

Spring 1995 / Big Island of Hawaii / Volume 1 Edition 1

## KONA COFFEE TODAY

by Les Drent

Turn your thoughts for a moment to the mountain side villages of Kona coffee country on the Big Island of Hawaii. While you imagine the sweet smell of freshly pulped coffee cherry stagnating in the morning along with the dense aroma of freshly roasted beans vision coffee shacks of decrepit weathered wood and their patchwork of tin roofs sitting low in the shade of tropical mountain foliage. At 2,000 feet tangled wood rose creeps in the foreground, up crooked telephone poles and out across weeping lines. All along these mountain side towns are farmers hidden in groves of coffee, their fingers rapidly plucking the coffee cherries from a twisted and gnarled system of branches. Men and women of Japanese, Filipino, Mexican, Hawaiian, and mainland Caucasian descent all work the fields in one of Hawaii's most spectacular modern day cottage industries. Think of Kona as a bursting sun begins to shed its tropical light over the countryside as steep rocky passage ways connect coffee farms to Mamalahoa Highway, a nearly two lane bumpy mountain road that winds its way through the districts of North and South Kona. The road was first built as a foot path by ancient Hawaiians to travel the mountain route around the island and revised later in Kona for donkey and horse travel before being widened for the transportation of coffee by jeep. From the fields, to the mill, to the roaster, to the store shelf the coffee industry in Kona continues to grow and is establishing itself as a tough, independent and self governing player in the world coffee scene.

To understand why and how coffee grows the way it does in Kona you have to allow your thoughts for a moment to be consumed in the environment that it grows in. What does this mean?

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Well, to begin, picture what the weather looks like on your average summer day in the up-slope Kona coffee country. It begins with a clear blue sunny morning before clouding over at noon to create a greenhouse like effect that follows with a light shower around mid afternoon. The day finishes off with a brief exodus of light including an orange and hazy sunset around dusk. Throw in some fair weathered humidity and a high air moisture content that has the power to make every piece of clothing, if not often used and washed weekly, thicken with mil-

dew. And so you begin to understand the climate of Kona coffee country. This weather pattern holds true more often than not in the summer months of longer daylight but is not uncommon in the winter months when the upward growth of vegetation slows and browns a bit due to a lessening of rain. With this endless summer, so to speak, winter and summer temperatures maintain a mellow equilibrium between the dry arid heat of Kailua and the snow capped

tops of Hawaii's two largest mountains, Mauna Loa (13,679') and Mauna Kea (13,796). Low temperatures in the coffee belt hardly ever drop below fifty degrees Fahrenheit. In the dead of winter and as you go up over the coffee belt, just above the three to four thousand foot mark in elevation, it is not uncommon to see or smell ohia smoke coming from someone's wood furnace.

How are you doing now? With this picture in mind imagine the descendants of age-old coffee trees with outstretched roots in the porous and rocky mountain slopes consisting only of lava rock

and a thin layer of dark decaying acidic soil. The first coffee seedlings were planted in Kona in 1828, thanks to reverend Samuel Ruggles, who indirectly acquired thirty or so cuttings from coffee trees grown in Brazil. This early variety of coffee came to be known as "Kanaka Koppe", or Hawaiian Coffee, and is still prevalent throughout Kona today. Later coffee introduced at the end of the nineteenth century was of the Guatemalan strain. This strain of coffee came to be known as "Meliken Koppe", or American Coffee, and was first intro-



Ladies sorting green coffee at a mill in Kona. photo courtesy of Kona Historical Society, circa 1906.

duced by Albert Horner from Hamakua, a northeast region of the Big Island. The Meliken Koppe became the choice strain in planting and now constitutes the major variety of coffee trees found in Kona today. To get a better idea of the mystique that surrounds Kona coffee we trace its roots even further back in history to learn that this strain first originated in Ethiopia, where it grew wild on the high plateaus. It is believed that coffee was first discovered by tribal goat herders that first used the raw but sweet coffee cherry to enhance their strength and endurance during times of hard work Spring 1995

or struggle. The neighboring Persians, who upon raiding Ethiopia, brought back the coffee and started planting on the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula. This was the first cultivation of coffee.

### Kona Coffee arrives on the Big Island of Hawaii after a long and interesting journey.

Around 1,000 AD, these Persians began brewing their coffee into a drink, coffea arabica, making its consumption a daily part of their culture. Thus the beginning of the drink we now know as coffee. Sultans of the land did not allow the magical coffee beans to be taken off their lands, but colonizers. missionaries and merchant traders found ways to smuggle the beans out of their kingdoms. These events marked the beginning of numerous adventures of coffee contraband staged throughout history.

In 1683 treasured sacks of Arabian coffee beans were left outside the gates of Vienna by a fleeing Turkish army whose attempts to conquer



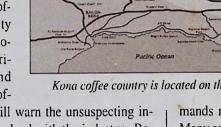
Hauling Kona coffee to the mill. Courtesy of Kona Historical Society, R.J. Baker Collection, circa 1915.

the city failed. Subsequently, Vienna's first coffee house, The Blue Bottle, opened in that same year soon to be followed by many others all across Europe. The arabica coffee beans found their way across the Atlantic ocean by way of the Jesuits who were often travelling to South America by this time. Wide spread planting in Brazil, especially in the mountainous regions around Rio de Janeiro occurred often. It was there that an English agriculturalist named John Wilkinson acquired the coffee that would be brought to Hawaii and planted at the home of chief Boki, then governor of Oahu. The reverend Samuel Ruggles of Kealakekua took cuttings from this Oahu estate and planted them at his home in Kona. So you see, coffee has had an incredible journey before ever reaching the mountains of Kona back in 1828.

So, how did the coffee culture in Kona evolve. Even though coffee was in Kona in 1828 it wasn't until many years later that it was seen as a viable crop.

Through the later part of the 1800's and

into the 1900's the situation in Kona was constantly changing and the industry experienced many booms and busts, never making Kona coffee an easy commodity to bank on. Many today who have experienced the ups and downs with Kona cof-



fee over the years will warn the unsuspecting investor of the risks involved with the industry. Recently the price per cherry pound in Kona reached a high of one dollar in 1989 before falling to sixty five cents four years later in 1993.

Many Japanese who were in Hawaii as contracted workers on the sugar plantations during the boom years of the 1880's fled the sugar industry to work on the Caucasian owned coffee plantations in Kona which were experiencing a rapid rate of growth. But with a crash in the world coffee market in 1899 many of the large plantations were forced to lease their land to their Japanese laborers

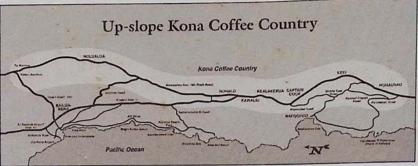
> in parcels averaging from five to fifteen acres per lot. The lease agreement in most cases was in exchange for one-half of the farms output in coffee. It was the Japanese family style of farming that pioneered and created the coffee culture in Kona.

The tenacious work ethic of these Japanese farmers and their usually large families seemed well suited for life in Kona as their uncharacteristic ingenuity created some pretty industrious ways of producing a bountiful and vibrant crop of coffee. One of these ingenuities

came in the form of a moving roof system that operated on wheels to protect sun-drying coffee from the onset of afternoon rains. If you have the chance, look closely at many of the old coffee shacks along Mamalahoa Highway and you can still see wheels and tracks under many of these roofs, which the Japanese called "hoshidanas". It was always fun to observe the bewildered reaction of an outsider when they witnessed the spectacle of a moving house, recalls many of Kona's older coffee farmers that used the "hoshidana" system for drying coffee.

Because coffee developed into a family run operation in Kona, a strong sense of community centered around the Japanese in Kona. An independent mill was begun by the community for those who were seeking to establish their own autonomy in coffee production, and in the fall school was even postponed or put off so children could help their families with the picking of coffee. Many of these ideals, whether obvious or not, sustain independence among farmers in Kona today.

However, the modern coffee market de-



Kona coffee country is located on the western side of the Big Island of Hawaii

mands new ways of thinking among its farmers. Many areas of coffee production have changed and new struggles face those who operate within Kona's present coffee industry. Farms and mills today are owned by people who first started coming to Hawaii from the mainland United States in the 1960's. A considerable number of Japanese still operate their farms but many as growers and pickers that only sell their crop to local mills and have nothing more to do with the industry. Be-70ffee

cause many of the children of these coffee ancestors moved away from Kona to pursue dreams out-

side the farm, this era in Kona coffee history seems to be slowly drawing to a conclusion. It's interesting to note that the satire of the urbanized city child returning to the coffee farm has been played out more than a few times on local theater stages around Kona. The counter culture that is on the rise in Kona is one that is creating new and much needed inroads to today's industry and focuses on strengthening the reputation of Kona coffee and continuing its road to farmer independence.

For years Kona coffee saw its role in the world market as only a master blend that made inferior coffee taste better, and for years farmers in Kona were subservient to an industry that relied on the fine and superior characteristics of coffee

### **Commercial Coffee Companies** are Misusing "Kona" name to sell coffee that isn't Kona

grown in Kona. With the changing times in Kona, the rise of land and production costs, and the influx of mainlanders arriving from the United States to take advantage of all the riches a tropical paradise has to offer, Kona coffee faces the threat of extinction at the hands of corporations that intend not only to use Kona coffee as a master blend but the name "Kona" to sell a coffee which contains no more than ten percent Kona coffee in Hawaii and perhaps none outside of Hawaii. How this can be allowed to happen is the most often asked question by those outside of the industry. The answer is actually quite simple, it is allowed!

Because we live in a world filled with product names that associate very little with the actual contents of products. Kona was an easy target for marketers looking to exploit the name "Kona" on a package of coffee that quite simply didn't contain Kona coffee. Today, the detriment of these blends and misuse of the name "Kona" is great. Commercial coffee companies operating in Hawaii and around the world continue to place their emphasis on the name "Kona" rather than on the actual contents of the coffee they are selling. Currenty there are only 1,300 acres in Kona being used to grow coffee, most consisting of small farms comprised of two to ten acres. And, when compared to the nearly six thousand acres reported to have been in production at the turn of the century, and the nearly seven thousand that were reported in 1958 something is apparently wrong, espe-

cially when considering we are in a period of time when the gourmet coffee market is booming in our fel-

low forty nine states of the Union.

At this point if you are upset with where we are in this article and you are upset about the risk of Kona coffee extinction we apologize because you haven't heard the whole story.

We can guarantee you that in the quiet hills above the now sprawling world of mass development, better known as Kailua-Kona, Hawaii, there is a healthy new breed of coffee farmers operating with their own ingenuities, much like their early Japanese counterparts. In an effort to protect the name "Kona" from fraudulent use the local Kona Coffee Council, a nonprofit coalition of independent farmers and processors in Kona, spear headed an effort in 1994 to federally register the name "Kona" with a certification mark that would protect it from counterfeit and fraudulent use.

Unfortunately the effort failed due to the legal pandering of five major coffee marketers who practice deceptive labeling at the consumer's expense. These five companies, C. Brewer d.b.a. Royal Kona Coffee Co. from Honolulu, Captain Cook Coffee Co. from San Francisco, CA, Kona Kai Farms from Berkley, CA, and Woolson Tea & Spice d.b.a. Lion's Coffee Co. from Honolulu, filed law suits against the Kona Coffee Council and put up a legal battle that the under funded farmers simply could not participate in. Mayor of the County of Hawaii as well as the State Department of Agriculture refused to aid the farmers in their struggle in fear of having these costly law suits targeted at their offices.

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It was evident after this legal cloud had passed that these companies were still insistent on maintaining their long arm of plantation rule that they initially gave up when the coffee lands in Kona were leased and sold off to the farmers nearly one hundred years ago.

The outcome of this failed certification did however stir up much public sympathy and awareness for protecting the precious commodity of Kona coffee. New and aggressive efforts dealing directly with publicity and marketing of 100% Kona coffee has led the local industry into profit related growth

that will not only deliver a true and quality oriented product to the consumer but also a higher degree of awareness that will in time destroy the marketing tactics and illegitimate labeling practices of these corporations.

What is known for certain about Kona coffee and its reputation is that when a person tastes a cup of pure Kona there will be little doubt in their mind why companies have sought to steal a name that has been synonymous with the reputation of one of the world's finest coffees.

Today, coffee farms in Kona are active with both ancient and modern methods of coffee production. In all cases the coffee is still handpicked

### Modern Day Coffee Independence Sweeps Through Kona

at the picker's average rate of one to three hundred cherry pounds per day. From the fields the coffee is transported in everything from old station wagons to heavy trucks to the mill where farmers can collect an average of eighty cents per pound for their efforts. In the past donkeys called "Kona Nightingales" were used to transport coffee up and down the hillsides but were later replaced by small farm jeeps that weren't quite as stubborn as the donkeys. Once at the mill the coffee cherries are husked and the beans undergo a twelve hour soaking period before being spread out to sundry for fifteen to eighteen days. At larger operations rotary driers may be used to speed up this process but it is believed by many farmers that a finer tasting bean is produced when the coffee is sun-dried slowly. From the drying decks the beans are usually stored in what is known as parchment (a thin shell membrane that surrounds the coffee bean). Storage in parchment usually helps preserve the freshness of the bean. When the beans are prepared for shipment or roasting they are removed of their parchment and graded on a gravity table that separates the beans into grades according to their size and weight. The minimum



size and grade of Kona coffee is called Prime with the highest grade being labeled extra fancy. One rare and round grade of Kona coffee is called peaberry, which is the result of single bean growth in the usual two bean coffee cherry. Peaberry is regarded by some to have distinct cupping characteristics because it is believed to retain all the flavor of two beans in only one. Many independent farms that operate solely on their own produce a grade of coffee known as an estate grade, simply meaning that it is coffee grown exclusively on that farm and is of a prime grade or higher. Organic coffee farming is coming of age in Kona as well and constitutes the last variety of coffee in Kona. Farmers who have perfected the natural fertilization process have themselves created a more natural coffee that carries a distinct taste as well as having a positive impact on the environment.

Many large and small farms around Kona now grow, mill, roast and sell their own coffee by the pound to island visitors or through mainland accounts and mail-orders.

The modern age of desktop publishing and data bases have outfitted the Kona coffee farmer with important marketing tools by which they can operate their operation entirely from their farm.

All this self initiative sweeping through Kona, despite a local and mainland marketplace wrought with the perils brought on by neighborly competition, and counterfeiters the industry and reputation of Kona coffee will continue to benefit and grow from its continued spirit of independence.

For more information on Kona Coffee or to lend support to the issue of protecting the name "Kona" call or write Coffee Times at Box 1092, Captain Cook, HI 96704, (808) 326-7637.

## Current Kona Coffee Prices as of 2/1/95

Cherry: \$1.00 lb.

Green: \$6.00 - \$8.00 Roasted: \$12.00 - \$18.00

Est. 540lbs, of Cherry to Produce 100lbs, of Roast

# Coffee Times 100% PURE KONA™ COFFEE Hand Picked, Sun Dried and Truly Graded

Did you know that out of the **20 million pounds** of Kona Coffee bought and **consumed** every year under the name Kona only **2 million pounds** of that coffee is actually **grown** here in Kona? And the **frightening fact** of the matter is...that most Kona coffee drinkers around the world have no idea that what they're drinking is a coffee containing 90% of something other than Kona coffee. It's time for this deceptive labeling and misuse of the Kona name to end. In an attempt to preserve the coffee growing heritage here in Kona and the gourmet reputation of our local coffee and to combat this widespread misrepresentation of the Kona name to sell counterfeit coffee we here at Coffee Times magazine unconditionally guarantee that the coffee you receive from us is farmer direct, contains only 100% Kona coffee and meets the State of Hawaii's highest grading standards. Enjoy the pure taste of the world's finest coffee and help preserve our local farm lands by buying only 100% Kona.



Even if you never make it to the Big Island you can still get the taste of Kona shipped home!

ORDERING INFORMATION	
Type Roast I	Lbs. Total
	<u> </u>
	<u> </u>
	\$
	\$
	\$
Delivery Charges \$	
In U.S. please add \$3.50 for 1st pound & \$1.50 for each additional pound (Call for international fees)	
Grand Total \$	
Please mail with check or money order to: Coffee Times, P.O. Box 1092, Captain Cook, HI 96704	
by Credit Card (MC) (VISA) (AM EX)#:	
Exp. Date: Name:	
Signature:	
Ship To:	
Please allow up to 1 week for delivery	

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Exquisite taste, high elevation, large single bean coffee 16.95/lb. 79.95/5 lbs. 149.95/10 lbs. FANCY

Excellent quality, average sized bean, high cupping standard 14.95/lb. 69.95/5 lbs. 129.95/10 lbs.

#### PRIME

Choice bean of most specialty Kona coffee consumers. 12.95/lb. 59.95/5 lbs. 109.95/10 lbs.

### FLAVORED KONA (Prime) COFFEE

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(please specify medium, dark or espresso roast)

### **Other Goods Offered:**

T Shirts \$15.00 (add \$1.50 each shirt for shipping)
(Coffee Times Logo on front, counterfeiting cartoon on back)
please specify Large or Xtra Large shirt size)

Kona Coffee Crunch Candy \$2.50 2.50z pkgs.

(1-4 pkgs. no shipping chg., 5 or more add 1.50 for each five)

(These Homemade Hawaiian Candies contain Hawaiian

Macadamia Nuts, English Toffee, and 100% Kona<sup>TM</sup> Coffee

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