



AINA HONUUA

CHOCOLATE IN PARADISE

BY JOAN NAMKOONG

Who doesn't love chocolate? And there's all the more reason to love chocolate produced in Hawaii.

Seven years ago, the first 100-percent-Hawaiian chocolate bar was produced in Kailua-Kona—a first not only for the state but for the nation, since Hawaii is the only place in the U.S. that grows cacao from which we derive chocolate. Hawaii is at the northern edge of the “chocolate-growing belt,” a region that extends 20 degrees north and south of the equator, a region that includes parts of Africa, South America and Indonesia.

Growing cacao in Hawaii has been going on since 1850. But it wasn't until the 1980s that it began in earnest on the island of Hawaii. The harvests were sold under the Hawaiian Vintage Chocolate brand, but unfortunately we were all led to believe that this was 100-percent-Hawaiian chocolate, which it was not.

In 1997 Bob and Pam Cooper “retired” to Hawaii Island from Raleigh, North Carolina, buying a house in Kona that had macadamia nut, coffee and cacao trees. Some moldy sacks of cacao beans piqued their interest and they began to research the possibility of producing a 100-percent-Hawaii-grown chocolate product. They were enamored with the notion and started the Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory, producing that first chocolate bar three years later.

There was a learning curve on growing and harvesting the cacao but it was the processing that presented a challenge: There

weren't a whole lot of cacao beans to process and equipment is sized for thousands of pounds. The Coopers hired consultants, invested in what equipment they could find, improvised by turning an old treadmill into a conveyor belt and employed coffee-roasting equipment. Piece by piece they built a processing facility that could take the fermented, dried cacao beans and convert them into luscious, delectable chocolate.

Determined to keep their product 100 percent Hawaii-grown, the Coopers have built a niche industry on Hawaii Island. About 60 farmers grow cacao for them in addition to the cacao they grow on their 6-acre farm. They do all their own processing, packaging and marketing.

In recent months they have introduced a new product: a 100-percent-Hawaii-grown Kona Grand Cru Criollo chocolate bar. Criollo is considered a premium, finer chocolate variety than the Forastero that is used in their dark and milk chocolate bars. You can find the Coopers' products in a number of retail outlets throughout the state; for a list go to



www.originalhawaiianchocolatefactory.com.