

# CULTIVATING INNOVATION

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YOUNG PROFESSIONAL

## Les Drent

By :: Joan Conrow | Photo by :: Sara Wall

Les Drent is the epitome of the self-made man. In creating each of his successful enterprises—*Coffee Times*, Blair Estate Organic Coffee Farm and Kaua'i Cigar Company—Drent has largely taught himself what he needed to know, and figured out on his own how to make it all happen. “I take a lot of pride in the fact that I’m really resourceful,” he says.

That resourcefulness has allowed him to gain access to Central America’s secretive hand-rolled cigar industry, start Kaua’i’s first—and only—organic coffee and tobacco farm, and trans-

ported fertilizers. grown on Kaua’i, where soon the stogies will be rolled as well. Visitors can see the entire process on the farm tours—also one-of-a-kind—that Drent plans to launch this April.

He’s intentionally focused on niche markets. Drent gained valuable insights into both marketing and business management while selling advertising for *Coffee Times*. He sees specialty offerings like hand-made cigars, custom-roasted organic coffee, and farm tours as the often overlooked key to viable agricultural enterprise in Hawai’i.

“Agriculture is dead here, with the

imported fertilizers.

“Every five years I get bored and I have to start something new,” he says, explaining why he moved into his newest business, cigars. He now cultivates two acres of tobacco, which is cured on-island, then shipped to Nicaragua for rolling.

“I always loved cigars,” says Drent, who traveled extensively in Central America to learn the closely guarded secrets of the trade. “My grandfather used to smoke them. I loved the smell.”

Drent, who is driven as well by “a curious mind,” has found that Kaua’i Cigar Company is holding his interest longer than his other ventures.

“The more I learn about it, the more involved I get,” says Drent, who recently dispatched two staff members to learn the rolling process in Central America so the company could produce an entirely local premium cigar. “By no means do I have it figured out, which is frustrating but also rewarding. The quest continues. The journey is what it’s all about.”

It’s also about looking ahead and having a sense of where he wants that journey to take him. “My dad always said, project five, ten, fifteen years ahead to where you want to be,” Drent says. “So many people like to live day-to-day and just feel the moment, but you really do need to project your future.”

That foresight, coupled with “trying new things and not giving up,” explains why Drent has been able to make the shift from a surfer sleeping on a cot in a laundry room to a successful farmer, business owner, and family man on Kaua’i.

“Things are better today than they were last week, last year, five years ago,” Drent says. “I feel very fortunate.”

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form a visitors’ guide into a Kona coffee roaster and mail order distributor.

Yet resourcefulness isn’t the only reason that Drent’s plans keep coming to fruition like the carefully tended coffee cherries that figure so prominently in his business. “Perseverance is the secret to my success,” says Drent, who lives with his wife, Gigi, and two young children on their farm in Kapahi, an upland area of east Kaua’i. “I was never a great student. But I was sort of an innovator, trying to create new things.”

That’s why the world now has premium cigars made from tobacco

high cost of land and labor,” says Drent, who had to find his own way in creating a profitable farm venture. “You’ve got to be able to enhance the value of it. The Department of Agriculture and government are so disconnected from the reality of farming in Hawai’i in the 21st century.”

Drent began “working with the dirt” in 2001, when he bought his farm and planted coffee trees on three acres. His commitment to sustainability prompted him to introduce St. Croix Hair sheep to graze on weeds. He also shifted to shade-grown coffee as a way to reduce the need for



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