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Hana Hou!

THE MAGAZINE OF HAWAIIAN AIRLINES



Best in Joe

Story by Adrienne LaFrance
Photos by Matt Mallams

It's a quiet June morning at Ala Moana Shopping Center, and at a Honolulu Coffee Co. kiosk, a pot of coffee gleams auburn under the sun. This is not just any run-of-the-mill, grab-it-and-go joe. The coffee in this pot is some of the best—and rarest—in the world. Weeks earlier, in the town of Bogotá, Colombia, it won the man who created it the right to call himself the second-best barista on the planet. Now that man, Pete Licata, stands at the kiosk counter, pours a taste of the brew and sips it for "quality control."

Licata knows the beans that created this coffee intimately: He picked them on the Big Island when they were still cherries on the tree, processed them, roasted them, blended them, ground them and then transformed them into the liquid before us. Licata spent months perfecting this coffee and years getting himself to the point where he would be able to do so. Now on this June morning he has maybe a quarter-pound of beans left, a mere handful of the creation that took him from Honolulu to the heights of the international coffee world. "After that it's all gone," he muses. "This special little project that became an enormous undertaking."

We drink the coffee. It is remarkably sweet and full-bodied with an uplifting bite of tangy nectar at the finish, like the flare of a flame just before it goes out. "At this point it's got kind of a dry, bittersweet cocoa type of flavor," Licata says between sips. "It's still very, very sweet. The acidity is still there; it's kind of like sweet orange citrus. And there's definitely a berry fruit coming through—like a chocolate-covered blueberry kind of thing."

That complexity was by design. "Literally understanding what creates different flavors throughout the entire process of coffee, especially in the United States, that's something that has been a little bit of a mystery," Licata says. He took it upon himself to unlock that mystery—and in the process he did something that no competitive barista before him had done: He crafted his coffee all the way from the field to the cup.



Boffo barista: Honolulu Coffee Co.'s Pete Licata was named the best barista in the country at the United States Championships in Houston this year. He then flew to Bogotá, Columbia, to compete in the World Barista Championship, where he took second.

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Licata looks like he could be a farmer. He's tall, with a shaved head and a dark beard that almost hides his dimples. His eyes get wide when he talks about coffee. Behind the counter at the Honolulu Coffee Co., where he's worked for the last two years, he moves with an easygoing meticulousness, like he's taking the exact amount of time required to do something just right.

Licata has competed in barista competitions for six years, beginning when he was a college student living in Topeka, Kansas, majoring in Japanese and working as a barista at PT's Coffee Roasting Co. "I won the regional the first time out of the gate, and everybody was really impressed. I was like, 'Yes! I'm awesome,'" he recalls with a laugh. "It wasn't until about two years after that point that I realized I really sucked."

That realization only spurred Licata to work harder. He kept learning all he could and honing his understanding of coffee. He developed a scrupulous approach: perfectly grinding the beans, minimizing waste, maximizing flavor. And the work paid off: This year he was named the finest barista in the United States.

He attributes that win at least in part to his involvement in the entire coffee-making process. No barista in competition, he says, had ever "honestly taken it from the source, from the beginning, all the way through to the final steps of actually serving that coffee."

He knew he wanted to try—and because he'd just moved to the one part of the country where coffee actually grows, Hawai'i, he was in a perfect position to do so. To begin he had to find the right farms. He settled on Rusty's Hawaiian in Ka'u, one of the Big Island's most acclaimed coffee farms, and owner Laurie Obra welcomed him to pick fruit. "That gave me specific knowledge to really identify a lot of things," Licata says. "If you pick coffee cherries that are not quite ripe, or they're too ripe, or whatever it is, then the sugars aren't developed in the coffee bean as much. It's not as naturally sweet."

Licata also picked coffee cherries at Waiono Meadows, a farm to the north of Hualalai that sits at an elevation of about three thousand feet. "At higher elevations you get cooler temperatures, and generally it seems like the coffee grows a little bit slower, so it develops over a longer period of time. It allows acids to develop in the actual coffee itself," Licata says. Hawai'i's latitude also made it easier for Licata to get his coffee's acidity where he wanted it. "To get the acidity that I got (in Hawai'i) in, say, Central America, you would have to be five thousand feet or higher," he says. In all, he picked some 550 pounds of fruit.

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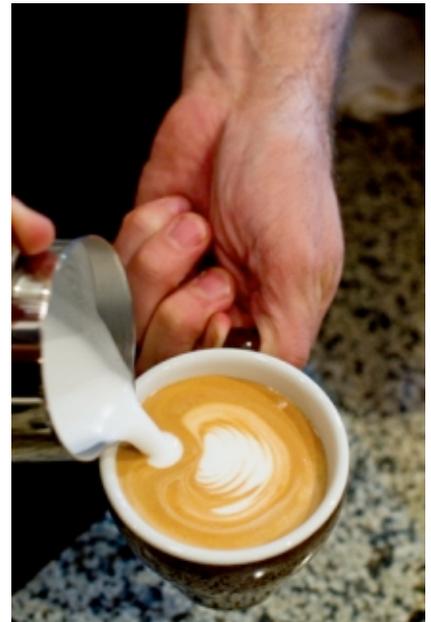
Once Licata had the cherries, next came processing. He decided on a combination of three different methods: washed, honeyed and natural. Washed is the standard process for Kona coffee: The fruit is dried and cleaned quickly with water, leaving a splintered layer of residue in the fold of the bean. For honeyed beans the outer skin of the cherry is removed, leaving the fruit's inner meat intact through the drying process for a "really sweet, nice flavor and a viscous body," Licata says. For natural beans the entire fruit is allowed to dry in the sun— a tricky process that requires assiduous care and weeks of raking the fruit to ensure that it dries evenly. "If it's done improperly, the fruit can ferment," Licata says. But if it's done right, "it should bring out this really tropical, fruity flavor."

After Licata had spent months picking and processing, he turned to the roasting— the area, he says, that presents the greatest opportunity for error. Some aspects of roasting are formulaic: A darker roast, for example, is produced by letting the beans roast for a longer period of time. Truly exceptional roasting is the point at which science becomes art, and it requires a blend of creativity, skill and style. "What you're trying to do is develop the flavors in there: keep the sugars intact and also caramelize them internally," Licata says. "Depending on what you want to do, you want to bring out the acidity, the sweetness of the coffee, the body of the coffee. That aroma you get when you grind coffee is a huge part of the flavor that comes out, and there are different times of the roasting process when using more or less heat, using certain airflow, convection or conduction, will make or break the coffee."

He roasted his beans in tiny batches, the biggest of which was just a kilo. Then he blended them. And then he was at the point where most baristas begin: He had his beans, and he was on a plane to the competition. "You want to talk about nerve-racking? Oh my goodness," Licata says. "All of these things can go wrong. But as you get through that step of 'OK, the coffee's produced and I know it's good,' and then 'Now I have to roast it properly,' and then you get done with that, and it's this big burden off your shoulders. Then it's like, 'Competing? All I have to do is make it right.'"

In years past, Licata's had to be careful not to drink too much of his own coffee at competition, lest the caffeine make him jittery and affect his performance. This year he had another concern: Not overburdening the judges with information. After he took first place at the United States Barista Championship in Houston in May, he headed to the World Barista Championship in Bogota with fifteen pounds of coffee—which, you'd better believe, wasn't in his checked luggage. At the competition he was tasked with making twelve drinks and giving a fifteen minute presentation.

"You have four espressos, four cappuccinos and four of the signature drinks that you do, and I could have easily done a three-hour presentation!" he says. Even restricting himself to the fifteen minutes allotted, "I still got feedback from the judges saying it was too much information to digest," he rues. "You just can't give all the information you have. I started rambling a little. By the time I got to competition, I knew more about coffee than I had at any other point in my life." In the end he placed second to a barista from El Salvador named Alejandro Mendez whose presentation overlapped Licata's somewhat: Like Licata, Mendez had gone out into the coffee fields and harvested at the source.

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Licata was in the fourth grade when he had his first taste of coffee, something “really crappy,” he recalls, that had been languishing on a burner. He flooded the stuff with artificial creamer and sugar but could still taste enough of the actual flavor of the coffee to know he liked it. It was at his first barista job at PT’s that coffee became an obsession, though he struggled to pay his bills with the money he was making and even considered leaving the industry. Then the owner of the Honolulu Coffee Co. called, looking for a “coffee person who could speak Japanese” to come to Honolulu.

O’ahu has proved a big change from the Midwest, though as part of the United States, it is still, Licata says, “a little less intense with its coffee than a number of European and Asian countries. Taiwan, Japan and Korea are major, major markets, just huge right now. They’re buying some of the best coffees in the world.”

Licata describes a recent auction in Guatemala where a Korean company paid a record-breaking \$214 per pound for green coffee beans. “It went for the highest price ever for a green coffee, just outrageous,” he says. “But it goes to an auction in very small amounts, and people are willing to pay a lot for it.”

Licata says caffeine-driven consumers in the United States have lots to learn about coffee—if they choose to. Americans, he notes, are more willing to sacrifice flavor for the convenience of a Starbucks drive-through. But he has nothing against the coffee giant. “Starbucks has its place, and it’s a good starting point for people. ... If it hadn’t been for Starbucks, we wouldn’t even have a specialty coffee industry at this point, at least as far as we know. And I started out drinking raspberry white chocolate mochas myself. You have to start somewhere, and your appreciation grows. The better it gets, the more your appreciation grows.”

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