old restaurant is one of the city's top spots to enjoy a drink (don't miss the house-made *canelazo*, a hot, mulled beverage made with *aguardiente* (a sugarcane-derived spirit) and seasonal fruit, or the *uwillla martini*, made with wild gooseberries harvested on the property). If Oswaldo's mother, Tita, is in the kitchen, you're in luck: the regional Ecuadorian menu features many of her family recipes, including *llapin-gachos* (mashed potato cakes stuffed with cheese) and the most luscious *locro* (potato, avocado, and cheese soup—here made with Zuleta's Pepper Jack) you'll ever taste. Amber also offers market tours with cooking classes and a six-course tasting menu, and cacao and coffee plantation tours. (Obispo de la Madrid s/n al final de la calle, Quito-Ecuador, +2-2548-206, [ww.rumilomalodge.com](http://www.rumilomalodge.com)).