

All of Hawaii is abuzz!

Maui emerges as a red-hot coffee growing destination at first statewide cupping competition

By Carla Tracy, Dining Editor, Maui News, 07/16/2009

Maui got a big jolt of caffeine adrenaline Saturday evening at Hawaii Coffee Association's first-ever statewide Cupping Competition at the Maui Tropical Plantation in Waikapu.

In fact, two Upcountry coffee farms rose like cream to the top 10 of the 69 entrants. The other winners were from Kona and Ka'u, producers of some of the most sought-after and expensive coffees in the world. A Kauai farm ranked high at 15.

So this is quite the coup for the Valley Isle. Those who are thinking about changing careers may want to ponder life as a lucrative Maui coffee farmer.

The Maui winners include Kupa'a Farms of Kula and Keokea Farms below popular Grandma's Coffee House. Kupa'a took first place in the Maui Division and seventh place overall. Keokea placed eighth overall. Both farms are organic.

"What an exciting time for us," beamed Gerry Ross, who runs Kupa'a Farms with his wife, Janet Simpson. "It's very gratifying after all the work we have done."

The best part is, Maui is now firmly planted on the coffee map of the world. Kona is still "granddaddy" of the seven coffee districts in the state with over 700 coffee farms, but Maui is inching up.

"We have over 40 members in the Maui Coffee Association now," said the event's education chairman David Gridley, who owns Maui Oma Coffee Roasting Co. "We're starting to get more and more.

"A lot of the Maui farmers connect with each other. This one will go to that one for dry milling, for instance. They learn from each other. They're vertically integrated, meaning they grow the coffee, they roast it, and then they sell it direct to consumer. With the computer age, there is little reason for them to wholesale anymore."

But the astute Gridley did happen to buy up all of what winner Kupa'a Farms had to offer this season. So coffee lovers cannot purchase direct - yet. The only place you will

find Kupa'a Farms coffee is Longhi's Wailea and Lahaina. That's because Gridley sells them the beans.

"We've been doing French-pressed coffee service for lunch and dinner for two years now," said General Manager Michael Rose of Longhi's Wailea. "It's unfiltered, so the flavors don't get washed out. To me, French pressed is the best."

The eighth place winner overall, Keokea Farms, does have a current supply from its 1,000 trees and sells its Typica coffee beans at the Kula Highway fruit stand, at crafts fairs and online as well.

MauiGrown Coffee in Kaanapali is the largest individually operated coffee grower in the U.S. and the only major producer of 100 percent Maui origin coffee in the world. President Kimo Falconer also attended and spoke at the conference. His coffees have earned many accolades, including as "one of the Top 10 Estate Coffees in the World" by expert Ken Davids.

Maui Tropical Plantation is a growing coffee concern and has a roasting room. Many other colorful Maui coffee characters are coming on board. Take for instance, new coffee farmer John Frank, who has 60 to 70 trees in the rich soil on Ainakula Road in Kula. Set in a cool, high-elevation residential neighborhood, it's on the former estate of Judge John Vail.

"I'm trying to start this farm in Kula, so I joined the Maui Coffee Association," he said as he toured Kupa'a Farms with a group of attendees Sunday. "But I'm struggling with it all, because I travel back and forth from Maui to LA."

As it turns out, his LA career is as a writer for "The Simpsons." He's been on the team of 20 writers for 11 solid years now, yet he's getting itchy feet.

"My trademark is Awful Coffee," Frank deadpanned with a Homer "doh!" demeanor. "But I have no coffee yet. Hollywood will throw me out soon enough and this is my backup. The axe is coming - it's either this or bank robbery!"

Over a vegetarian boxed lunch and sips of delectable gourmet coffee at Keokea Farms, Maui Coffee Association newcomers Tim and Pixie Pell of Livermore, Calif., said they are also hot to get in on the coffee-growing action here.

"We don't have any farming experience. But we're in pursuit of purchasing a coffee farm here," they said.

Top Kona coffee farmers Trent and Lisa Bateman of Mountain Thunder took in the views and the action as well.

"You really have to be crazy to be in this business," said Lisa. "Because it's such hard work for so little yield."

But the Batemans are one of the success stories in Kona. They boast 200,000 trees on 200 acres. It's the largest coffee farm in the Kona district, it's organic and it's got the highest elevation on the volcanic slopes at 3,200 feet.

Looking around Kupa'a Farms with its shady monkeypod and ice-cream bean trees along with coast-to-coast views, Trent said, "Maui is a good, emerging coffee district. It's way ahead of the other islands like Oahu, Molokai and Kauai." Trent also said Maui coffee farmers would benefit from offering ag tours, like those at Surfing Goat Dairy, Ali'i Kula Lavender, Tedeschi Vineyards and O'o Farm, for instance.

"At Mountain Thunder, we offer you VIP tours, in which you roast your own beans and create your own coffee. We offer lunch and a jungle walk through vanilla, cacao and green tea. We also take you through lava tubes as a bonus."

Sharon Wood, owner of Arianna Coffee Farms in Kona, is excited to see Maui take off.

"I think of coffee like wine. You want to try different varieties from different areas."

The umbrella organization for it all, Hawaii Coffee Association, has a mission statement to represent all sectors of the industry - growers, millers, wholesalers, roasters and even retailers.

Restaurants besides Longhi's that really support the industry with menus listing the various farmers are Mama's Fish House, Pineapple Grill, Merriman's Kapalua and Mala Wailea.

Private-estate coffee at Mama's is brewed and pressed at your table. The Kipahulu organic Arabica from Chuck Boerner's Ono Farms fetches \$14 per French-pressed carafe. The price may be dear, but you get two-and-a-half cups and the taste is oh-so divine - aromatic, balanced and full-bodied.

"We buy our coffees directly from the farmers, just like we buy fish directly from the fishermen," says Mama's Vice President Karen Christenson.

Many other restaurants sell their own the blends, such as Marco's Grill & Deli and Gerard's.

"I changed a minor component in Gerard's house coffee and Chef Gerard Reversade noticed it right away," said Gridley, who roasts for him and many other restaurants on Maui. "That's how good his palate is. Of course, I adjusted it back, to suit his preferences."

Unlike Gerard, retailer Dean Wong of the Green Banana Cafe in Paia is still learning the ropes.

"Being relatively new to the coffeehouse business, I thought it was important to attend the Hawaii Coffee Conference, and learn firsthand what Maui coffee farmers were producing as far as quality goes. What I learned was really very impressive! I was also happy to learn that many Maui coffee growers are working towards organic farming, keeping their beans free of chemicals - this is vitally important to us at the Green Banana Cafe, where we serve and produce only organic coffee drinks."

Peripheral businessmen such as Donn Soares of Maui Brand Sugar, part of HC&S, were also in eager attendance at the conference.

"Lots of manufacturers are moving away from high-fructose corn syrup on their coffee products and into natural sugar. Our Turbinado sugar goes great with coffee," he said.

Nicky "Beans" Matichyn, longtime owner of Maui Coffee Roasters in Kahului (wholesale and retail), summed it up most succinctly as he sipped a cuppa and munched chocolate-covered coffee beans. "Drink more coffee! It's important for people to buy local products. Coffee grown right here is some of the best in the world."