

Cooper couple grows cacao, sells chocolate far and wide - Hawaii News - Honolulu

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By Erika Engle

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That Hawaii is the only U.S. state in which cacao is grown can't be overstated. It means Hawaii is the only U.S. state in which locally grown single-origin and estate-grown chocolate can be produced.

The Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory goes back a "fur piece," as co-owner Pam Cooper might say.

She and her husband and business partner, Bob, are "originally from North Carolina," a region in which "fur piece" could be translated to "a long way."

The couple originally started visiting the islands in the 1970s and decided to retire to Kona, where they bought a farm in 1999.

So much for retirement.

The Coopers run a tree-to-bar operation, growing their Forastero cacao and going through all the steps required to turn it into chocolate marketed under the Original Hawaiian Chocolate brand name.

They also process Criollo cacao into chocolate, but neither the twain shall meet. The chocolate from the beans is never blended, to stay true to their single-origin chocolate promise, she said.

Cooper estimates that 85 percent of the world's chocolate is made from Forastero, while less than 10 to 15 percent is Criollo-based, and an even smaller percentage is made from Trinitario, a hybrid of Forastero and Criollo.

"We make milk and dark chocolate" from the Forastero, and dark chocolate from the Criollo beans that come from a "sister farm," she said.

Prices for the Coopers' chocolate may vary at retail, but via their website a 3-ounce box of individual bars of milk or dark chocolate sells for \$10, while the Criollo costs \$15. The 1-ounce packages of plumeria-shaped chocolates sell at \$6.50 for milk or dark chocolate and \$8.50 for criollo.

Website cruisers also will find a range of packaging sizes, including 1-pound bars; packages containing more than 30 hand-poured, plumeria-shaped chocolates; 3.5-ounce packages of roasted cacao nibs; 8-ounce packages of The Orchards of Kahalu'u brand 100 percent Kona coffee; and T-shirts.

In addition to the 60-some retail locations where the Coopers' products are sold around the state, visitors on their popular, twice-weekly farm tours also can buy goodies on-site.

Bob Cooper leads the tours each Wednesday and Friday morning, and the tours are regularly sold out well in advance, partially because of the widespread attention the chocolate and the farm have received on the Food Network cable television channel.

The Coopers have hosted Sunny Anderson and Alton Brown, for instance, and people who sign up for the tours still tell the couple about how they saw the farm on the cable channel.

The 6-acre farm had cacao, macadamia nuts and coffee growing on it when the Coopers bought it in 1999. The number of macadamia trees is not enough to farm commercially, so they give the nuts away to friends, but "we've got 550 coffee trees and 1,400 cacao trees," she said.

They dabbled with the coffee for a while and still market their coffee crops, "but the chocolate had a plan for us," she said.

The crop grew so well on their small farm that they encouraged others to grow it as well, "but there was no market for chocolate" back then.

Bob Cooper threw himself into the legwork required to research the industry, went to chocolate-making school and sent their beans off to Spain to have them assessed by experts.

"They came back (with a rating of) bold and forthright in flavor," she said. "That was our green light to start production."

The Coopers have been advocates of a sustainable food supply from the beginning, first as members of the Tropical Fruit Growers Association, and in recent years through establishment of the Hawaii Cacao Association, which is based in Honolulu.

Sustainability and the whole concept of buying local is one of the reasons that in the early '90s Bob Cooper started going to the Legislature, Pam Cooper said. "Cacao is such a small crop, if these devastating diseases are brought in, in bags of beans, it could potentially ruin a new industry," he would tell lawmakers.

The Original Hawaiian Chocolate Farm has been certified with a Seal of Quality from the state Department of Agriculture.

"It's just nice to have the verification that you are doing what you say you're doing," she said.

Chocolate is "an amazing whole food, it's good for you," she said. "It's the food of the gods."

The friendliness in Cooper's voice is immediately apparent, and given her North Carolina roots, she comes from the land of legendary Southern hospitality, which bears "so much similarity" to Hawaii's famed aloha spirit, she said.

To make the connection even sweeter, the tag line in email from Cooper reads, "Chocolate is Aloha."

WHERE TO BUY

The Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory

78-6772 Makenawai St.

Kailua-Kona, HI 96740

Phone: 322-2626; 888-447-2626

www.ohcf.us

OAHU

Whole Foods, Honolulu Chocolate Co., Executive Chef

MAUI

Whole Foods, Tedeschi Winery & Vineyard, Kula Marketplace

KAUAI

Hukilau Lanai, Papalani Gelato, Princeville Wine Market

HAWAII ISLAND

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"Buy Local" runs on Aloha Fridays. Reach Erika Engle at 529-4303, erika@staradvertiser.com or on Twitter as @erikaengle.

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COURTESY ORIGINAL HAWAIIAN CHOCOLATE FACTORY
Pam and Bob Cooper, owners and cacao-growers at the Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory in Keauhou-Kona on Hawaii island.

COURTESY ORIGINAL HAWAIIAN CHOCOLATE FACTORY
Criollo Chocolates made from the criollo variety of cacao beans, grown on Hawaii island by another farmer, and processed by Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory.



COURTESY ORIGINAL HAWAIIAN CHOCOLATE FACTORY
Various sizes of hand-crafted chocolates are offered by the Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory, including dark and milk chocolates made from single-origin beans grown on Hawaii island.



COURTESY ORIGINAL HAWAIIAN CHOCOLATE FACTORY

One-ounce, boxed, large plumeria-shaped chocolates, by Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory, are individually packaged and available from the company's website for \$6.50 for milk and dark chocolate and \$8.50 for criollo.

COURTESY ORIGINAL HAWAIIAN CHOCOLATE FACTORY

Three-ounce boxed, individual bars of Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory chocolates are made on Hawaii island from either Forastero or Criollo varieties of cacao beans.



COURTESY ORIGINAL HAWAIIAN CHOCOLATE FACTORY

Bob Cooper, co-owner of the Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory in Keauhou-Kona on Hawaii island, shows the innards of a cacao pod and explains the tree-to-bar process during farm tours twice a week.



COURTESY ORIGINAL HAWAIIAN
CHOCOLATE FACTORY

Bob Cooper, co-owner of the Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory in Keauhou-Kona on Hawaii island, shows a whole, ripe cacao pod and explains the tree-to-bar process during farm tours twice a week