



SILVER AWARD WINNER

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LABVA, Chile

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BIOMATERIALS: A New Cultural Statement

This experimental biomaterials laboratory is located in Valdivia in the south of Chile. Occupying an old building constructed in 1926, LABVA is essentially an independent and self-managed community laboratory and kitchen, where people from the area cook and grow biomaterials and research local and circular economies. LABVA aims to bring science closer to the community, focusing especially on new materials or open biomaterials, and creating a culture around it. Empowering communities and building awareness of the material culture by changing the root issue being the way people consume. Therefore, teaching how to grow, harvest and make materials emotionally binding, associating with the territory, ecosystems and its communities. Consequently, biomaterials become an agency tool to question matter and its processes.

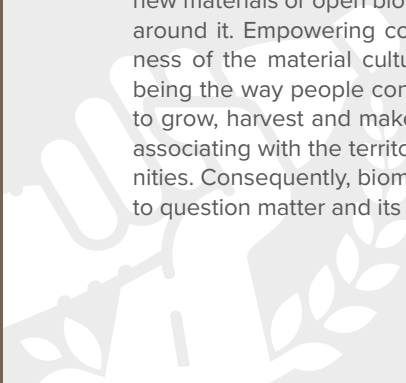
WE RECOGNIZE: LABVA's main vocation is to reconnect with the territory.

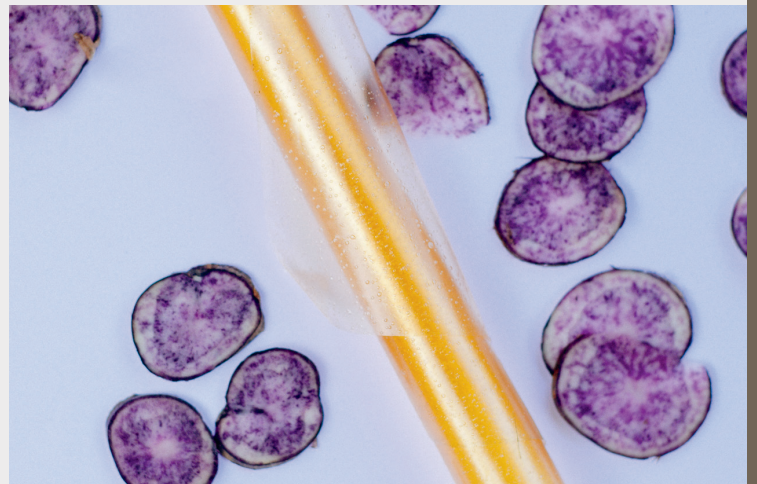
WE CRAFT: LABVA crafts polymers from algae, fish offal, seashell offal, or food waste.

WE COOK: LABVA returns local organic agroindustrial waste back to the productive cycle through the creation of a biomaterial.

WE GROW: LABVA uses biological growth.

WE TEACH: LABVA wants to question the materialities that surround our everyday life in order to understand the processes behind them and therefore practice sovereignty.





Coffee Talk with Valentina

Please tell us a little about your initiative, Valentina! In 2017, María José, Alejandro and I, founded the Valdivia Biomaterial Laboratory in the south of Chile. They are both architects and I'm a designer. We soon realized that we needed to incorporate a scientific perspective, so we expanded the team to include Esteban, who is a Marine Biologist, and Gabriela, who works in Biochemistry. We explore alternatives to create a native palette of biomaterials. Also, we are a citizens laboratory, which means that we make all of our knowledge, research, and explorations open to citizens. For us, it's also very important to connect with the ancestral culture. There is so much knowledge around that. We think that for creating new materials, we really need to start giving emotion to those materials because the main problem now is that people don't have any attachment to the material culture. If we want to change something, we really need to start giving the material an emotional perspective. Even for the collection process of some raw materials, we have indigenous communities that are dedicated to collecting some fruits in the forest, some abundance that exists in our territory and they do it from a very conscious perspective. We feel we need to start to observe our territories and understand how they interact. When I talk about growing our materials, because we work with living organisms, suddenly we understand that we're no longer a superior entity. We generate certain conditions for the environment but it is the organism that completes the design process. So it's like a co-creation, and that is something very beautiful. We don't have absolute control of what we are growing or how the materials form, it depends on these tiny, tiny organisms.

What was the first step of action for LABVA?

It was kind of funny. We are friends and of course we had a lot of common interests. Some of us are interested in local biodiversity, interested in crafts, and manufacturing related to our territorial and ancestral culture. We are mainly interested in food and everything that has to do with cooking in the kitchen, so I think from there, from cooking-related processes like fermentation, we started to question if we were able to experiment mixing our professions with this common interest – using our kitchen and co-creating with living organisms. So we built this biomaterial exercise, this native palette of biomaterial through three key processes for us: The extraction of bio-polymers, the cooking of our materials, and the cultivation of biomaterials.

LABVA is a large community now. How did it grow?

Because we are in a small city, people became curious. We have a very open approach with our processes and methodologies and we like to share our experience, so people began to wonder "Oh, what's happening here? What is this strange entity talking about biomaterials?". We were very focused on the local community and then, suddenly through the media and social networks, we started to grow, to grow and grow. The beautiful thing about LABVA is that people recognize it as a very friendly entity. We want to approach people, to encourage them to get involved. People actually imagine a laboratory as something huge and very far away from us, but in reality, we are just a kitchen that we call a laboratory.

