Hawaiian delight

From plantation to confectionery, island chocolate is sweet success • By Eric Lucas

One must look closely to detect differences between the two handcrafted chocolate bars on the counter in Derek Lanter's O'ahu North Shore test kitchen. Is one a slightly darker shade of plum? Does the other have a modest gossamer blush, like hoarfrost at dawn? Aside from such distinctions, both pieces of chocolate seem identical, rich ingots the size of a toddler's hand, bearing the distinctive deep glint of high-percentage cacao, a gleam like that in old rubies.

"Hard to tell the difference by looking," says Lanter, manager of Waialua Estate Coffee and Chocolate. "Let's get into tasting and see what we find out."

Tasting chocolate, it turns out, is a process almost as exacting and elaborate as tasting wine or coffee. First we each break off a small bit and hold it in our hands a minute, warming it. Then we carefully rub our thumbs over the surface, releasing the aroma. Then we each pop our chunk into our mouth, letting it melt. "You don't just chew and swallow, you experience the chocolate and savor it," Lanter says, smiling at the self-evident absurdity of this notion.

For me, at least, this demands more monkish restraint than I have on hand, and down goes the chocolate. Same for the next piece. Aside from the wondrous, hearty taste of high-quality dark chocolate, what stands out most is the profound difference between the two bars. Processed exactly the same, the cacao for each comes from two orchards just 20 miles apart. One chocolate piece, from O'ahu's windward shore, smells of sour cherries and tastes of pecans; the other, from the Waialua Estate orchard, just outside the window, that Lanter manages for the Dole Food Company Hawai'i, has just a light aroma, like petunias, but a powerful taste, as of dried plums.

"Astounding, isn't it?" Lanter takes huge delight in our discovery, which is an apt metaphor for the Hawaiian Islands' nascent homegrown chocolate industry. Here, along the shores of Earth's most remote major island chain, a tropical delight grown

Opposite: Cacao seed pods, hanging from cacao tree trunks, ripen year-round.
Top: Derek Lanter, of Waialua Estate, checks the bean-drying process.
Below: Plump beans in the pod, before they are husked and placed on drying racks.

MONICA SCHWARTZ

Sweet Paradise chocolates are as artful as they are flavorful.

around the world is enjoying a 21st century renaissance that fans believe will make it the next big thing in the Islands, a worthy addition to the coffee, pineapple and macadamias for which Hawai‘i is now known.

To say the idea is nascent is putting it mildly. Hawai‘i, 21 degrees north of the equator, is at the most northerly edge of cacao production, which typically takes place within 10 degrees north or south latitude. Though cacao originated in South and Central America, it is one of the most widely traded agricultural commodities across the planet, with annual global production of around 5 million tons from 360 million acres of orchard, the vast majority of which is in West Africa.

By comparison, Hawai‘i currently produces approximately 38,600 pounds of cacao on 43 acres at about two dozen farms. And almost half of those acres are at Lanter's 20-acre O‘ahu orchard—which makes it the largest cacao farm in the United States, inasmuch as Hawai‘i is the only state in which cacao is grown commercially.

Although the Islands seem blessedly balmy to the 8.3 million visitors who travel here each year, they are challengingly cool for cacao producers. The trees grow fine, but the cacao bean–fermentation process that follows the harvest can be impeded by nighttime chill in many Hawai‘i locales. Yes, "chill." The beans ferment best at steady temperatures around 85 degrees; temps in the 60s are common throughout the Islands after dark, and most producers must insulate and heat their fermentation bins.

"Hawai‘i is the North Pole of the cacao world," says University of Hawai‘i horticulturist H.C. "Skip" Bittenbender, a cacao advocate at the College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources who has been working for years to establish an artisan-chocolate industry in the Islands. Yet the state's latitude also can be seen as an advantage, he says.

Quite simply, the advantage consists of those two magical qualities that have so much heft in the wine industry—terroir and cachet. The first is more concrete than the second: Cacao, like grapes and coffee, tastes different depending on the soil and climate where it is grown. Witness the two chocolates Derek Lanter made. One came from a wetter site with more rugged, volcanic ground; his Waialua orchard is in a drier location, on bottomland soil in a small valley about a half mile from the ocean.

As for cachet, American travelers and gourmets are heartily embracing the wonders of locally produced foods, whether reindeer meat in Alaska or chiles in New Mexico. Adding to that mix one of the

From Tree to Truffle

The process that turns cacao pods into a universally beloved treat is as complex as wine making. Although the exact procedure varies from one maker to another, these are the key usual steps:

- Once planted, cacao trees take 3 to 5 years before they begin bearing.
- The bean-bearing pods, roughly a foot long, are harvested as they become ready, which is a continuous, year-round process for most varieties.
- Workers break open the pods and strip out the seed-bearing pulp.
- The pulp and seeds are fermented in closed boxes or bins for 3 to 5 days.
- The pulp is removed, and the seeds are sun-dried for up to two weeks.
- The resulting "beans" are roasted, much like coffee.
- The beans are separated from their light shells in a winnowing machine.
- The bean pieces, called nibs, may be treated with alkali for flavor development.
- Nibs are emulsified in a "conching" machine.
- Larger manufacturers separate out the fat, called cocoa butter; this is what white chocolate is made from.
- Cocoa liquor and butter are blended with other ingredients, such as sugar, vanilla, nuts and fruits, then solidified into bars, truffles or candies. —*E.L.*

STEELGRASS FARM (2)

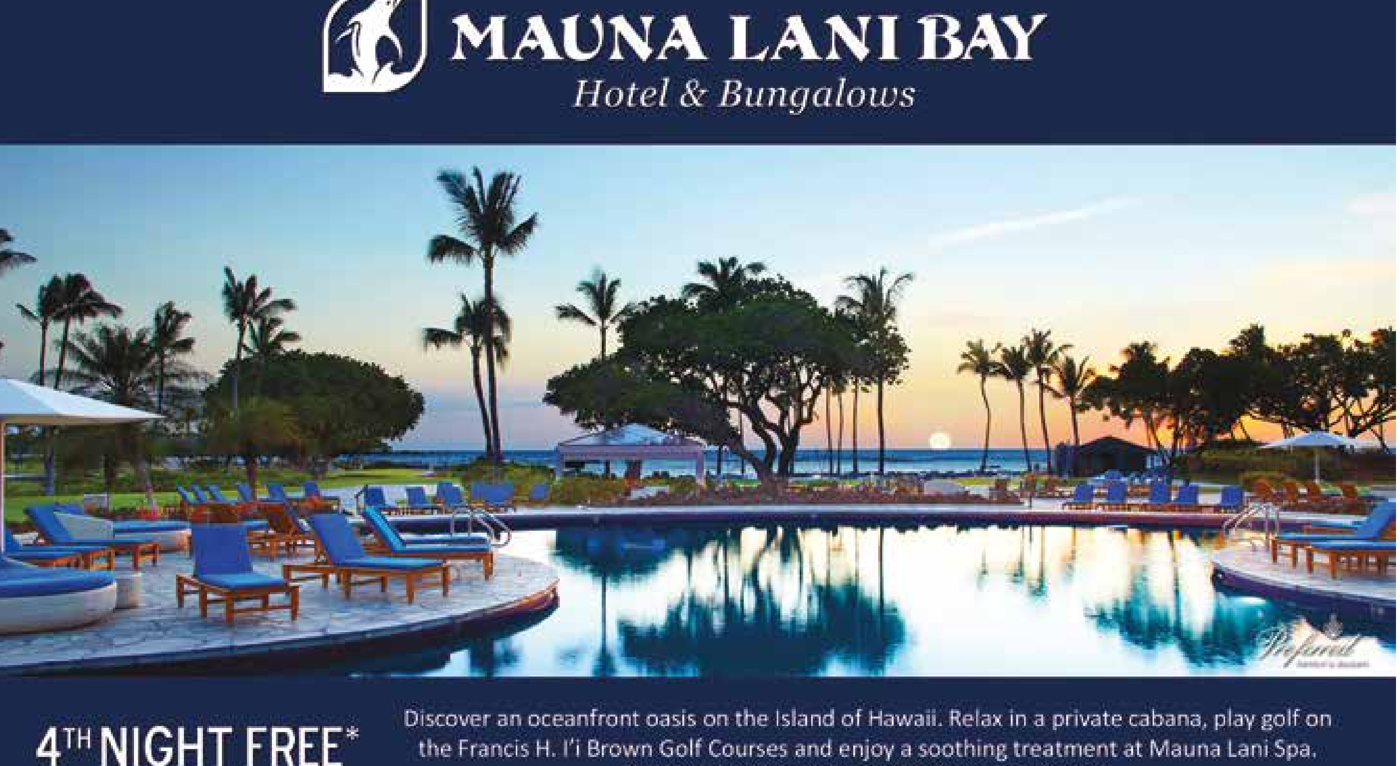
Ripe cacao pods are harvested at Steelgrass Farm on Kaua'i. Inside the pods (right), seeds are encased in pulp.

world's most treasured treats is a natural for Hawai'i. What could be more appropriate than a food that's delicious, healthful, beloved and valuable? The Aztecs used cacao beans as currency and were amused when Spanish conquistadors came seeking gold and snubbed cacao. So far there are just a handful of chocolate makers relying on Island-grown cacao, and all of them fervently believe in a successful future.

"The same unique growing conditions—the lava landscape, the climate, the salt air—that work so well for coffee in the Islands are equally beneficial for cacao," says Robert Dye, whose Waimea Chocolate Company on Maui has already won a few prizes for its candies and truffles. Dye uses exclusively Island-grown cacao (and macadamia nuts), and says he welcomes new entrants in the field who will help raise the visibility of Hawai'i chocolate.

"I just got back from Belgium, visiting producers there, and our Island chocolate is as good as any in the world," he says.

While Dye's confectionery uses cacao grown for it on O'ahu (at Waialua Estate), other Hawaiian Islands producers are planting or utilizing their own trees so they may enjoy what Bittenbender calls one of the key distinctions of Hawai'i chocolate: the chance to taste what you grow. In all of Africa's vast cacao lands, for example, there is just one company that processes cacao



and makes fine chocolate for the retail market. Most of the world's cacao growers simply harvest the pods and ship them off to processors, most of them in Europe. Most processors then ship raw cocoa liquor to chocolate makers large and small in almost every country. Condensing this massive global industry to a neighborhood enterprise is a worthy task, but not so simple.

In Hawai'i Island's Kona district, long known for coffee production, Bob and Pam Cooper bought a 6-acre farm with cacao, macadamia and coffee trees, but no ready means for using the cacao. So they established their own small processing plant, creating fermentation boxes for the pods they harvest year-round, building sheltered sun-drying racks, and enlisting engineers to design small-batch machines for roasting the beans, separating the shells from the beans, and refining the resulting cocoa nibs into liquor and cocoa butter—the process is called "conching." The Coopers' first chocolate came on the market in 2000, making their Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory a true pioneer in the Islands.

> Neither of the Coopers intended to become a chocolate producer. "We feel like the chocolate had a plan for us," Pam explains.

Neither intended to become a chocolate producer—they just bought a nice property overlooking the Kona Coast that happened to have coffee, cacao and macadamia trees.

"We feel like the chocolate had a plan for us," Pam explains.

Their orchard, now almost two decades old, rests on a rising slope northeast of the processing facility they have built. Cacao, like coffee, prefers to grow in partial shade. On the Kona slopes, that shade is provided not by overstory trees

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but by the reliable arrival of midday clouds that form on the slopes of Hualālai, the extinct 8,271-foot volcano that adjoins Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa. Like many fruit trees, the 20-foot-tall cacao trees seem to gather sunshine and refract it into an apricot light that transforms the orchard into a van Gogh–like canvas, even though the trees themselves are planted rather close to each other, on 10-foot centers, with their branches brushing each other.

"Cacao are social trees," explains Pam Cooper. "They like to hold hands."

While the Coopers grow and process their own cacao, and make it into finished chocolate, other members of the Islands' burgeoning industry simply prefer to be orchardists. Tony Lydgate, on Kaua'i's east shore, tried several different crops on his family's 8.5-acre farm before settling on cacao. Today he has 150 mature trees, and is growing or planting thousands more on his own

By the Numbers

- Global retail chocolate sales, 2012: $107 billion.
- In the U.S., 400 chocolate makers produce 1.6 billion pounds of chocolate worth $12 billion a year.
- The U.S. is the world's largest single chocolate market—but Switzerland leads in per capita consumption, at about 20 pounds a year.
- About 70 percent of the world's cacao is produced in Africa; leading countries are Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon.
- Cacao contains many alkaloids, such as caffeine and theobromine, the substance usually credited with producing the euphoric effect of chocolate. —*E.L.*

ground and a property next door. The tours he conducts of his orchards are designed not only to entertain and educate visitors, but also to encourage other islanders to plant their own trees. In addition to the two dozen or so already-producing farms, another roughly equal number of farms plan to begin harvesting over the next few years.

Bittenbender believes the industry will one day mature into a larger set of growers, many of those with just a few acres, and a lot of bean-to-bar chocolate makers. There's no shortage of candidates to perform both functions. Aside from simple horticulture, cacao-pod

> "This is a happy business," says Maui confectioner Melanie Boudar. "Ever met anyone who dislikes chocolate? Me neither."

production is relatively simple: the trees mature pods year-round, and the crop can be picked regularly (once a week, say), thus obviating high labor needs. The Coopers, for instance, still largely handle harvest themselves—walk out in the orchard, look for the deep-yellow or bright-red ripe pods, pluck them off the tree.

And, as both producers and growers, they are among the many cacao adherents who have come into the industry from one end or the other, and decided to broaden their scope.

"When you share something you're passionate about, people respond," says Melanie Boudar, a Maui confectioner who has planted 200 cacao trees on a slope along the Hāna Highway and hopes to open a roadside tasting room in the next few years for her Sweet Paradise chocolate brand.

"This is a happy business. Ever met anyone who dislikes chocolate? Me neither," Boudar points out.

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Though she is currently using imported chocolate for her high-style, beautifully decorated confections (Boudar's background is in high-fashon jewelry design), her trees will soon begin bearing, and she eagerly anticipates the time visitors can pull to the side of the

Homegrown Chocolate in Hawai'i

Hawai'i's young chocolate industry has only a few retail locations where visitors can taste—and buy—bars and confections made with Island cacao:

• Waialua Estate Coffee and Chocolate: About an hour's drive north of Honolulu, in the small town of Waialua, is the retail shop Island X Hawai'i, housed in a colorful former warehouse. Visitors can sample many Island products, including chocolate, coffee, fruit preserves and cigars; waialuaestate.com.

• Madre Chocolate Company: With outlets in Honolulu and Kailua on O'ahu, this company offers a wide range of gourmet chocolate bars featuring Hawaiian cacao, some with other ingredients, such as ginger, macadamias and *liliko'i* (passion fruit); madrechocolate.com.

• Mānoa Chocolate: Also in Kailua, this company offers bean-to-bar chocolate using Island-grown cacao and ingredients such as lavender, goat milk and chiles; manoachocolate.com.

• Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory: Poised on the lower slopes of Hawai'i Island's Kona district, this small farm and processing facility is open for tours by appointment; the on-site shop offers a wide selection of chocolate bars and candies; ohcf.us. —*E.L.*

road and sample chocolate from an orchard just a few feet away.

The Hāna Highway exemplifies another advantage Skip Bittenbender identifies for Hawai'i chocolate. Unlike the Third World locales in which most of the planet's cacao is grown—the globe's leading producer is West Africa's Ivory Coast—the Islands enjoy an established infrastructure of roads, domestic services such as water and electricity, and business services such as banks and telecommunications. If Hawai'i is 20 degrees cooler than some West African locales

> "We quickly sell every bar made from island cacao, and we could easily sell 50 percent more," explains Carley Miller, chocolatier at Madre.

where cacao is grown, processors can easily solve the problem by heating their fermentation bins. If a fuse blows on the heating system, the processor can hop in a car, drive to a local hardware store and buy a replacement.

These ready advantages lead some Hawai'i chocolate entrepreneurs to deflect remarks about any supposed courage they are exercising. After all, the end product is one of the world's most-sought gourmet treats. The Seattle metro area, for example, boasts at least two dozen artisan chocolatiers (none of which use Hawai'i cacao, yet), with like numbers in other West Coast cities. So the cultural window for artisan chocolate is already well established.

"I don't know if I'd call myself a pioneer. Let's just say I saw this wagon train heading out and decided to hop on board," says Robert Dye, who also operates a confectionery, Ladybug Chocolates in Oregon (using Belgian chocolate).

So did the founders of Madre Chocolate, an O'ahu bean-to-bar company in Kailua whose products are derived about

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half from Island cacao grown on O'ahu and Hawai'i Island—the other chocolate coming from elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere because new production in the Islands has yet to meet demands.

"We quickly sell every bar made from Island cacao, and we could easily sell 50 percent more," explains Carley Miller, chocolatier at Madre. Like other Island chocolate makers, Madre makes a point of including iconic Hawai'i ingredients, such as *liliko'i* (passion fruit) and coconut milk, in its bars. Sometimes, Miller says, the company trades chocolate for ingredients—just the sort of easygoing approach to commerce one would expect in the Islands. Not that anyone is approaching this new industry as a lark; Hawai'i cacao pioneers are fervent believers that theirs is the next big thing in the Islands.

As Skip Bittenbender points out, the market is ready-made.

"Americans love chocolate. And in Hawai'i we have 8 million visitors a year who all want to bring home some-

Sweet Celebrations

• The Big Island Chocolate Festival brings gourmets, producers and fans to the Fairmont Orchid, May 7–9. Workshops, farm tours and a wrap-up feast are event highlights; bigislandchocolatefestival.com.

• The sweet party continues at the Hawai'i Chocolate Festival on O'ahu, October 17. Expect more cooking classes, tastings and feasts; hawaiichocolatefestival.com.

• Widely considered the nation's top artisan chocolate gathering, the Northwest Chocolate Festival returns to Seattle, October 4–5, drawing chocolatiers from Hawai'i, the West Coast and beyond; nwchocolate.com. —*E.L.*

thing from the Islands."

Those visitors spend more than $14 billion in the Islands each year. Furthermore, Hawaiian chocolate is as distinctive as any artisan product anywhere in the United States.

COURTESY: PRODUCE TO PRODUCE

COURTESY: ORIGINAL HAWAIIAN CHOCOLATE FACTORY

Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory's bars (top) are produced from the company's own orchards, driers and processing facilities on Hawai'i Island.

"We're pioneering something special here," says Derek Lanter. "We can honestly say this is not only a rare single-origin product—it's the rarest chocolate in the whole world."

Eric Lucas is contributing editor.

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