



Candyman Bob Cooper and his wife Pam harvest pods (below) from 1,300 cacao trees to create their confections.



photos by Peter French

BIG ISLAND

Cooper and the Chocolate Factory

Eight hundred feet up the slope of Hualālai volcano in Kona, dry leaves crackle beneath Bob Cooper's feet as he steps up to a tree in his cacao orchard and points out an oblong green pod growing from the trunk.

"As this ripens, it'll turn yellow, then we'll slice it open and get the beans," says Cooper, who runs The Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory, the only company in the United States to make chocolate entirely from scratch, from cacao pod to candy wrapper.

Beside the orchard sits a tiny processing facility, which Cooper suspects might be the smallest chocolate factory in the world. And, since both his dark and milk varieties retail for a whopping \$40 per pound, they might be the world's priciest. Still, more than a dozen Island merchants carry them, and a handful of restaurants have embraced them, too.

Mama's Fish House on Maui puts Cooper's chocolate in its Classic Kū'au Pie. The Hukilau Lanai in Kapa'a uses it in its Volcano Cake. Merriman's in Kamuela uses it in a *pot de crème*, and chef Alan Wong plans to include it in a chocolate sampler at the Four Seasons Resort Hualālai. Some 5,000 miles east, an upstate New York resort called The Sagamore uses it in its Kona Cake and in its Hawaiian Chocolate Martini (four pounds melted chocolate to one quart vodka, per batch).

Restaurants aren't the only places where the Big Island's boutique chocolate gets put to creative use. The Maui Wellness Institute has found a place for it in its menu of alternative practices (aromatherapy, chakra balancing and now "chocology"). Institute head Jim Polakof extols the health aspects of chocolate (vitamins, antioxidants, the "good" cholesterol) and claims that the choices people make about chocolate reveal personality traits (dark chocolate people are problem solvers, chocolate-with-coconut people are ready for adventure, milk chocolate people like sex). "It falls in line with astrology and things of that nature," Polakof says. "You wouldn't want to stake your life on it. But it's amazing how many people say, 'You really identified my personality!'" —David Thompson