

Under the Volcano

The Kauai Cigar Co. is growing its own tobacco—in Hawaii.

ONE MIGHT BE forgiven for reflexively recoiling from any brand of Hawaiian cigar. After all, the souvenir sticks found in the islands' gift shops are made—somewhere other than Hawaii—from scrap tobacco of various origins that has been fouled with artificial coffee or macadamia-nut flavoring. But those cigars, save for being sold in Hawaii, have nothing in common with the offerings from the Kauai Cigar Co.

This island business produces cigars that are comparable to the ones made by the top brands of Central America and the Caribbean, and it does so by using a blend of filler tobacco that includes leaves grown on its farm on Kauai, a mountainous island with nutrient-rich volcanic soil and ample rain. “Tobacco grows naturally in the wild here,” says Les Drent, who describes himself as the company’s grower, president, and tractor driver.

After seeing a tobacco plant in a friend’s ornamental garden, Drent, who has been farming organic coffee on Kauai since 1999, wanted to find out what Hawaii-grown tobacco would taste like. His initial experiments produced leaves of poor quality, but the results piqued his interest nonetheless. Drent then conferred with the Oliva tobacco family of Miami—which owns farms in most of the world’s tobacco-growing regions and has supplied leaves to many of the world’s major cigar manufacturers—and obtained better seeds, which ultimately yielded superior plants.

Hawaii’s 40 percent wholesale tobacco tax rendered rolling the cigars on Kauai prohibitively expensive, so Drent partnered with a cigar manufacturer in Estelí, the city that is the production center of Nicaragua’s cigar industry. Kauai Cigar cures its Hawaiian tobacco in its drying barn on the island and then ships it to Nicaragua. There, the tobacco is sheathed in wrapper and binder leaves from



Ecuador and Nicaragua and rolled into the company’s Island Prince cigars.

The Island Prince is available in both a light and a dark variety; the Momona size (5¼ x 50) is priced from \$10 to \$20. Drent says that the Kauai company cigars are sold in about 125 shops in Hawaii—primarily in the ubiquitous ABC Stores—but in few, if any, retail outlets elsewhere. Smokers on the mainland can order the cigars through the company’s web site—while they last. “We made 36,000 cigars last year and are hoping to hit 100,000 this year,” Drent reports. “Our maximum production capacity is probably 160,000.”

Drent plans to release, in January, the Grand Alii, a cigar made entirely from Hawaiian tobacco and rolled in Hawaii. “We’re going to produce roughly 8,000 of them,” he says, “depending on how much wrapper we’re able to get from our crop.” The tobacco will be shipped to Nicaragua for processing and grading and then returned to Hawaii for rolling. Drent also is experimenting with in-house fermentation, in the hope of producing a limited-edition, all-Hawaiian, fully organic cigar. “We’re a certified organic farm,” he explains, “but the tobacco is fumigated when it leaves Hawaii, so we lose the organic status.”

Drent describes the flavor of Kauai-grown tobacco as “very strong, but balanced and aromatic.” Our sampling of Kauai Cigar’s Island Prince Light, made with wrapper grown in Ecuador from Connecticut seeds, confirmed his description. The cigar has the heavy-bodied palate often associated with Central American filler, but the flavor is somewhat mellow and smoother, characteristics that seem consistent with the tobacco’s island origin. —BRENT BUTTERWORTH

Kauai Cigar Co., 808.822.4495, www.kauaicigar.com

The company’s Island Prince cigars feature a blend of filler tobacco that includes leaves grown on Kauai.