

# Green

By Joanie Bergeron Poudrier, Alternative Channel

## Chew on this



Have you ever wondered what your daily chewing gum is made of? With all the new trends in gum – long-lasting flavor and teeth whitening, to name a few – it's wise to question whether these products are made with natural ingredients. We're guessing not! But can you imagine chewing a gum made of 100% sustainably-harvested

ingredients? Alternative Channel's Joanie Bergeron Poudrier recently discussed with Glee Gum's President Deborah Schimberg about how making chewing gum in Central America can be a sustainable affair.

JBP – What is Glee Gum in a nutshell?

DS – Glee Gum makes an all-natural chewing gum. It is the only company in North America that uses chicle, the raw material that all chewing gum used to be made from. Ancient Mayan culture used chicle, a latex that comes from the chicosapote tree, for many purposes. They used it as a glue to solidify pyramids or just to chew it as a gum.

JBP – How exactly do you get the chicle?

DS – The chicosapote trees are tapped by the chicleros, just like we tap maple trees in Canada to get maple syrup. The chicleros climb on the trees with spiky boots and with a machete they cut the tree trunks with big X's and the sap flows down these incisions to be collected at the bottom of the tree. They do around 10-12 trees every day and at the end of the day they collect the sap and boil it in a big cauldron. After stirring it over fire for few hours, they end up with a sticky mixture which they put into wooden molds that are later on processed industrially to remove any impurity.

JBP – Why is the chicle not as popular as it used to be in the chewing gum industry?

DS – Once upon a time all chewing gums were made from chicle. But after World War II, the demand for chewing gum had grown so much, especially because American soldiers used to bring chewing gum in their rations when they were stationed overseas. So it got people interested in chewing gum all over the world. It became expensive and too long of a process to use natural

chicle. The chewing gum companies figured out how to make synthetic and less expensive gum base.

JBP – Why did you decide to get involved in the natural chicle industry?

DS – I was very interested in the idea supporting community development in the places where raw materials for chewing gum come from. We also want to build awareness about the rainforest of Central America, and the important part that non timber forest products play in terms of conservation.

JBP – What is the reward you get from using sustainably harvested chicle?

DS – I went recently to the annual meeting of all the representative of the chicleros, which represent about 200 families. We are involved now in providing scholarship money for sons of chicleros who are interested in furthering their education in biology, sustainable development or ecotourism. In talking to the group about what we do at Glee Gum to help their communities, I was very moved to see their happy faces. When we realize that the sale of our gum makes it possible for these people to live a more sustainable lifestyle and to help conserve the forest instead of chopping it down, this is where we get our reward!

JBP – What are the other organizations supported by Glee Gum?

DS – We are a member of [1% for the Planet](#), so we give 1% of our gross sales to these two organizations that support the environment:

[The Cloud Forest School](#): The mission of the school is to encourage a new generation of ecologically aware, bilingual individuals with the skills and motivation to make environmentally and socially conscious decisions on a local, national and global scale.

[The Forest Foundation](#) promotes sustainable livelihoods through environmental education and “green” business development. The mission of The Forest Foundation is to assist artisans, producer groups and other entrepreneurs living in and around areas of high biodiversity.

JBP – What do you hope for the chicleros?

DS – By selling a million packs of gum a year with the word “chicle” written on it, we hope people will better understand their connection with the chicleros, the architects of chicle, and give them the credit for it.

JBP – Glee Gum is a good model to follow. What would you say to other companies trying to deal with developing communities?

DS – We believe that business should be more of a partnership than simply a transaction. If we can have a close relationship with the makers of our chicle, we ensure that they are not exploited and we also guarantee that the forest is used in a sustainable way.

JBP – What would you wish for Glee Gum in the next few years.

DS – We would like to expand our product line with sugar free gum. We also would like to define even more our relationship with the chicleros. Last year Hurricane Dean affected the forest of southern Mexico and the amount of chicle harvested was less than the previous years. As a result, the incomes of the chicleros have been affected. So, we would like, in the next few years, to be able to work together and to stabilize the relation between consumers and producers so that the earning of the chicleros can be more steady and assured.

To read more about Glee Gum visit their [website](#).

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