



FINDING
VIROLA
guatemalensis

REVUE

contents

14 **ROADS TO ADVENTURE**

by Capt. Thor Janson
The Road to
NAKUM



12 **GUATEMALA INSIGHT**

by Elizabeth Bell
A "New" Mayor for Antigua

16 **MUSEUM MONTH**

by Anna Claire Bevan
Archaeology & Ethnology

18 **MUSEUM MONTH**

by Anna Claire Bevan
Modern Art: Carlos Mérida

20 **MUSEUM MONTH**

by Anna Claire Bevan
Botanical Gardens

21 **TRAVEL**

by Tara Tiedemann
Canal Clamming

36 **2013 SPIRIT**

by Sri Ram Kaa & Kira Raa
Harvesting Magic in May

42 **LANGUAGE**

by Dwight Wayne Coop
The Zen of Relation Words

46 **BOOK ALERT**

by Dianne Carofino
In My Enemy's Service

54 **COMMUNITY SERVICE**

by Natalie Rose
The KIDS Restaurant

58 **FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

by Shannon McCullough
Artisan Food Products

64 **SACRED ANIMALS & EXOTIC TROPICAL PLANTS**

by Dr. Nicholas M. Hellmuth
Finding Virola guatemalensis

70 **ARTESANÍA**

by Hilary Kilpatric
Flor de San Juan

82 **MUSEUM MONTH**

by Natalie Rose
Unlocking Samabaj

102 **HONDURAS**

by Monish Welcome
Roatan: Getting There

107 **SENSUOUS GUATEMALA**

by Ken Veronda
Balsam of Peru

SECTIONS

- 22 DateBook: May
- 38 Health Services
- 80 Travel
- 96 Marketplace
- 98 Real Estate
- 102 Honduras
- 104 El Salvador

REGIONS

- 31 Guatemala City
- 44 La Antigua
- 82 Lake Atitlán
- 88 Quetzaltenango
- 89 Río Dulce
- 90 Pacific Coast
- 94 El Petén
- 94 Cobán
- 95 Tecpán

MISC.

- 10 From the Publisher
- 45 Antigua Map
- 74 Vet Q & A
- 101 Bilingual "Cruci-Word"
- 106 Advertiser Index

photo contest: Portraits

All of the May entrants can be seen at www.Revue.gt ... here are the winners

- 6 Jonathan Argueta
- 6 Mayra Ramírez
- 104 Alejandro Barillas
- 105 Manuel Aldana
- 105 Katherine Poole
- 105 Sergio Rizo

Deadline for the
June 2013 issue » May 10

Sacred Animals and Exotic Tropical Plants

by Dr. Nicholas M. Hellmuth
photos: Sophia Monzón



Finding *Virola guatemalensis*

The search is on for ancient flavorings

After four years of searching, we still have not been able to find seven of the flavors used by the Maya 1,000 years ago.

For example, where is an actual orejuela tree (muc in K'ekchi Mayan)? Two years ago its leaves were common in the markets of Cobán, Alta Verapaz. Last month not one single vendor had them; they said people were drinking modern tea and bottled drinks and the interest in orejuela was waning. Hopefully, leaves from the orejuela trees are still in other markets, and we will work to rejuvenate interest in this flavoring, which was pretty much No. 1 for many Maya and Aztec peoples before European food arrived.

Nor have we found smilax bushes (or roots) nor the proper magnolia (Magnolia mexicana or Talauma Mexicana), which still most likely

grows near Huehuetenango. The other trees we have not been able to find are itsimte, Clerodendrum ligustrinum, and the *Virola guatemalensis*.

With the help of Dwight Carter of Frutas del Mundo (near Río Dulce, Izabal) we were told of a spot near Puerto Barrios that had a pimenta gorda tree in flower (allspice). This spice is widely used to flavor chocolate and many other foods. While studying this tree one member of our team found a tree a few meters away whose fruit was almost identical to *Virola guatemalensis*. But I believe that its fruit may have been nutmeg, *Myristica fragrans*. Nutmeg is from Asia; *Virola guatemalensis* is native to Mesoamerica.

Virola koschnyi is synonym of *Virola guatemalensis*. *Virola koschnyi* is known in Guatemala as banak or

palo de sangre (Cordero and Boshier 2003:937). A dictionary (www.ars-grin.gov) indicates that “dry seeds are used for flavoring chocolate. The seed oil is used for making soap and candles. Whorled twigs are used like eggbeaters.” Using this twig to stir food may itself have a fragrance, which immediately reminded me of molinillo, *Quararibea funebris*, also known as rosita de cacao.

There is very little information available on *Virola guatemalensis*. This tree grows well here in Guatemala and has huge economic potential. But no local can give us enough information to find one.

Although I am not a botanist, I have worked with ...continued page 72

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Antigua Sister City in Florida re-elects its mayor



Jim Cason

Voters in Coral Gables, Florida, one of La Antigua Guatemala's Sister Cities, have re-elected Jim Cason, a retired U.S. Foreign Services officer, as their mayor.

Mr. Cason was first elected in 2011 and won a second term last month by a 71-29 percent margin over longtime City Commissioner Ralph Cabrera.

Mr. Cason has more than 40 years of national and international public service, with extensive experience in Latin America and the Caribbean. Among other posts, he served as U.S. ambassador to Paraguay; chief of mission, U.S. Interests Section in Havana, Cuba; and deputy chief of mission, U.S. embassies in Honduras and Jamaica. He is fluent in five languages.

Coral Gables, located beside Miami, and Antigua have been Sister Cities since 1993 through Sister Cities International, an organization founded in 1956 by U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower to create opportunities for cultural exchange at the municipal, county and state level.

Images and information about Antigua, as well as Coral Gables' other siblings, are on display at the Coral Gables Museum in an ongoing exhibit titled "Coral Gables Sister Cities: Partners in Peace."

—Matt Bokor



I have worked with plants long enough to understand a bit about the basics of classification. So *Pseudobombax ellipticum*, *Pachira aquatica* and *Ceiba aesculifolia* are all members of related species (formerly *Bombacaceae*, now sub-family *Bombacoideae*). You can see the relationship—just look at its flowers.

Yet, *Virola guatemalensis* and *Myristica fragrans* look (to a lay person) almost identical. The nut inside the fruit has the most remarkable red "claw" clinging all around the surface. It looks like it comes from another planet.

So, our search continues. If you would like to be part of our endeavor, please contact us: FrontDesk@FLAAR.org. For example, our project really needs a 4WD vehicle, since some areas are rather remote. A 600mm prime lens would enable our team of botanists and photographers to get better photographs of flowers and fruits high up in a tree. Obviously it would be ideal for a major international chocolate company to cooperate with our project, since we have the best high-resolution photographs available of both cacao and pataxte, and gradually, each of the elusive ancient flavorings.

We have compiled an ever increasing list all plant substances that were used by the Maya and Aztec to flavor cacao beverages. Our specialty is the flavoring. (Visit www.maya-ethnobotany.org to view the on-going list.) 

A further goal of FLAAR is to provide information to students, scholars and the general public on what the diet was like for the Classic Maya. We study native fruits, tropical vegetables and plants; over 200 native plants are edible but less than 15% are eaten today. Of course anona and zapote are indeed still consumed, but there are another 40 fruits that the Classic Maya ate 2,000 years ago!