
A Growing Vision

Les Drent of the Kauai Cigar Co. is making sure that Hawaii is known for more than just beaches, sunshine and leis.

BY ALEJANDRO BENES • PHOTOGRAPHY BY KYLE ROTHENBORG

Walking from the driveway into the backyard of the modest farmhouse, the sound of a chainsaw fills the air. Branches are snapping and dust is blowing everywhere. The visitor sees Les Drent perched atop a lift rented from Home Depot, pruning back the old lychee trees. After nearly 70 years of being untouched, the trees have gotten out of control.

“Some days, I wish it would just snow!” exclaims Drent, a native of New Hampshire.

Drent, in a T-shirt with the sleeves cut off, is dripping with sweat. At the end of coffee-growing season, Drent’s also been cutting back the “mother of cocoa” trees that provide shade to the coffee he’s been growing for more than a decade. It seems like he’ll never be done.

“This place never stops growing,” he complains, but not too strongly.

This place is Kauai. As in the “Garden Island.” As in Hawaii. As in where Les Drent is now farming tobacco. As the owner of the Kauai Cigar Co., Drent is gaining recognition.

“I’ve had everybody calling,” Drent says, explaining how busy he’s become and how he has no time. “I’m not sure I really want to do this article.”

When the NFL needed cigars for its 2011 Pro Bowl party in Oahu, the event organizers called Drent. On that warm January night, Drent was in his early orientation of what it means to be a cigarmaker in demand. Large football players, the best in the pros, stopped by the small palm-thatched booth where



Kauai Cigar’s Island Prince and Makaleha brands are made with Hawaiian tobacco.

Drent and his right-hand man, Tai Erum, were rolling and handing out Island Prince cigars to anyone who wanted one. And everybody—from Dallas Cowboys linebacker DeMarcus Ware to DeMaurice Smith, the head of the NFL Players Association—seemed to want one. The NFL ordered more of Drent’s cigars for the 2012 party.

“I don’t really think I want to do anything more,” Drent explains, “until we get the Grand Alii done.

The Grand Alii (pronounced ah-lee-ee) is

sort of Drent’s Holy Grail. Alii means “royalty” in Hawaiian. The cigar is, or will be, a puro made of tobacco grown only on his farm in Kauai.

Drent has been growing cigar tobacco in Kauai since 2006. On a visit to a friend’s hot-house garden, Drent saw a plant he didn’t recognize. It was a tobacco plant.

“Tobacco grows wild around Kauai. Mostly Sumatra [seed],” Drent explains, sitting on the porch of his house in Kapa’a. Drent’s friend gave him the first tobacco seeds.

“We planted a few rows in 2006. I really started smoking cigars in 2005, 2006. My grandfather used to smoke cigars when I was growing up,” Drent reminisces. “I loved the smell of a good cigar.”

As a child, Drent would visit his grandparents at the Jersey Shore.

“Everybody smoked cigars and drove Cadillacs.” Drent recalls and laughs. “I loved smelling the cigars.”

Drent says his father smoked a pipe at their home in New London, New Hampshire, but when the family would go to see their beloved Boston Red Sox play a game, cigar smoke was in the air.

“I used to love smelling those Dominicans outside of Fenway along with the sausages on Yawkey Way,” Drent remembers, referring to the provenance of the cigars, not players like Manny Ramirez. “They called them Dominicans, but I don’t really know where the cigars were from.”

Drent has come a long way—more than



Les Drent, owner of Kauai Cigar Co., takes stock of a curing barn brimming with his Hawaiian cigar tobacco.



A trio of field workers hanging freshly harvested leaves of tobacco grown on the Hawaiian island of Kauai. After curing, the tobacco will be shipped to Nicaragua, where it will be rolled into cigars.

5,000 miles from New Hampshire to Kauai—and Drent's Kauai Cigar Company has gone from a self-described hobby to a well-established presence in the numerous gift shops, coffee bars and the 120 or so state-run liquor stores on the Hawaiian islands. Drent is the go-to guy for Hawaiian cigars. Hell, he's the only guy.

"We're now growing about 4,600 pounds of tobacco a year and we sell between 80,000 and 100,000 cigars a year," Drent explains over sips of Hawaiian Koloa rum and superb espresso from beans grown on his own farm, his main business, Blair Estates Coffee (Blair is Drent's middle name). This year he's aiming to produce closer to 120,000 cigars, and he is looking to add nearly 50 acres by fall.

Growing in Hawaii presents unique challenges, and Drent has to be careful to keep fungus at bay. "It rains so much here," he says. "It helps the coffee, but tobacco likes sun. We're finding we have to let the tobacco mature longer because we have so much moisture."

Drent moved to Hawaii right out of college in 1991. The coffee roasting business began in 1993, started with money earned the old-fashioned way.

"I would take old-style photographs of tourists dressed up in coffee plantation garb," Drent recalls. "So I went to the local Salvation Army in Kona and picked up a lot of old clothes, mumus for the ladies, etc. Stitched some burlap together, found some old barrels, cut some bamboo, coffee-picking baskets and went to work setting up a sidewalk shop. I took the photos for free, developed the sepia-toned pictures in a small closet and I sold the pictures for \$10 apiece cash, and \$20 and up for framed. It was a lot of fun and I raked in the money."

In 1998, he moved himself and the business to Kauai after discovering "the best cup of coffee I've ever tasted from beans growing in the wild there." A year later, Drent was growing coffee on land he bought with help from his father and a "handful of our credit cards." He built his farm, the centerpiece of Blair Estates, in 2004, which offers coffee and tobacco tours. Drent invested the money from the successful coffee business into his new tobacco venture.

"I still put every penny of profit back into business growth," Drent says

"I think he's a very smart, creative entrepreneurial guy who grew a business out of nothing," says Robert Levin, the owner of the Ashton and La Aroma de Cuba cigar brands, among others. Levin spends a lot of his time in Kauai and has known Drent for a while. "Les's cigars sell pretty well all over the islands. He made this out of nothing. I think it's pretty neat. I don't know the potential for growth, but we'll see. I really hope he makes it. I think it's great that someone is growing cigar tobacco other than some wrapper leaves in the United States."

These days, while not pruning trees, Drent, 44, is a stay-at-home dad during the week, taking care of his two young children while his wife teaches English at the local high school. When he can, he gets away on Tuesday nights to play street hockey on inline skates. Drent is also something of an ambassador for the island of Kauai. He points out all the "good places" to eat and tells visitors the best spots to hit.

Over Lava and Rainbow Rolls at Bushido in Kapa'a—the sushi chefs give out a big cheer of "Les!" when he enters—Drent is relaxing, talking baseball. Inevitably, the discussion veers to cigars. Drent quizzes any cigar smoker about favorite brands and tastes. He just wants to know.

In 2005, Drent was smoking cigars, mostly Padrón 1964s. (These days he also favors La Aroma de Cubas and Montecristo No. 2s.) He was thinking about growing tobacco and sought out the advice of some of the best in the business, the Oliva family from Oliva Tobacco Co.

"When I was first in Nicaragua with the Olivas, I said I understood how hard it was to grow tobacco because I was a coffee grower," Drent says, shaking his head and smiling. "Rene Valdivia [Oliva's production manager in Estelí] said to me, 'Coffee is nothing compared to tobacco.' He was absolutely right.

"I want to taste the farm," Drent says of his philosophy. "The farm in Kauai. That's a big challenge when you're blending our tobacco with stuff grown outside of Kauai, but it's my goal."

"These guys just know what to do with tobacco, like I know what to do with coffee." Drent explains. "I gravitated to the natural wrapper. I'm after more the good-tasting cigar than the look."

"These guys" are the makers of premium cigars. Drent has great respect for them and the care they take in what they do. When Drent was ready to start making cigars, he sought out Victor Calvo of Tabacalera Tambor in Estelí, Nicaragua, to manufacture the Island Prince line of cigars. He set up the deal in 2006.

"I said to Victor, 'I want to taste the farm,'" Drent recalls. "I mean the farm in Kauai. That's a big challenge when you're blending our tobacco with stuff grown outside of Kauai, but it's my goal."

Drent says that anywhere from 40 to 60 percent of the tobacco in Island Prince cigars is from Kauai. The tobacco takes about two and a half years to get from the field to the cigar. Drent explains that rolling cigars

\$19 an hour in salary, payroll taxes and insurance. To manufacture cigars, Drent would also need a separate license.

Island Prince cigars sell for between \$10 and \$20 each, and a single cigar in a coffin at an ABC Store in the islands goes for \$21. "There's no way we're ever gonna be able to do a \$5 to \$6 cigar," Drent explains. Island Prince cigars come in three sizes: the Momona is a robusto, the name meaning "sweet and fat;" the Luana Iki, or "short pause for pleasure," is a 46-ring, 4.5-inch petit corona; and the Bumboocho, a slang term for "the big one," is a Churchill-sized 52-ring, 6-plus inch.

"I've been carrying the cigars for about three years," says Marcus Daniel of Marcus Daniel Tobacconist in Old Naples, Florida. His shop is one of the few on the mainland that sells Island Prince. They sell for about \$12 each. "The cigars are interesting and unique. People tend to like them. They sell pretty well. I'm going to put in another order this week," says Daniel.

Daniel's website describes the light-wraper (rolled with Connecticut-shade) Island Princes as "silky-cream like," and the darker-wrapped (Habano leaf) ones as "filled with deep, complex flavors."

"I think the whole thing is kind of interesting. He [Drent] seems to be serious about it. The cigars sell well and the packaging is nicely done. It's nice to see cigar tobacco being grown in the United States," says Daniel.

"I think we can sell more than 100,000 cigars in Hawaii alone," Drent says. "Right now, it's a tourist cigar, but some locals are getting into it."

For now, Drent is focused on growing.

"I really need to spend an entire growing season in Nicaragua," Drent says. "I know the coffee side and I need to get to know the tobacco."

This is quickly followed by, "I need to keep a balance" and "I need to focus on better yield." Drent's mind is active, to say the least, and yet clearly pointed in the direction of making better cigars.

During the spring of 2011, Drent spent about a month in Nicaragua, followed by a week in Cuba.

"Nicaragua was pretty much just work," Drent says. "I spent the mornings at the Oliva farm that produces filler tobacco. Watching, learning, listening, talking and understanding the fermentation side of it. I learned a few little tricks about the growing that we can't really use in Kauai because we're organic. After lunch, I'd work with Victor [Calvo] on the new brand creation. It's a lot of work."

Drent and Calvo have created two new lines for Kauai Cigars. Both are medium- to full-bodied.

"The Hawaiian Vintage Series is 25 cigars in a Cuban-style box with paper on a plywood box," Drent says. "We're putting less Kauai tobacco in it. It's aimed for the mainland market. We have two sizes. One is a perfecto."

The second line is the Makaleha, named for the Kauai mountain range next to the farm. This will come in three sizes up to a 60 ring-gauge

the leaves—or lau—of which are used in things like basket weaving.

From Nicaragua, Drent flew to Panama and then to Havana.

"It was like taking the last flight from Honolulu to Kauai," Drent says. "Everybody on the plane knew each other and they were just walking around talking."

The mood changed a little when Drent got into the airport in Cuba.

"I got in late one night. Everybody was very polite," he begins. "Then you have to pay for your health insurance for however many days you're gonna be there. Then I got to where you get your bags and that's where the fun started because I had all my tobacco equipment. That was just a circus. We were there for about three hours. Military guys came over and said it was no problem, but we missed the guy who was going to pick us up. They took all our tobacco equipment. They said we couldn't have it with us in the country, but we got it back on the way out [of Cuba]."

While in Cuba, Drent spent three days with Hirochi Robaina, son of the late cigar legend Alejandro Robaina, on the family's farm in Pinar del Río. Spending time on a Cuban tobacco farm, Drent came to appreciate "just how advantaged we [in the U.S.] are technologically, but at the same time, their cigars are so wonderful that you don't want to mess with it."

"I got a real sense of the roots and where it all comes from," Drent explains. "You don't really know until you actually grow something. Once you start growing some tobacco, it's a whole new level of understanding."

Drent, who does not speak Spanish, says he had no problem communicating with the Cubans.

"We spent an entire day talking tobacco. Just hangin' out and smoking

Cuban cigars and drinking Cuban coffee," Drent says of how he passed the days with Robaina. "We decided that the three universal things were women, cigars and baseball. We could communicate just fine if we stayed on those subjects."

These days, Drent is focused on cigars. He claims his quest for creating the Grand Alii, that Hawaiian puro, keeps him "motivated in a brutal way." You can't help but wonder, though, if Drent's own passion to learn and to make his cigar business a success won't get in the way. How will he ever achieve that "balance"?

"When I produce a cigar with tobacco grown here in Kauai that can be as good, if different, from what they're producing for us in Nicaragua," Drent explains, "that's when I'll be somewhat satisfied."

Even Drent smiles when he hears himself say that.

"My next move is to spend a couple of months on the mainland and sell," Drent promises. "I'm gonna pack the van with cigars and free stuff and put it on the website and let everyone know I'm coming."

You can just see it in his eyes. For Les Drent, it's all about the journey. ❖



Drent uses his pickup truck to oversee the transfer of his tobacco leaves from the field to the curing barn.