

ISLAND LIVING

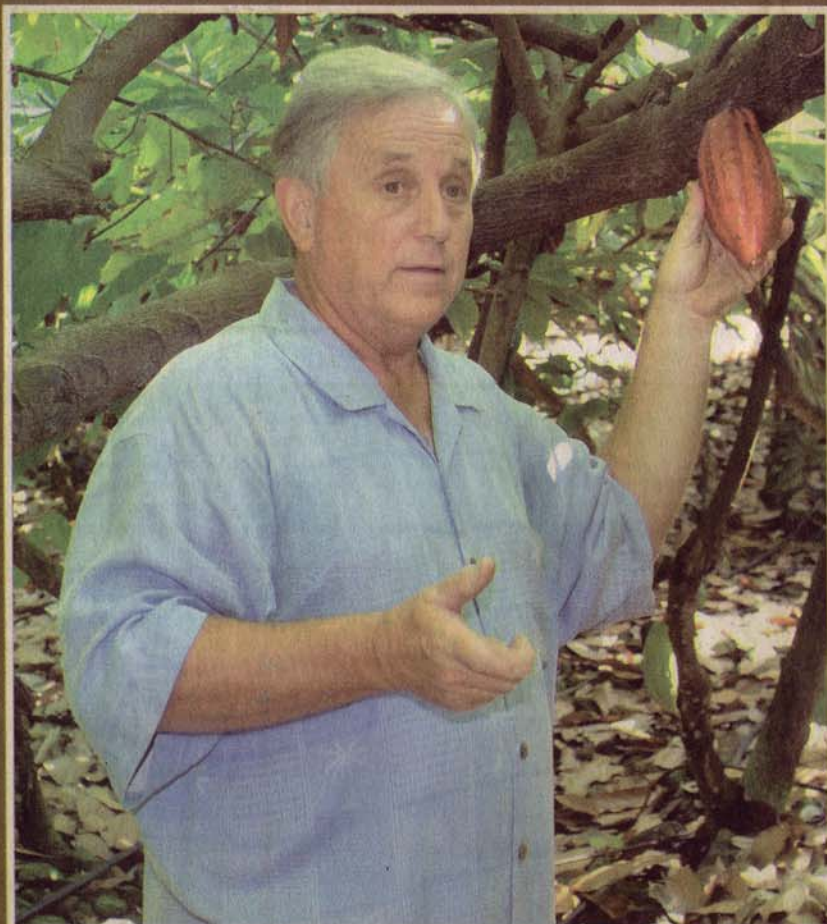
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The tempering machine mixes liquid chocolate, both milk and dark, while lowering the temperature from 120 degrees to 86 degrees. This is the final stage in the development of the flavor of chocolate.

PHOTOS BY LAURA SHIMABUKU | SPECIAL TO WEST HAWAII TODAY

Chocolate Origins



Bob Cooper, owner of the Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory, displays a cacao pod ready to be harvested Aug. 1 at the farm.

BY MITCHELL BYARS
WEST HAWAII TODAY

FARMERS KNOW A MARKET WHEN THEY see one, and some are saying that cacao — the main ingredient in chocolate — could be Hawaii's next sweet deal.

Greg Colden remembers the first time he saw a cacao tree. After moving to the Big Island from California in 2003, Colden was walking through the five-acre Holualoa farm he had just purchased on the Big Island when he stumbled across a patch of 250 cacao trees.

"I just fell in love with them. They are just magical."

Five years later, the 250 trees have become 1,800, and the name of Colden's farm is now Kokolekalani — "chocolate heaven."

That term could soon apply to the whole Big Island, and cacao may join the long list of agricultural products that have thrived in the islands. Many farmers around the state are stumbling upon the fruit — sometimes literally.

Like Colden, Bob and Pam Cooper had no intention of going into cacao farming when they moved to the Big Island in 1997. But when they inspected the farm they bought, they found the cacao trees already growing there. Not wanting to waste the trees, they hired a consultant and dove headfirst into the chocolate business, and The Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory was born.

"We had no intention of doing chocolate, but the trees were here," said Bob. "When we got here, we didn't do any feasibility tests or excel charts. If we did we would have ran the other way. We were not in danger of making any money for six years. But we turned the corner."

Hawaii remains one of the few places in the United States where cacao can be grown and the only state that farms them commercially.

"This is the only place in America where cacao will grow for cultivating," said Cooper. "There are some hobbyists in Florida and California but not enough to cultivate. Most large chocolate companies contract growers and import their beans. We grow and process our beans. We use only 100 percent Hawaiian grown cocoa beans, the first Hawaiian bean chocolate."

Cacao was first discovered in South America and grows well in areas near the equator. A rainforest tree, the cacao needs ample rain and canopy cover to produce fruit and is most successfully grown in Central and South America and parts of Northern Africa. There are three types of cacao used to make chocolate. The Forastero is the most common variety and is used in



Cacao beans are seen drying in the sun Aug. 1 at the Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory.

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Above: Baskets of assorted chocolates available at the Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory. **Right:** Cacao beans are seen drying Aug. 1 in the sun at the Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory.



PHOTOS BY LAURA SHIMABUKU
SPECIAL TO WEST HAWAII TODAY

► CACAO: 'We feel like cacao is going to be the next big agricultural business in ... Hawaii'

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80 percent of the world's chocolate. Criollo is the most expensive and coveted of the three varieties, while the Trinitario is a hybrid of Forastero and Criollo.

Since pods do not drop off the trees, pods must be cut from the trees when harvested. While there are peak seasons, trees produce pods year-round and each pod contains anywhere from 20 to 60 individual beans.

Once harvested, the beans are sweated — where the thick pulp surrounding the bean ferments and liquefies — for eight days and dried out in the sun for about a month. Once the seeds are cleaned, they are then roasted and sent through a winnower, which removes the husk and breaks the beans into smaller pieces. They then go through conching — where the beans are ground up into a liquor and other ingredients are mixed in — and are then slowly cooled down to be poured into molds.

The true challenge for a small chocolate factory comes in the processing. While large companies can devote hundreds of thousands of square feet to their processing plants, the Coopers have 1,152 square feet — and 435 more on the way — and a smaller budget to work with. Many of the Cooper's machines had to be specially made to fit into their processing shed and their budget.

"We're not exactly Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory,"

said Cooper.

Never the less, the Coopers believe that chocolate can be a staple of Hawaii's agricultural scene. In addition to their own acre of trees, the Coopers currently have 65 growers across the state — including Colden — who either sell them cacao beans or have planted trees and are planning to sell once the trees come to fruition.

"We feel like cacao is going to be the next big agricultural business in the state of Hawaii," said Pam. "It can be as big as pineapple or sugar cane. It grows well on small family farms. Most of the farmers we have already had farms. We just encourage them to diversify."

The local farmers think that chocolate can be established in a way similar to Kona coffee. While larger companies will always be more adept at creating cheaper blends, Cooper says that Hawaiian chocolate can be sold as a specialty chocolate with a unique flavor that cannot be found anywhere else.

"We can't compete with the big companies," said Pam. "We have to create a niche market for our chocolate."

"There is a huge future with (chocolate)," added Colden. "There are a lot of small (chocolate groups) on the mainland who are interested in blending beans. They are moving forward and getting involved with Hawaiian chocolate."

Hawaii Cacao Chapter

President Gini Choobua says that the industry needs more processors to start buying beans and making chocolate.

"The main difficulty for growers right now is market. The genetics are all very promising in terms of quality and taste. We need people to buy beans. If the interest is real, it

encourages farmers to plant more trees and more people to grow cacao."

Colden believes that cacao needs to be a diverse product for it to succeed. Colden, who co-owns Kona Natural Soap Co., makes cocoa soaps with the bean husks left behind by the winnowing process and also sells the raw beans — which

are edible — for people to eat.

"We need more value added products," he said. "We need to think outside of the box. We need to look at many different alternatives to just making chocolate. If cacao is to succeed, we need alternative food products from it."

Despite the challenges,

Bob Cooper thinks the industry is here to stay "if it is done responsibly."

"It's amazing how the industry has evolved into a modern industry. Making chocolate is no secret. The process for making chocolate is the same around the world. It's just the quality of the beans and the ingredients."