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Renato and Meghan Varas, owners and founders of Simply Originals.

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## Drinkin' Incan

### *Will Peruvian potables win over America?*

By RYAN DORAN

With its roots in Peruvian tradition, Simply Originals L.L.C. of Rowayton, a family-run, all-natural beverage company, launched its debut beverages this spring.

"I quit my job as a trader on Wall Street," said Renato Varas, co-owner of Simply Originals.

Renato left his job at Gabelli Asset Management in Rye, N.Y., as did his wife Meghan, who worked in corporate finance with Allied Domecq Wine and Spirits based in Westport.

The couple met while attending Boston College in 1993. They now live with their two daughters in Rowayton.

The two beverages, Simply Originals Purple Corn and Simply Originals Flaxseed, were launched in March at the National Products Exposition in Anaheim, Calif.

Renato was born in Peru and once was a semiprofessional soccer player.

The purple corn beverage, or chicha morado, he offers today is what he grew up drinking after his games and what the Incan natives of Peru have been drinking for centuries.

"It's the national drink of Peru," said Renato. "This is what 30 million people drink every day, if I wasn't drinking it I was chewing on the ice. If you walk through the soccer fields you'll see women with a Styrofoam cooler selling these as ice pops."

According to the couple, the challenge is to have the drinks become a legitimate beverage here in the U.S. The materials are all harvested and processed in Peru and then shipped to the U.S. Renato's father has a beverage business that caters specifically to the ethnic community in the tri-state area, giving Renato some knowhow and enabling him to get the ball rolling for Simply Originals.

"People don't perceive corn as a beverage flavor but there's an entire nation out there drinking it," said Renato.

According to Renato, it was the smells of cloves, cinnamon, lemon pineapple fused with the blue corn that time after time drew him to the kitchen.

"I always had a dream about bringing this drink over from my place of origin," said Renato.





According to Meghan, Renato had always envisioned that things he grew up with would have some legs here in the American mainstream.

"It was just, 'When's the right time, and how do we approach it?'" said Meghan. "I started to see what he wanted to do and get behind him with it a little bit here and a little bit there and the next thing you know we're establishing the whole business and launching it."

The draw of health and connection with athleticism of the purple corn drink goes beyond tradition, with clinical research studies from Ohio State University, Texas A&M University and Nagoya University Japan. These studies each found that purple corn's properties offer extremely high levels of antioxidants, more than blueberries and pomegranates, due to anthocyanin C3G (the source of the purple color).

"It's an amazing raw material," said Renato. "Going back to the Inca days, the Incas were a people who lived very healthy vibrant lifestyles, very smart."

The Varas find that the history brings a certain credibility.

"Peru, it's being discovered every day, is a gem of raw material," said Varas. "The flax seed-based drink, referred to in Peru as "emoliente," is barley, tea, flax seed and shave grass."

According Renato, shave grass is an herb with a high content of silica, great for the skin, hair, teeth, bones and nails.

"That's why it's called the drink of health and beauty," said Renato. "Great for women."

"We began distributing from a local proprietor in Fairfield County into lower Manhattan," said Meghan.

Among the first establishments to carry the products were the Rowayton Market, Walter Stewarts in New Canaan, Palmer's in Darien, Spic & Span in Southport, Equinox Fitness in

Darien and Tommy K's Vitamin Shop in Stamford.

"We are out there regularly doing brand and product education ourselves," said Meghan. "Whether it's Manhattan or here, we're doing it ourselves."

Meghan, an American, jokes that her Incan heritage is sometimes questioned by the consumers.

"A lot of American consumers have been schooled to think that, if it's going to be good for me then I shouldn't expect it to taste good," said Meghan. "Things that are good for you can and should taste good."

Simply Originals plans to launch two more beverages, also based on traditional Peruvian recipes, in a year's time. The beverages can now be found in all Northeast Whole Foods stores, covering northern New Jersey, New York and southern Connecticut.



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