



Most people don't think
"Hawai'i" when they think "cigar."
Kaua'i's Les Drent is
on a mission to change that.

The STOGGEYMAN

STORY BY MICHAEL SHAPIRO | PHOTOS BY KYLE ROTHENBORG

Les Drent is happy. The plants on these two acres at the back of Kapa'a are nearly as tall as he is, and he's pretty tall. Like a kid at the edge of a swimming pool, he can't resist: He wades into the field and brushes the foliage tenderly, unconcerned that tobacco deposits a gummy, odorous residue on whatever it touches.

"Unbelievable," he says, shoulder deep in a verdant sea. "This stuff is gold. This is gold right here." Kaua'i's lush valleys can often be too wet for decent tobacco, but a fortuitous mix of sun and rain, of hot, humid days and cool nights, has made the 2011 harvest—Drent's seventh—his most productive. "This tobacco here is even more beautiful than the tobacco you see from Cuba," he says. "Gorgeous!" He's not just blowing smoke: The *ligero*—the leaves from the top of the plant used for a cigar's filler, which are usually the smallest—are the size of turkey platters. Drent's confident that the premium cigars the *ligero*



is destined to be rolled into will be the Kaua'i Cigar Co.'s best yet. But it's a long journey from stem to stogey, one that will take this tobacco from Kapa'a to Central America and back.

He tugs at one of the aromatic leaves. "When it's ready to be picked, it snaps right off," he says. It's clearly ready; the leaf practically jumps into his hand. By tomorrow afternoon all this tobacco, about 3,500 pounds by Drent's reckoning, will be harvested, strung leaf by leaf and hung in curing barns to dry. It'll stay there for about forty-five days, turning from green to gold to toasty brown, after which



Reading the tobacco leaves: Les Drent examines one of his babies at the Kaua'i Cigar Co. Cigar making—from growing to rolling—is an art and science, one Drent has been working tirelessly to master for the past seven years.

it'll be baled and shipped to Nicaragua, where it will be fermented, sorted, blended, rolled, banded and boxed. The first stick won't be on the shelves of Island stores until 2013—two and a half years after the initial planting.

"Isn't that crazy?" asks Drent. "For a small businessman, the money you have to front with this whole thing ... it's just crazy to do this." But Drent, like a lot of successful type-As, is a little bit crazy. The New Hampshire native is, in the best patrician New England tradition, at once a gentleman farmer, a craftsman, a perfectionist, a do-it-yourselfer, a rebel and something of a masochist (evidenced as much by his unwavering devotion to the Boston Red Sox as his quixotic effort to make cigars). It's taken him seven years to get the Kaua'i Cigar Co. to this point, with dramatic success and agonizing failure

along the way. Once finished, though, the cigars that come out of this field will be unique: These two acres are, for now, the only farm in the Islands producing commercial tobacco, and Les Drent is the only farmer crazy enough to try making cigars out of it.

Drent's office is a warm room, filled with wooden furniture, man-sized humidors, vintage signage and the faintly acrid aroma of aging cigars mixed with the smell of roasting coffee. He presents me with a Paris-worthy latte he's just made, its meringue-thick foam scored by delicate lines of espresso. "Try it without sugar first," he says. "I always tell people that." When I say it's the best latte by far I've had in Hawai'i, Drent smiles with satisfaction but not surprise: He's been growing coffee since 2001 through his other company,

The Stogeyman

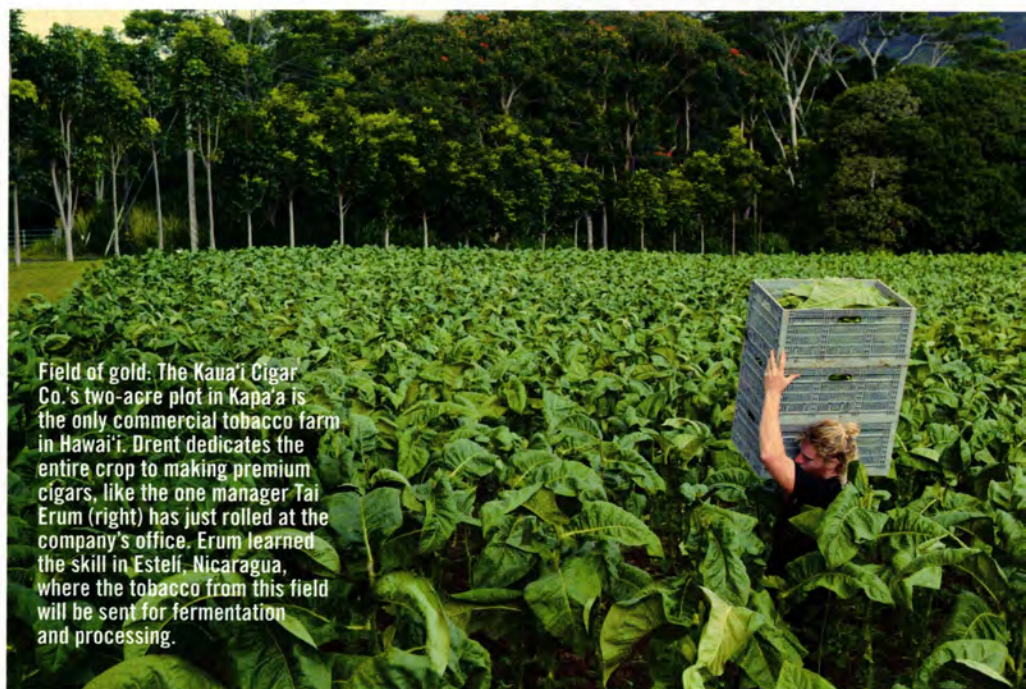
Blair Estate Coffee (Blair being his middle name). I've caught up with him, in fact, on the day before the busiest day of his year; while the tobacco's being picked up the road, the coffee will be simultaneously harvested here on the property where he lives with his wife, two kids, two lazy cats and a brood of plump laying hens.

Drent's voluble, affably caffeinated and he talks fast when he gets going about his passions, whether coffee, cigars, baseball or writing. When he came to Hawai'i in 1991, he had no intention of farming; he wanted to be a journalist. He'd been grinding out ad copy in Los Angeles long enough to realize he hated it, so he put his beat-up Toyota on a barge and headed for the tropics. He wound up living on a coffee farm above Captain Cook, where he "had this idea to start a publication, really cheap," he says. "I had no money, no computer. I was going to do the whole thing by hand and photocopy it." He scraped the \$4,000 in startup cash together by taking \$10 photos of tourists in Kailua-Kona in front of a coffee plantation scene he created with props he'd borrowed from the farm. The first issue of *Coffee Times*, which covered the Kona coffee industry, rolled off the photocopier in 1993. It was enough of a success that Drent could buy his own press but not successful enough that he could hire help. "I wrote it, shot it, delivered it, did the billing. I printed it in an old macadamia nut shed in Hōlualoa ... all night long, the whole shed shaking," he says. "It was horrible."

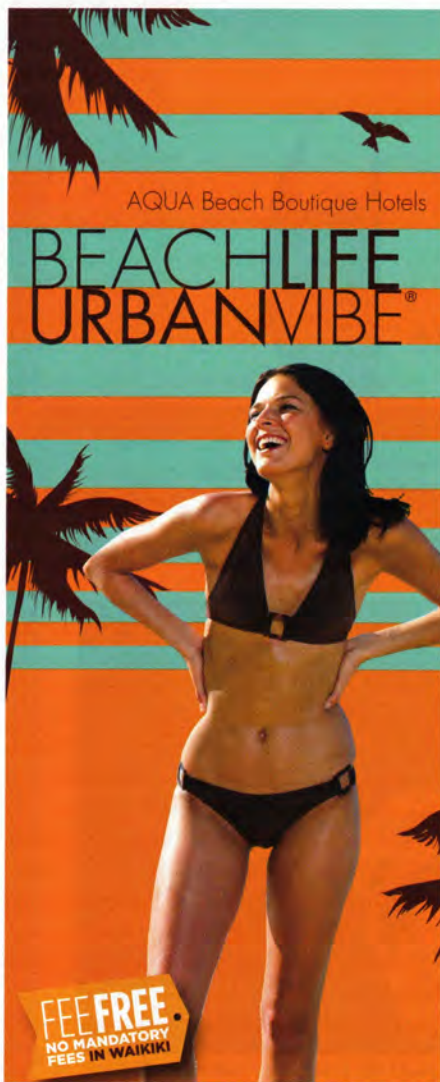
Eventually the one-man operation took

its toll, so after what he affectionately calls his "nervous breakdown" in 1995, he started roasting and selling mail-order coffee. This was before Kona had made the big leagues ("\$11.95 a pound for 100 percent Kona Peaberry," he recalls. "Can you believe that?"), but the writing was on the wall as new money moved in and the region's reputation started to build. "I thought, 'I'm going to get squashed with all these dot-com guys coming over. I just can't afford land.'" When he picked beans from a wild coffee plant on a visit to Kaua'i, Drent's life changed. "It was just the most amazing coffee I'd ever had. It was euphoric, amazing." So in 1998 he packed up his roaster, headed for the Garden Isle and with his parents' help bought three and a half acres in Kapa'a. By 2001 Drent was a successful farmer, roaster and purveyor of Kaua'i coffee.

Three years later another fateful encounter with a wild plant—a kelly green weed growing in a neighbor's garden—would again alter Drent's life trajectory. "I asked him, 'What the heck is that?' 'It's tobacco,' he said. 'Tobacco, really! Can I have some seeds?'" The neighbor broke off a pod, and the rest, says Drent, is history—a tortuous one. If Drent had known anything about tobacco, he says, he probably wouldn't have touched the stuff. The first cigars he made from that wild tobacco, a descendant of a Sumatran variety growing throughout the Islands, were "terrible. Horrible. Brutal." But tobacco, as is well known, is highly addicting, and Drent was hooked.



Field of gold: The Kaua'i Cigar Co.'s two-acre plot in Kapa'a is the only commercial tobacco farm in Hawai'i. Drent dedicates the entire crop to making premium cigars, like the one manager Tai Erum (right) has just rolled at the company's office. Erum learned the skill in Esteli, Nicaragua, where the tobacco from this field will be sent for fermentation and processing.



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He bought some Connecticut seed, which yields a light, mellow tobacco (a “forgiving cigar,” as he puts it), and hit the books, scouring the Kaua’i Community College library and the Internet for all the information on tobacco cultivation he could find. In 2004 he produced his first commercial crop, which yielded about a thousand cigars. They weren’t all that good, Drent says, but he packaged them in homemade boxes and put them in a couple of local gift shops anyway. They sold out—fast. “I was like, ‘Wow, there’s that many people liking cigars out there?’ That’s when the lights went on.”

But to take things to the next level, to produce a quality cigar, Drent had to get serious. First he had to grow stronger tobacco. He procured some Habana2000, a Cuban-seed variety with big leaves and spicy flavor, from the Oliva family, one of the biggest names in cigar making. The stronger the tobacco, though, the more carefully it needs to be processed; screw it up and you get “a bonfire in your mouth,” says Drent. So he asked the Olivas to help him find a “legitimate, bona fide expert” to handle his tobacco. They connected him with Victor Calvo, a master *ligador* (blender) and cigar maker in Estelí, Nicaragua. Estelí, a town in the hill country near the Honduran border, was a haven for cigar makers fleeing Cuba’s communist revolution in 1959; they turned it into one of the most important cigar-making centers in Latin America. Drent followed his 2006 crop to Estelí, where Calvo initiated him into the secretive world of premium



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cigar making.

In 2009 Drent tried fermenting the harvest in Hawai'i based on what he'd learned in Esteli with the eventual aim of bringing the entire process, from seed to cigar, to Kaua'i. It was a disaster: The piles overheated, which led to molding. "There's a big difference between fermenting and composting," Drent laughs, still a little ruefully. "Three thousand pounds of tobacco and \$60,000 in labor, all ruined." Lesson learned, Drent's been sending his tobacco to Esteli since. Last year he sold about 90,000 cigars through ABC Stores, Whalers Village and Foodland among dozens of smaller specialty shops and a handful of Mainland stores; he's currently developing an exclusive line for local craft shop Martin & MacArthur.

The irony in all this is that Drent's not a huge cigar guy himself. He'll indulge in one or two a week, tops. "I always loved the smell of a good cigar, you know, outside of Fenway Park growing up and smelling those Dominicans down there, but I never really got into the pastime of smoking them." For him the satisfaction lies in having done something nobody else has, something unexpected and maybe a little nuts. "Who'd ever have imagined there's a guy in Hawai'i growing tobacco and making cigars?" he shrugs.

Cigars are a pretty simple tobacco delivery system. They come in dozens of shapes and sizes, from demure Rothschilds to Castro-size Presidentes, but all of them comprise three parts: the filler (the tobacco at the center), the binder (which encircles the filler) and the wrapper, a single thin leaf around the outside of the stick. But balancing the flavors among these parts by blending different tobaccos is what makes a good cigar more than just a cigar. By itself the Kaua'i-grown Habana2000 is faintly floral and sweet. "Like apple pie," says Drent, "but without the crust." To "pepper it up," he says, Nicaraguan ligero might be added to the filler or Connecticut Shade used for the wrapper. The precise ratio of ingredients in a given blend is a trade secret, says Drent, but what we're smoking now, from his "Island Prince" line, is about 80 percent Kaua'i-grown filler, Ecuadorean-grown Connecticut Shade wrapper and "a little something else." It's a tasty cigar with nutty, caramel notes, medium body and an even burn. It has a gentle start, slow build and smooth finish without becoming harsh or drying.

For someone coming out of the coffee

world, where purity is often the ideal, the practice of blending is a bitter pill to swallow. Still, when Drent was researching tobacco cultivation back in 2004, he found a 1917 report from the Hawaii Agricultural Experiment Station summarizing the results of a three-year experiment in growing cigar-quality tobacco on the Big Island. "The tobacco grown ... in the Hamakua district on the island of Hawaii," it concluded, "has been pronounced by experts in the trade as equal in quality to that produced in any other tropical tobacco-growing country." It went on to suggest that a globally competitive tobacco industry be created in Hawai'i.

That never happened, but the report got Drent's ambitious and restless mind going. Sometime around 2006 a dream took shape: A cigar made entirely from Hawai'i-grown tobacco, cured, fermented, rolled, banded and boxed in the Islands. He would call it the "Grand Ali'i," and it would be his holy grail, the cigar to put Hawai'i on the smoking map.

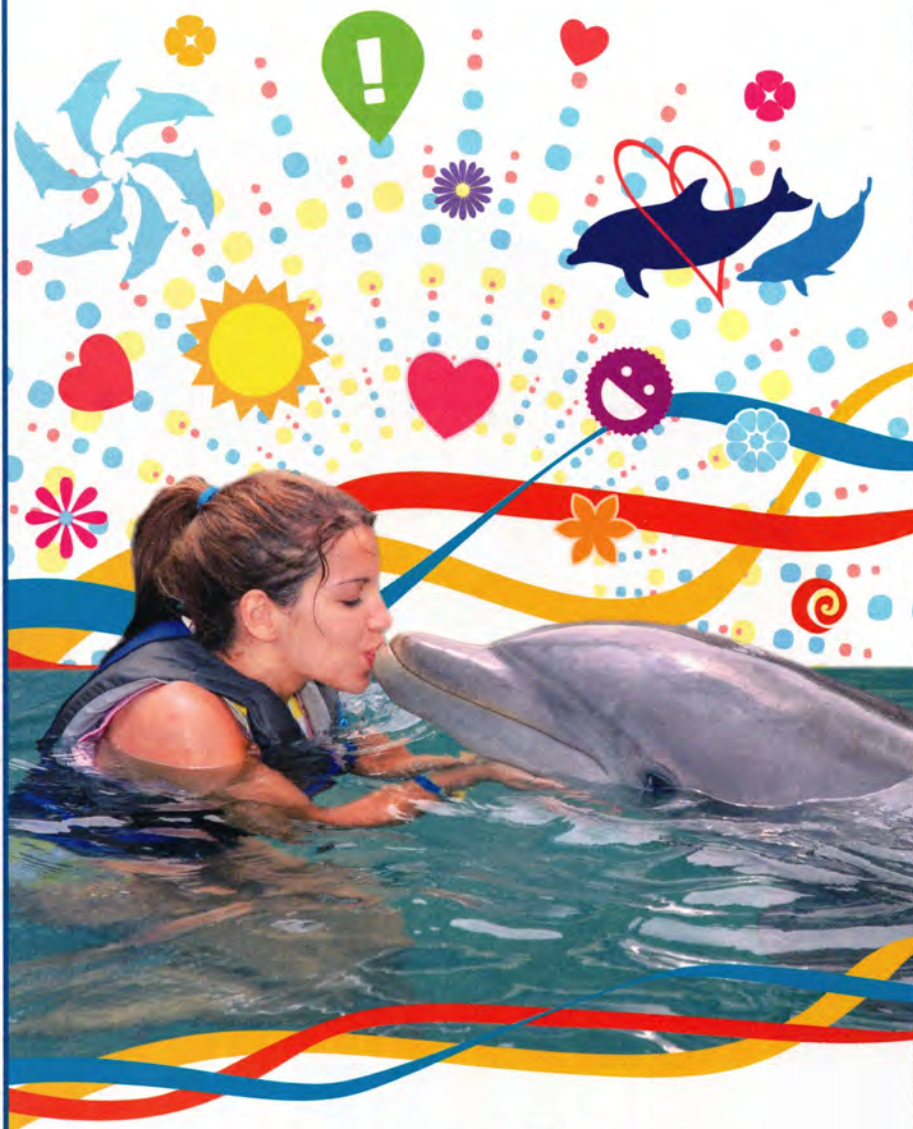
He's been at it for the past three years and devoted two crops to creating the Grand Ali'i, but the effort has been an "extreme disappointment. A flop. The cigar just doesn't have it." He intends to keep trying, though, despite the many hurdles. For one thing, he'll have to experiment with different tobacco varieties in different microclimates. He's already leased sixteen acres near Lihue and is looking for a plot on the dry leeward side, "a really sun-drenched, blistering, brutal environment that will produce a hot, spicy tobacco." Bringing the cigar-making process to Hawai'i is a whole separate can of worms: The expertise and the comparatively cheap labor pool needed to process tobacco doesn't exist here, at least not yet. The State of Hawai'i's burdensome 50 percent tobacco tax is no help, either, when Drent must compete with cheaper imports from Latin America.

But should the day come that a 100 percent Hawai'i-grown cigar is superior to the blends that the Kaua'i Cigar Co. is making now, Drent will be ready. He's got the bands printed and the boxes assembled; all he needs are the cigars to fill them.

"They make great cigars in Cuba, and all their tobacco's grown in one region. They did it somehow. There's gotta be a way. God knows if I can figure it out ... but I'm going to figure it out." HH

To arrange a tour of the Kaua'i Cigar Co., visit www.kauaicigar.com.

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