



PUERTO RICO WATER BALI FLAVOR

PLACE CRAFT

Dearest Gentle Reader,

**THE ART
IN THE NOTES**

A water crisis, a \$50 oceanside villa, Bali chocolate, and the invisible systems inside what we call luxury.

WHAT PLACE LEAVES BEHIND

THE HIDDEN INGREDIENTS ISSUE

ISSUE 04

CREATED, WRITTEN & EDITED BY AMBER
RODGERS

This week:

Why do some inexpensive moments stay with us longer than the expensive ones?

FROM AMBER'S DESK

I Thought This Issue Was Going to Be About Flavor.

Then Puerto Rico handed me three shower heads in the middle of a water emergency and ruined my neat little outline.

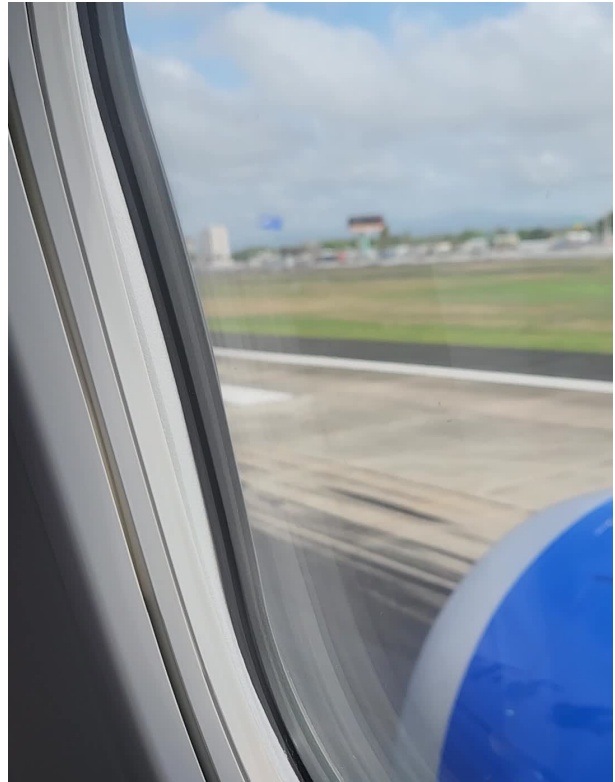
I had flown in to the familiar applause when the wheels touched down, still carrying that little rush Puerto Rico gives me. Blue water. Heat. Food. The feeling that the island has welcomed you back before you have even collected your bag.

I did not expect a hotel shower to become a story about infrastructure. I did not expect a fifty-dollar oceanside room to pick a fight with my definition of luxury. And I definitely did not expect a bottle of melted chocolate in Bali to become evidence in the case.

I love beautiful hotels. I love butler service. I love the tiny details that make a room feel cared for before you ever touch a light switch. I have stayed in places where the scent in the lobby seems professionally managed and breakfast arrives looking like it had a creative director.

I enjoy all of it.

But the experiences that stay with me are not always the ones with the largest bill. Sometimes they are the ones that let the place itself do more of the talking.



The wheels touch down, people clap, and the island begins talking before you reach baggage claim.

Dearest Gentle Reader, come with me. This issue starts in a shower, wanders through roadside stands and mountain plantations, loses a beloved bottle of chocolate at airport security, and eventually asks what water, soil, time, craft, and place leave behind.

COVER STORY · PUERTO RICO WATER

I Had Three Shower Heads. People Nearby Had Water Jugs.

A ridiculous hotel shower, one abrupt realization, and the distance between private resilience and public resilience.



The hotel room, where the water emergency was easy to

forget.

When I moved into the hotel, I discovered the shower.



The car wash, as I immediately nicknamed it.

Three heads. Not one. Three.

I turned on the first, then the second, then the third, because apparently moderation had missed check-in. Steam rose. Water came from every direction. I was shampooed from head to toe, one enormous bubble, moving from stream to stream in what I immediately decided was a very elegant human car wash.

I was having an absolutely ridiculous amount of fun.

Then the water jugs flashed into my mind.

Outside the hotel, I had seen people carrying water. Puerto Rico was in a water emergency. Inside my room, I had enough water coming at me from three directions that, for a few happy minutes, scarcity had disappeared.

I rinsed quickly, shut everything down, and stood there thinking about how strange that was.

This is not a guilt story about taking a shower. Conservation matters, especially during drought, but one person's shampoo is not an infrastructure strategy.

The harder question is this: **How can a shortage become almost invisible inside one building while households nearby are reorganizing daily life around it?**

IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

A hotel having reliable water does not prove it took water from a nearby household. Hotels can have storage tanks, pumps, generators, maintenance capacity, contracts, and other redundancy. The point is not blame. The point is what private resilience reveals about public resilience.

THE BETTER SYSTEMS QUESTION

How Do We Make Reliable Water Boring Again?

Not luxurious. Not heroic. Not delivered by convoy. Just there when someone turns on the kitchen faucet.

~48 hrs

Official scheduled service interruptions in affected PRASA zones were expected to last about two days.

VERIFIED

1.015M

Gallons distributed by the Puerto Rico National Guard in the drought response, reported Aug. 28.

VERIFIED

298,151

Gallons purified between Canóvanas and San Juan by the National Guard response.

VERIFIED

Emergency import

Puerto Rico temporarily eased rules to facilitate bottled-water and ice imports during the emergency.

VERIFIED

Emergency distribution is an extraordinary capability. It is also a reminder of what ordinary infrastructure is supposed to prevent.

Water systems are not one thing. They are watersheds, reservoirs, treatment, electricity, pumps, pipes, pressure, storage, maintenance, sensors, staffing, budgets, emergency plans and households at the very end of all of it.

1

Protect watersheds

2

Reduce leaks

3

Restore storage

4

Reuse where safe

5

Add new supply

6

Back up power

7

Build local reserves

Emergency water delivery is an extraordinary capability. Reliable water at the kitchen sink is a civilization.

Could the ocean help?

Yes. Desalination is proven technology and can become one layer of a diversified supply strategy. But a desalination plant does not repair leaking distribution lines, power unstable pumps, or magically erase energy and brine-management costs.

The best version is not "desalination or everything else." It is a portfolio: protect existing sources, repair the network, store locally, reuse safely, harden power and evaluate new supply where it actually fits.

THE DESIGN RULE

Do not design only for supply. Design for interruption.

A better water system expects drought, outages, pump failures and damaged lines, then gives communities more than one way to keep essential water moving.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF LUXURY

The \$50 Room I Still Remember.

I have had butlers.

At the Condado Vanderbilt in Puerto Rico. At the St. Regis. In Dubai, where luxury can feel almost architectural in its ambition. I loved the polished rooms, the service, the sense that somebody had anticipated what I might want before I had finished wanting it.

And still, one of my favorite stays was a little oceanside place in Puerto Rico that cost about **fifty dollars**.

There was no butler outside my door.

The ocean was.

I ate from roadside vendors. Fried blue crab burritos, hot and messy and wonderful. Praline candy. Fresh coconut that had recently been attached to an actual tree.

Nothing came with a tasting-menu introduction. Nobody had to tell me the food was local. I could see where I was. I could smell it. I could taste it.

And I felt rich.



A room can be inexpensive and still give you the thing the expensive room is trying to imitate: place.

The room was inexpensive. The experience was not small.

That little place taught me something the expensive rooms never had to explain: price can buy extraordinary service, but it cannot automatically buy a stronger sense of place.

By the Time I Reached Bali, Luxury Had Already Put on Quite a Show.

I loved the show. Bali simply changed the language.

Singapore was precision. French pastries arranged with the confidence of jewelry. Pour-over coffee treated like a small ceremony. High-end spirits gleaming behind immaculate bars. Even a robotic bartender, because apparently a beautifully made drink was no longer futuristic enough.

Kuala Lumpur was hospitality. I arrived at the St. Regis and found warm chocolate brownies waiting on a plate by my pillow. The next morning, breakfast seemed to contain everything a person could reasonably desire before noon. Even the guava juice required a decision: pink or green?

Dubai was spectacle. I stayed on Palm Jumeirah with a balcony that felt entirely mine. I could arrange a Maybach from my room. I rode camels. I went sandboarding in the desert at sunset. The whole place seemed designed to make scale itself feel luxurious.

I had already seen several persuasive arguments for what luxury could be.

Then Bali pulled me into the landscape.

The roads climbed into green so dense it seemed impossible that another color existed. I went into the mountains and swam beneath a waterfall. Monkeys appeared in the trees as though someone had assigned them to improve the scenery.

At a tiny roadside place, I ate roast pig in a setting that would never be confused with a grand hotel, and I remember it as clearly as meals served beneath chandeliers.

Then came the coffee and tea plantation.

Cacao pods were hanging from trees. Coffee and spices moved from plant to process in front of me. I watched roasting over a large burner. I watched beans pounded in a giant mortar and pestle, sifted, ground, and brewed. Cup after cup of coffee and gorgeous tea arrived for tasting.

I tried kopi luwak, the famous civet coffee, fascinated at the time by the strange path from animal to bean to cup. Years later, I also know the industry has an animal-welfare story that deserves to be told alongside the novelty.

That was what Bali kept doing. Products became plants again. Ingredients had roots. Spice had smoke. Coffee had hands. Cacao had a tree.

WHAT I KNOW NOW

Traditional kopi luwak is associated with beans collected after free-ranging civets eat coffee fruit. Research on Bali's tourist coffee industry has documented serious welfare concerns where wild-caught civets are confined for commercial production. Wonder and accountability can live on the same page.

THEN CAME THE CHOCOLATE

And Then Everything Stopped at Junglegold.

Later, I came down from the mountains toward the coast and went to Junglegold.

I remember walking inside and seeing chocolate flowing.

Not metaphorically. Flowing chocolate.

There were little spoons waiting for you to taste it, which may be one of civilization's more thoughtful inventions.

I tried it.

The chocolate was luminous and smooth, bitter and sweet at once, coating my mouth like a thousand chocolate kisses without becoming sugary or heavy.

I had eaten chocolate in expensive places. I had been welcomed with brownies at luxury hotels. I had walked through gleaming shopping districts and tasted beautiful things in beautiful rooms.

This was different.

It tasted alive. It tasted close. It tasted, somehow, like chocolate knew where it came from.

And that is the taste I kept thinking about after the trip.

THE DETAIL I CHECKED

Junglegold's current Sanur page still describes free tasting and its famous warm melted-chocolate wheel. The bottled melted chocolate I bought is my travel memory; it is not listed as a standard item in the current online range.

A VERY SMALL DRAMA

CASE FILE 04-B

STATUS: CHOCOLATE
CONFISCATED

I loved it enough to buy a bottle of the melted chocolate to take home.

This was apparently an act of optimism incompatible with airport security.

They took it.

I watched the best chocolate I had ever tasted disappear on the wrong side of security and experienced several stages of grief before boarding my flight.

The rules were the rules. The editor would still like the record to reflect that she remains dissatisfied with the outcome.

The expensive rooms gave me extraordinary service. Bali gave me a flavor I still remember years later.

THE TASTING DESK

Flavor Has an Address.

A flavor note is usually not an ingredient. It is a sensory resemblance built by biology, place, processing, time and memory.

THE NOTE YOU TASTE

genetics + soil + water +
climate + microbes + heat +
time + craft

Try the Flavor Lens

Tap a source and watch the invisible system come back into view.

Cacao

**Genetics + soil + rainfall +
fermentation + drying + roast +
conching + storage.**

A bar can suggest fruit, flowers, nuts or caramel without those things being added. The note is the result of a chain.

genetics

+

soil chemistry

+

pH

+

elevation

+

rain

+

fermentation

+

heat

+

time

+

craft

THE SYSTEMS LESSON

Nature provides the raw material. Place gives it character. Time changes it. Craft decides what remains.

PUERTO RICO IN A BOTTLE

Pique Is Not Just Hot.

Treat a good bottle of pique the way you would treat wine, perfume or chocolate. Ask what is actually happening in there.

THE PEPPER

Ají & heat

Pepper variety, ripeness, growing conditions and quantity change more than the heat level.

*grassy · fruity ·
floral · sharp*

THE ACID

Vinegar

Acidity carries aroma, extracts flavor and gives pique its mouthwatering snap.

bright · sour · clean

THE HOUSE SIGNATURE

Fruit & herbs

Pineapple, garlic, recao or culantro, oregano, peppercorns and other additions create family signatures.

*tropical · herbal ·
savory*

THE WAIT

Rest

Time allows extraction and integration. Pique is a method as much as a formula.

*mellowed · layered
· alive*

The farther you look beneath flavor, the more geography you find.

THE MOST UNDERRATED LUXURY

Vanilla Is Not Plain.

Vanilla begins as an orchid. Commercial vanilla often depends on careful hand pollination, followed by months of growing, harvest and curing before the bean develops the aroma we recognize.

Somehow, after all of that drama, English decided to use "vanilla" as a synonym for boring.

Vanilla would like a word.

MADAGASCAR

**Classic,
rich,
creamy**

A familiar reference point for many bakers and perfumers.

MEXICO

**Warm,
deep, often
spicier**

Vanilla is native to Mexico, which matters historically and sensorially.

TAHITI

**Floral,
fruity,
perfumed**

Different species and curing traditions can produce a more aromatic profile.

UGANDA / INDONESIA

**Earthy,
dark, fruit-
forward**

Origin labels guide, but farm and curing choices still matter.

THE LEAF REMEMBERS THE ISLAND

Before the Cigar, There Was the Leaf.

Tobacco was part of Indigenous Caribbean life before Europeans arrived. Early European accounts describe encountering tobacco in the Caribbean rather than introducing it there.

The modern cigar industry developed later through colonial agriculture, trade, labor, manufacturing and evolving craft traditions. That distinction matters. The modern cigar is not a prehistoric Taíno product, but the Caribbean tobacco story does not begin with Europe.

Puerto Rico also deserves more space in the cigar conversation. The Museo del Tabaco in Caguas preserves the island's tobacco history, and Discover Puerto Rico notes that Caguas tobacco was once of such quality that Cuba imported it for use in cigar blends.

Wrapper

The outer leaf.
Appearance, elasticity,
burn and aroma matter.

Binder

The structural leaf beneath
the wrapper. It holds the
filler together.

Filler

The heart of the blend.
Multiple leaves can be
combined for strength,
aroma, body and burn.

Even the height of the leaf on the plant matters.

VOLADO

Lower leaves

Milder and
important for
combustion.

SECO

Middle leaves

Important to
aroma.

LIGERO

Higher leaves

More sun-
exposed and
typically
stronger.

THE BLEND

Composition

Soil, leaf position,
curing,
fermentation, aging
and the blender's
choices meet in
one object.

Puerto Rico

Central and mountain regions historically produced notable tobacco. Caguas preserves a visible piece of that heritage.

Cuba

Vuelta Abajo in Pinar del Río is one of the world's most famous premium tobacco regions, with San Luis associated especially with wrapper and San Juan y Martínez with filler and binder.

NATURAL NOTES VS. ADDED FLAVORS

Cedar, cocoa, coffee, pepper, earth, leather, nuts, cream, sweetness and spice can be sensory notes that arise from tobacco and processing. Infused or flavored cigars are a different lane, where aromatic materials may actually be added.

THE SAME LESSON, DIFFERENT CUP

We Ran Out of Room. The World Did Not Run Out of Flavor.

Coffee, tea, wine and whisky deserve their own issue because they are variations of the same art.

COFFEE

Knows its mountain.

Variety, elevation, shade, process, fermentation, drying and roast.

TEA

Knows its season.

Cultivar, altitude, harvest, oxidation, rolling, finishing and age.

WINE

Knows its vineyard.

Grape, site, vintage, fermentation, extraction, vessel and barrel.

WHISKY

Knows its cask.

Grain, water, fermentation, still, climate, time, toast, char and cask history.

Change one variable and you may barely notice. Change ten, and you have somewhere entirely different.

FINAL WORD

What the Place Leaves Behind.

By the end of this issue, I had stopped trying to decide which experience was the most luxurious. That turned out to be the wrong contest.

The better question was what each experience revealed.

The hotel shower showed me how thoroughly good private infrastructure can hide a public shortage. The little oceanside room showed me that an inexpensive place can still feel abundant. Junglegold showed me that origin can become part of flavor, not as a slogan, but as something you can actually remember on your tongue.

And the deeper I looked, the more the same pattern appeared. Water depends on reservoirs, pumps, power, pipes, maintenance, and people. Pique depends on pepper, acid, herbs, time, and somebody's hand. Vanilla carries climate and curing. Tobacco carries soil, leaf position, history, fermentation, and craft.

The finished thing is never the whole story.

That is what I want this Brief to keep doing. Put the invisible parts back into the picture, without flattening the beauty that made us look in the first place.

Puerto Rico deserves water that is boringly dependable. Farmers and makers deserve systems that keep more value close to the work. Culture deserves its history. Readers deserve the whole story.

Better systems should make the essentials reliable, then leave enough room for a place to still taste, sound, and feel like itself.

Dearest Reader, until next time.



Meet the Editor

Amber Rodgers

Founder, editor, systems thinker, storyteller and builder behind *The Better Systems Brief*.

I created the Brief for people curious enough to ask what is underneath the obvious answer. The editorial promise is simple: question what fails, understand why, imagine better, and celebrate what works without forgetting the people who live with the consequences.

This issue puts personal experience beside reporting because systems are not abstractions. They are the shower that works, the faucet that does not, the food someone

Clear explanations

Responsible
innovation

Culture + place

Systems that serve
people

HOW THE PRETTY PAGES STAY HONEST

Editorial Standards Without the Corporate Fog Machine.

Facts

Confirmed facts, company claims, personal recollections and future proposals are labeled differently.

Corrections

Meaningful errors are corrected clearly instead of being quietly swept behind the digital curtains.

Indigenous coverage

Specific peoples, histories, authority and attribution matter. Culture is not decorative texture.

Sponsorship

Sponsored material is clearly identified, and editorial conclusions remain independent.

Plain language

Technical accuracy does not require six nouns stacked in a trench coat.

Solutions

Problems are reported honestly, then the Brief looks for the strongest lawful route toward something better.

THE READER'S PORCH

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New issues, occasional notes from Amber's desk, and zero interest in cluttering your inbox with nonsense.

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ISSUE 04 ·

CURRENT

The Art in the Notes

Puerto Rico water, luxury, Bali, Junglegold, pique, cacao, vanilla and Caribbean tobacco.

[Return to the cover ↑](#)

THE SOURCE SALON

Receipts, Because the Story Is Interesting Enough.

Current water facts were checked against official Puerto Rico and U.S. government sources. Junglegold details come from the company's current site. Agriculture and animal-welfare context uses published research and primary references where available. Personal travel scenes are first-person recollections.

Puerto Rico Emergency Portal

Official August 2026 scheduled water interruption plan, including approximately 48-hour outages in affected zones.

preps.pr.gov

Puerto Rico National Guard

Aug. 28, 2026 report: 1.015 million gallons distributed and 298,151 gallons purified in drought response.

nationalguard.mil

Puerto Rico Department of Health

Temporary measure facilitating import and distribution of bottled water and ice during the drought emergency.

salud.pr.gov

Junglegold Bali, Visit

Sanur flagship: free tasting and the famous chocolate-wheel machine featuring warm melted chocolate.

junglegoldbali.com/visit

Junglegold Bali, Our Story

Chocolate made at origin in Bali, relationships with Indonesian cacao farmers, and the company's origin story since 2010.

junglegoldbali.com/our-story

Animal Welfare, Cambridge

Peer-reviewed study of welfare concerns associated with caged civet coffee tourism in Bali, distinguishing captive production from traditional wild collection.

cambridge.org

U.S. National Park Service

Early history of tobacco in the Americas and European encounters with Indigenous tobacco use in the Caribbean.

nps.gov

Discover Puerto Rico

Museo del Tabaco in Caguas and the historical use of Puerto Rican tobacco in Cuban cigar blends.

discoverpuertorico.com

Habanos, S.A.

Official reference for Cuban tobacco regions and cigar leaf terminology, including Vuelta Abajo, wrapper, filler, volado and seco.

habanos.com

Fine-flavor cacao research

Scientific literature on fermentation, pH, microbiota, temperature and aroma development in cacao.

[PMC](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)

About the memories in this issue

The trip scenes, the \$50 Puerto Rico villa, the butler experiences, the Junglegold bottle, the airport confiscation, the Bali plantation, roadside food, waterfall, monkeys and tasting memories are first-person

recollections supplied by the editor. Where a current brand or technical fact is stated, the publication separates that fact from the memory and cites it above.

The Better Systems Brief

Question what fails. Understand why. Imagine better. Celebrate what works. Taste the details.

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