

Central, South American retailers in Tampa for conference – St. Petersburg Times

By [Mark Albright](#), Times Staff Writer

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TAMPA — Pedro Malave Aquilo owns a retail bakery in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and has a side business selling German-made gas grills shipped from a distributor in St. Petersburg.

"That's why I'm here," Aquilo said, "to finally meet my distributor after five years and look for exporters with other products."

Aquilo is one of 250 retailers, importers, exporters and trade experts from 16 Caribbean and South American countries gathered at the 18th annual Retailers of the Americas conference in Tampa this weekend to talk shop and exchange business cards.

"When they get together, they often develop agendas for trade among several countries," said Derek Lloyd, president of the Caribbean American Chamber of Commerce of Tampa Bay.

U.S. exports to Central and South America rose 16 percent in 2006. The United States operated at a trade surplus with four countries there and a trade deficit with seven others, including Venezuela and Mexico.

Landing the conference was a bit of a coup for the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and local Caribbean American chamber. It's the first time the group — which draws participants from as far south as Chile and Argentina — staged its annual meeting in the United States. Tampa beat competitors Orlando and Miami-Dade County largely on the strength of its big Latin business community, role as a transportation hub and large number of small entrepreneurial businesses.

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