Brazil Nuts: The Hidden Gems of the Amazon Rainforest

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Ad placed by the Brazil Nut Association in a US-based magazine. Photo: Salo Coslovsky.

Recipe book produced by the Brazil Nut Association. Photo: Salo Coslovsky.

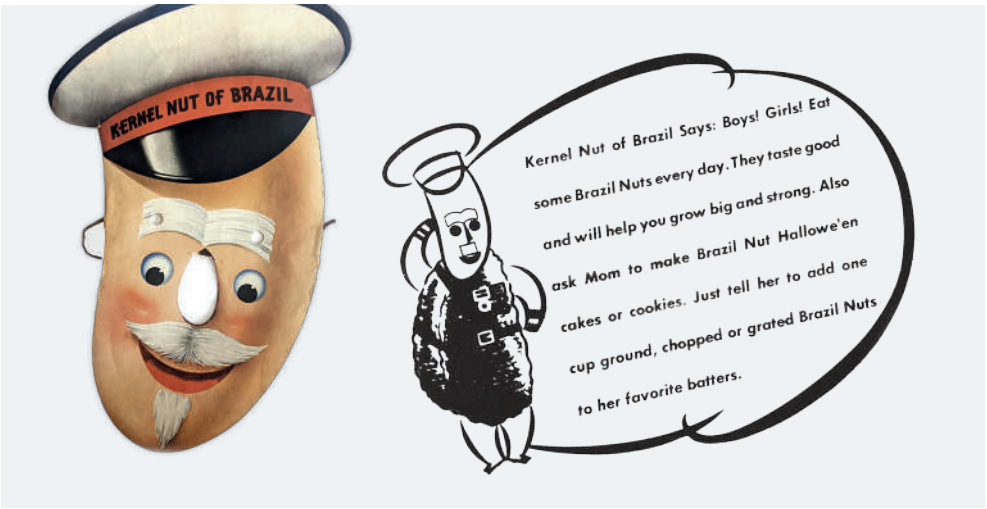
Brazil nuts are the most iconic of all forest-friendly products from the Amazon but their sustainability and fascinating backstory often go unnoticed by consumers. To ensure broader recognition and help this remarkable nut reach its full potential, it is essential to promote awareness and invest in marketing.

Business Insider, an online media company, publishes a captivating video series that examines "the real reasons why the world's priciest products are so expensive." Many of the products that it showcases are specialty foods, including saffron from Kashmir, nutmeg from India, huitlacoche from Mexico, truffles from Italy and cinnamon from Sri Lanka.

Each of these products is special, but they also share some features related to the way they are obtained. First of all, their production is labor-intensive and cannot be mechanized. Most of these foods are delicate or perishable. More importantly, they are strongly associated with a place and its terroir in a way that both restricts output and shields them from competition.

Brazil nuts have not been featured in any of those Business Insider videos yet, maybe because they are not all that expensive, but they are equally if not more extraordinary than any of the products mentioned above.

Every single Brazil nut kernel traded internationally is harvested from the wild in the Amazon, typically in remote locations, and often by members of indigenous groups or other forest-based communities that not only live in protected areas but actively defend them from illegal loggers and other threats. Many of these people spend weeks walking through narrow footpaths to go from tree to tree, collecting the fruits and extracting their edible seeds entirely by hand.



Paper mask from 1940 featuring "Kernel Nut of Brazil," the anthropomorphic character invented by the Brazil Nut Association to represent Brazil nuts. Photo: Salo Coslovsky.

The trees are marvels to behold. Tall and slender, many of them are older than celebrated European cathedrals, such as the Duomo in Milan or Notre-Dame in Paris. Some archaeologists believe that denser stands of old-growth Brazil nut trees were nurtured by members of ancient indigenous civilizations that deliberately shaped the vegetation that we see in the Amazon today. Crucially, the crop grows without pesticides, fertilizer, irrigation or any other human intervention. Rather, all the tree really needs is to be surrounded by the native forest, so its tightly-coiled flowers can be pollinated by large-bodied orchid bees.

These traits are not well known by the public in general. In most places, Brazil nuts are sold without any indication of their wild provenance and the tree's role as protector of the Amazon. Instead of being lauded for their sustainability, Brazil nuts have been shunned for containing compounds that could be dangerous to human health. In the United States, for example, consumers are cautioned about their selenium content and advised to limit consumption to a few kernels a day. Even if selenium is a crucial trace element, it can be hazardous if consumed in excess, so the advice seems reasonable. But is it based on solid evidence? A quick review of the medical literature surfaces no case of someone who fell ill after eating too many Brazil nuts. There are cases of people who got sick after taking too many selenium pills, and a few cases of individuals who fell ill after eating too many paradise nuts —but that's a different plant, with 500 times more selenium than its distant cousin. Further, many people eat foods rich in selenium without ill effects. One Pacific oyster, for example, contains 70% of the daily selenium intake recommended for an adult. Still, many people eat them by the dozen. It seems clear that more research is needed and findings must be disseminated more widely.

Producers and processors of other edible nuts have acquired the means to invest in research, advocacy and promotion. In the United States, for example, the Almond Board of California commands an annual budget of $80 million,[1] followed by the California Walnut Board and Commission with US$40 million,[2] while the American Pistachio Growers obtains close to US$17 million.[3]

But where is the Brazil Nut Association (BNA)? At one time, one did exist. The original BNA was created in 1934 by an alliance of food importers based in the East Coast of the United States. It was funded through a surcharge of US$4.00 per ton of Brazil nuts imported into that country (equivalent to about US$50.00 today) and the money was used to promote Brazil nuts among American consumers. Among other initiatives, the BNA printed recipe books, commissioned newspaper and TV ads, and provided retail displays. In 1935, for example, the BNA spent US$30,000 (equivalent to US$650,000 today) to distribute a booklet containing "recipes you have never tried" that incorporated Brazil nuts. After this release, requests for Brazil nuts reportedly "poured in," causing "practically the entire supply of Brazil nuts in the United States" to sell out. The BNA remained active for 30 years, but it stopped operating around 1965, likely due to a legal vulnerability dating back to its creation.

It is now time for Brazil nut enterprises around the world to once again promote their product in a forward-looking way. Such an organization could support a concerted effort to deepen our knowledge about the nutritional content of Brazil nuts and how this might vary depending on location. It could foster traceability so customers would know what they are buying. It could encourage forest-based communities to emulate their ancestors and plant Brazil nut seedlings as part of ongoing efforts to restore the Amazon. It could even suggest that Brazil nuts replace credits in the voluntary market for carbon, as each nut is incontestable evidence of continued forest preservation. Above all, it should convey the remarkable story of how Brazil nuts help protect the Amazon and the globe.

1. Almond Board of California, FY2018/19 BOD App'd Budget (Objective Est.) and FY 2017/18 Actual Financials. https://www.almonds.com/sites/default/files/FY18-19%20Annual%20Budget_0.pdf **2.** Executive Director and CEO, California Walnut Board & Commission. https://walnuts.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/CWB_CWC_PS.pdf **3.** American Pistachio Growers 2022 Annual Report. https://apgpower.americanpistachios.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/APG-2022-Annual-Report.pdf