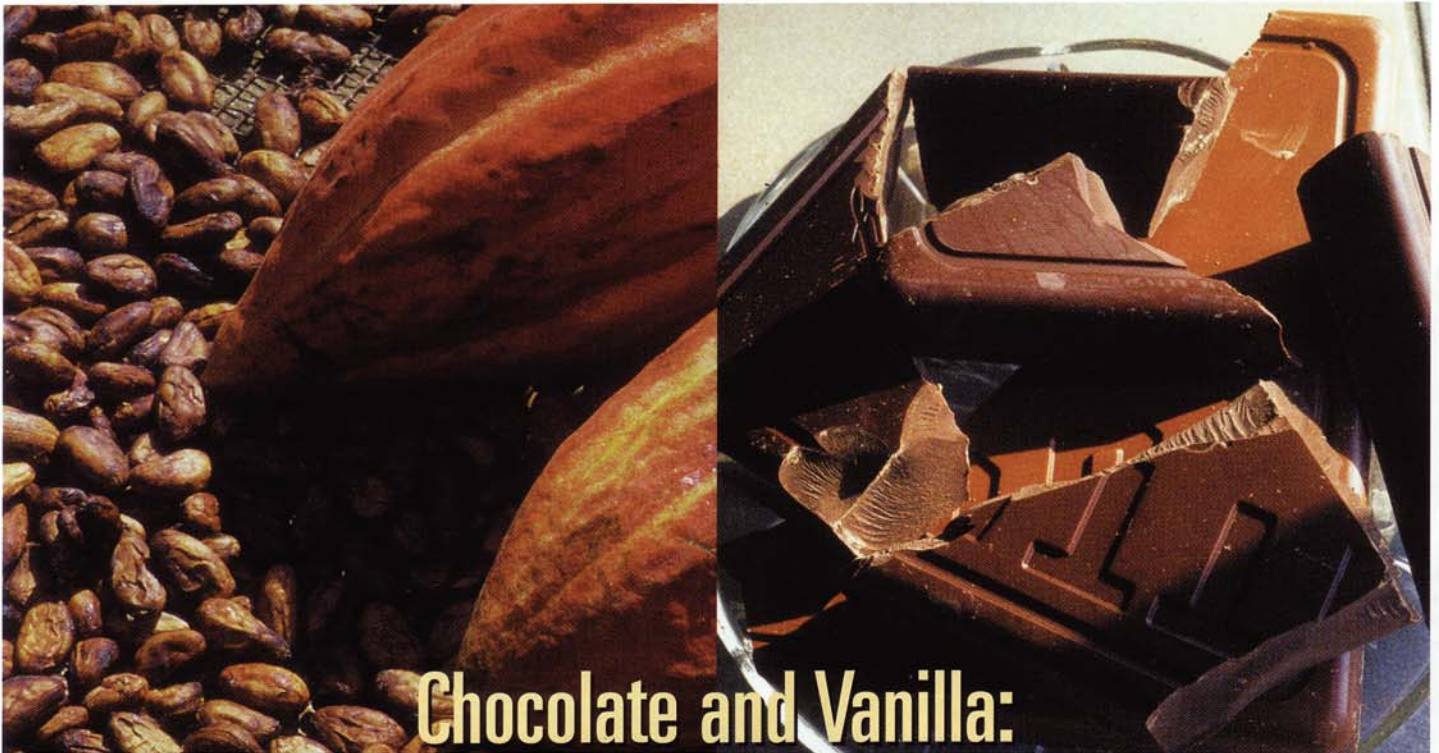


# Spirit of Aloha

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## Chocolate and Vanilla: Growing Flavors in Hawai'i

**H**awai'i's warm orchard lands, already abundant in buttery macadamia nuts and full-bodied coffee cherries, are bursting forth these days with colorful cacao pods and delicate vanilla beans, grown nowhere else in the United States. Like magnificent Christmas ornaments reminiscent of acorn squash, scarlet, orange, bright yellow, purple and rainbow-hued fruits dangle from the trunks of leafy chocolate trees. At 7 inches, not much different in appearance from a fat, store-bought green bean, tender, modest, green vanilla hides in fleshy orchid vines. From one crop big and glamorous, the other fragile and invisible, the first batches of velvet chocolate and fragrant vanilla are reaching chefs and stores this month.

As Hawai'i's farmers are searching to make the transition from massive sugar and pineapple plantations to diversified, uniquely Hawaiian products, vanilla and chocolate may well become the happiest conversion of them all. The soil and the temperature, as

much as the hunger of chefs and visitors for locally grown high-quality ingredients, push their success. But chocolate and vanilla, the youngest kids on Hawaiian farms, have more in common than perfect conditions. It takes pure passion, patience, devotion and commitment to extract their sweet, sunny flavors.

To make a business out of them? "Call it a leap of faith," says Bob Cooper, who, with his wife, Pam, owns Great Pacific Chocolate Co. in Keauhou on the Big Island. It's not that others before Cooper haven't tried chocolate, but they may have lacked sufficient knowledge. Anticipating what production entails, Cooper has been storing beans for three-and-a-half years from his 1-acre plantation of about 1,250 trees. Last fall, he poured his first test batch of chocolate — grown and made purely on Hawaiian soil, from pod to product, 500 pounds each of smooth bitter and milk chocolate candy bars. Now, the journey had begun.

"Believe me, when I came here, I didn't even know that chocolate came from trees!" Cooper grins.

He explains how, in early 1997, he and Pam took over 6 acres of sprawling Bishop Estate land that came with the home of their dreams, complete with peacock and sweeping vistas of the Kona shore. The coffee and macadamia nut trees on his new land were doing just fine, but the cacao, the odd crop that no one knew what to do with, was languishing with mature pods demanding to be snipped off trees and musty beans lying in forgotten sheds. Not knowing anything about them, Cooper felt driven to revitalize the 7-year-old orchard.

He explains: "We are from North Carolina. I was a general manager for an exclusive country club, Pam an office manager for a top-of-the-line jewelry store. We certainly weren't farmers. But I wanted to do things right, the Hawaiian way." And that meant: "To grow Hawaiian chocolate and to keep it pure."

Cooper now also has a contract to maintain and harvest cacao on a 10-acre lot near Kea'au on the Hilo side of the island and is encouraging other farmers to plant. He walks through his orchard, touching tiny blossoms and baby pods and says: "Unlike most beans grown elsewhere in the world, Hawaiian beans don't need blending. It's good chocolate."

That's quite a feat, when you consider what it takes to produce high-end chocolate, the kind that melts in your mouth. A farmer has to wait approximately three years for the trees to blossom. Throughout the year, from the thousands of tiny white blossoms, only a few hundred will set fruit. They are extremely sensitive to strong winds, sun and drought. It takes five months for the tiny fruits to mature. The bright jewel-like pods then need to be snipped and the beans extracted by hand. The fresh beans ferment in clean, untreated wooden boxes for seven days and dry in the sun on large, airy screens for another three to four weeks. Finally, they are ready for processing.

Cooper has transformed the agriculture sheds on his property into what he now calls "The Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory." No doubt it takes a visionary with a high tolerance for risk to install \$250,000 worth of equipment for a product that as yet is being grown in only minuscule amounts. The dry beans go straight from a cleaning contraption to a shining, green roaster resembling an old-fashioned locomotive engine. Temperatures are critical. "I burnt my very first batch," Cooper recalls. Once roasted, the beans are winnowed while aspirating tubes suck away shells. What's left is the nib, pure bean meat, ready to be made into chocolate liquor in

another gleaming machine known as a refiner conche. In the last phase — with the addition of cacao butter (another product made from the nib), sugar, whole milk powder (added only to milk chocolate), lecithin and vanilla — this liquor is transformed into the sweet indulgence we humans crave.

"We hold it at 118 to 120 degrees. It remains in liquid form," explains Cooper, his hands on a massive 2,000-pound, stainless steel, cylindrical holding tank. "When we are ready, the chocolate is tempered and pumped through a measuring machine into 1-pound molds. Simply hold the mold underneath it and vibrate out the air bubbles."

Voilà. Cooper shows the finished product in the holding room, a controlled pantry of sorts, kept at 54 degrees and 50 percent humidity — perfect, flat chocolate bars secure in gold foil and wrappers the color of the deep-red pods.

To be honest, there is no way that Bob and Pam Cooper could have created Hawai'i's first chocolate alone. Keith Greene, a quiet man weathered by years in the Navy and construction industry, built the factory, adding his own engineering feats. He operates the machinery and is key to the Coopers' success. But even he had no cocoa experience prior to this venture. "I couldn't even afford buying chocolate," he grins. "Yet I believe the future is in chocolate."

Chefs agree with Greene. Cathy Smoot-Barrett, president and chocolatier of Kailua Candy Co., was the first to use Cooper's chocolate back in October, with a Kona coffee mousse cake folded in an aphrodisiacal dark chocolate ganache. She says she would love to design an entire shelf with pure Hawaiian chocolates. Peter Merriman, ever passionate in his quest to encourage local farmers to supply restaurants with locally grown food, is thrilled. For his newest restaurant, Bamboo Bistro on Maui, as well as for his famous Merriman's on the Big Island, he already envisions "Hawaiian chocolate in its pure, plain form. Maybe dark truffles. I wouldn't want to mask it with too many other flavors."