

100% KONA CACAO

Next bumper crop for the Big Island?



By Fern Gavelek
Photographs by Tovi Daly

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CHOCOLATE – the “dark master” for those who crave its rich, velvety essence – is being made in Kona. Bob and Pam Cooper of the Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory are concocting milk and dark chocolate at their Keauhou factory – the only chocolate operation in the U.S. that grows, processes and markets entirely in Hawaii.

Tours are available by appointment at the couple’s farm, the Orchards of Kahalu’u, but alas, you won’t be able to pick chocolate right off the tree. What the Coopers are growing is cacao – six to 14 inch pods that dangle from the trunks and branches of trees. Resembling small colorful footballs, these jewels contain beans that must undergo an elaborate process to become chocolate. Technically, cacao beans aren’t called cocoa until they’re off the tree.

The Coopers came into chocolate by accident. Moving here in 1997, their new farm had coffee, mac nut and cacao trees. Bob

discovered the company originally utilizing the cacao didn’t want it anymore. Mulling the situation over, he figured he had something very special in his own back yard – American-grown chocolate. “Out of principal, we made the decision to both grow and process the chocolate here to keep it Hawaiian-made,” Bob explains. “Cacao only grows 15 to 20 degrees north or south of the equator so Hawaii is it for growing in the USA.”

A chocolate consultant told him his crop from an acre of trees would be too small for typical processing, and he was advised to blend his beans with foreign varieties to up the volume and insure consistency of taste. Determined to “keep it Hawaiian,” Bob, a former country club manager with no farming experience, picked the ripening pods and processed, dried and stockpiled the beans. He sent samples to Spain to be rated and favorable findings reported them “prominent and forthright in flavor.” Thus encouraged and supported by a loan from the state Dept. of Business and Economic Development, the Coopers had processing equipment set up for a micro operation – probably the smallest chocolate factory in the world. History was made when the first batch of 100% Hawaiian-made chocolate was taste-tested in September 2000.

What gives the Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory its quality taste? A combination of factors: soil, environment, variety of their cacao tree – forastero – and the Cooper’s meticulous care in their small-batch processing. Today, the Coopers produce 1,000 pounds of milk and dark chocolate monthly. Their farm has one acre of cacao in production, and the couple has contracted Big Island farmers to grow about 40 more. “We are already buying beans from some of our original seedling purchasers,” says Pam.

It takes three to four years for a cacao tree to bear. Growing best when their branches can “reach out” and touch one another, they form a continuous canopy that shades the fruit. Although thousands of blossoms flower, each tree produces less than 100 pods per year. The trees produce year round and the Coopers harvest every two weeks. Five months after flowering, the cacao pods are snipped from the tree and the complex process of producing chocolate begins.

After slicing the pods open, the beans are extracted by hand. They ferment in wooden boxes for a week, then are sun dried on screens for a month. After removal of any foreign debris, the beans are precisely roasted, then hulled – a technique called winnowing – to remove the shells

Cacao grows year round on the Cooper farm in Keauhou. After picking, pods are sliced open by hand, and the beans extracted, shown below. The beans are poured into a wooden vat for a week of fermentation and are then sun dried for a month before a series of complex steps produce a rich paste to which ingredients are added to create bona fide chocolate.

