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Hawaii: Kona and More

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"I've tried Kona coffee, and it isn't that good."

That kind of comment drives Karen Paterson nuts. She and her husband, Lee, own the Hula Daddy coffee farm in Hawaii's Kona region on the Big Island, a famed swath of land only 2 miles wide and 26 miles long. It is on the leeward, western slopes of volcanic Mount Hualalai.

"People say things like that all the time," Paterson says. "You don't hear people say, 'I've tried Napa wine, and I just don't like it.' There are amazing world-class coffees in Kona, as well as amazingly bad coffees."

She's right. For most people, Kona coffee is a single brand, supposed to be the finest brew one can enjoy—a mild, aromatic, balanced cup. But there are some 800 mostly small farms in the Kona region, where the beans are grown and processed with varying degrees of care and quality. Other regions on the Big Island of Hawaii also offer distinctive coffees, and then there is the coffee of other islands, such as Maui and Oahu.

I've been indulging in an exploration of some of the best that Hawaii has to offer. And although I've been exploring from my Vermont home, through these cups I can practically see the lush vegetation, feel the warm breezes and smell the coffee blossoms.

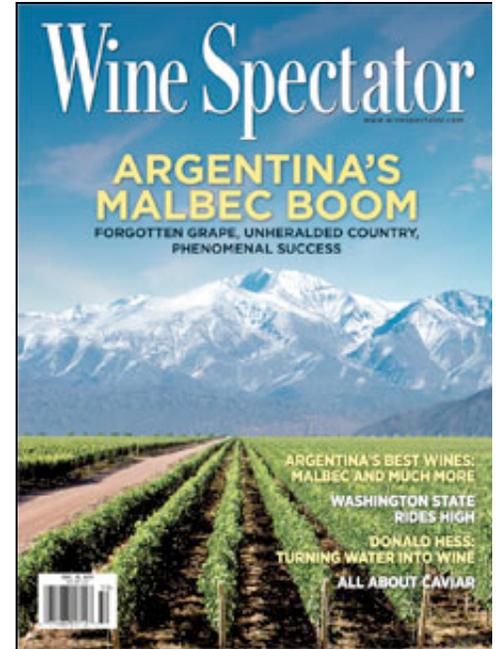
I started with Hula Daddy's Extra Fancy (www.huladaddy.com). Like most Kona coffee, these beans were grown on Guatemalan typica trees, a type of arabica originally imported from that Central American country, and processed by the "wet" method, in which pulp is removed through carefully controlled fermentation. The uniformly large beans were medium roasted to bring out a sweet bouquet wrapped around blackberry, with a hint of lemon.

Then I tried the Hula Daddy Kona Sweet, made with similar beans processed by the "natural" method, in which the coffee cherries are dried intact, with the fruit and skin still attached. The Patersons' first attempts in the humid Kona region nurtured algae, fungus and mold, but they finally succeeded by drying the cherries on wire racks at a lower altitude. The resulting complex brew mixes flavor notes of walnuts, brown sugar, chocolate and apples.

I asked Hawaii resident Shawn Steiman, author of *The Hawai'i Coffee Book* and an informative coffee blogger, which coffee I should sample as the quintessential Kona. "Greenwell Estate best exemplifies the Kona profile from days of yore," Steiman advised.

I sampled Greenwell Estate Private Reserve (www.greenwellfarms.com), produced by Tom Greenwell. Greenwell's great-grandfather Henry Nicholas Greenwell arrived in Kona in 1850, when he was 21, and set about planting coffee, raising cattle and buying land. The intervening years brought varying fortunes. Now Greenwell purchases and mills beans from more than 300 farms, mostly selling the beans for "Kona blends" that contain only 10 percent true Kona.

But his Private Reserve, a mixture of Guatemalan typica, Bourbon and Hawaiian typica, is 100 percent Kona, all grown on Greenwell's 50 acres under his watchful eye. It is a supremely balanced cup, with mild acidity, if somewhat lacking in



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complexity. It may not be a knockout, but I found this cup a lovely way to start my morning or end my dinner.

About 30 miles southeast of Kona is the Ka'u region, featuring a completely different microclimate and richer and deeper soil. The coffees, including Rusty's Hawaiian (www.rustyshawaiian.com), are beginning to receive more recognition. Rusty and Lorie Obra, natives of the Philippines, began planting coffee on their leased Ka'u land in 1999. They planted seedlings from other people's farms, resulting in quite a hodgepodge.

Since Rusty died of lung cancer in 2006, Lorie has run the farm alone. With advice from coffee guru R. Miguel Meza (who also helped the Patersons), she began to experiment with her different types of trees and processing methods. Her yellow Caturra is easy to spot, since it turns yellow rather than red when it ripens. Obra discovered that when the cherries were naturally processed, they yielded a remarkable cup. I can testify that it is extremely fruity and spicy in aroma and flavor, with an orangy nutmeg tang and brighter acidity than you'd generally expect from Hawaiian beans.

I also sampled Rusty's Red Bourbon, which is processed using the wet method, except that instead of soaking the pulped beans in vats of water, Obra mostly lets them ferment in their own juices. This results in a spectacularly full-bodied and fruity but clean cup. Obra does most of the work herself, including the processing and roasting, and she is obsessive and meticulous.

Next, I jumped islands to try MauiGrown Mokka (www.mauigrowncoffee.com), which grows tiny coffee cherries on small trees that ultimately derive-by way of Brazil and Costa Rica-from Yemen. James "Kimo" Falconer, an agronomist, switched from sugar to coffee on this relatively flat 400-acre Maui farm. He harvests the beans using modified blueberry-picking machines that run down 12-foot aisles, straddling the rows. While that may sound mass-marketed and industrial, it is perhaps the only feasible way to pick the minuscule, raisinlike beans that grow on a quarter of the estate. They are then naturally processed.

The resulting cup may be similar to the original Mokka grown centuries ago in Yemen, with a wild fruitiness that combines blueberry-apricot notes with a bit of chocolate.

In this column I reviewed coffees from only two of the Hawaiian islands. I am looking forward to further exploration and discovery. There is a delightful, surprising diversity among these beans that are made in the United States.

Mark Pendergrast is author of Uncommon Grounds, a history of coffee.