

# Hawaiian Coffee Primer

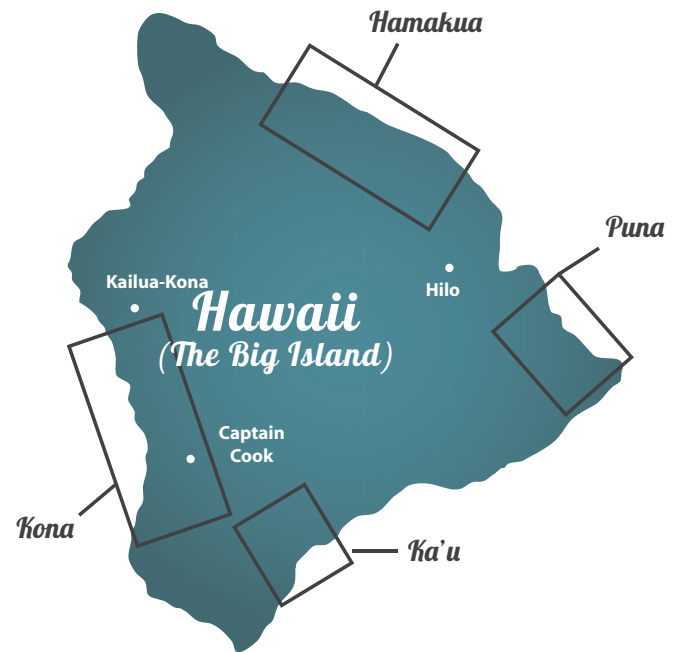
BY SHAWN STEIMAN

We'll never know what vision Chief Boki, John Wilkinson and Andrew Bloxam had for coffee when they brought 30 plants to Honolulu on May 6, 1825, from Brazil. Any dream of a plantation would take over a decade to be realized, on Kaua'i, only to fail after a few years. By that time, however, coffee had found its way to every island and many people in many regions took a chance at building a new industry.

Fortunately, they succeeded, and coffee has been an established crop in Hawaii ever since. It hasn't been all joy and success, though. For most of its time in Hawaii, coffee has ridden the rollercoaster of world prices, bringing with it the too-well-known busts and booms of coffee production worldwide. In addition, coffee had to compete with other crops for agricultural land, particularly with sugar. In fact, a massive worldwide price crash in 1899, and the enormous profitability of sugarcane nearly eliminated coffee production from Hawaii. The only region that continued commercial production through the present day was Kona, on the Big Island. Thus, for almost a century, one tiny coffee region in a tiny coffee origin had the opportunity to excel and build a shining, global reputation for itself, without any competition from nearby regions. In that time, the Kona industry modernized when possible and worked hard to maintain a positive reputation and desirable cup quality.

By the middle of the 20th century, nearly all coffee farmers in Kona were cherry farmers—estate farming was still decades away. Farmers grew and harvested coffee cherries and sold them to one of the few large mills operating in the area. A side effect of having only a few mills in the region was that the coffee became homogenized by the blending, producing a fairly standard cup profile that the region became known for. Over the next few decades, prices for green Kona coffee began diverging from global prices, earning higher and higher amounts per pound.

In the 1980s, sugarcane's demise in Hawaii was imminent, and large agricultural companies began planning their diversification with coffee.



Concurrently, specialty coffee was beginning to hit its stride, and some farmers in Kona began converting into estates, whereby they maintained control and ownership of their coffee at every stage of production, from growing to roasting and even marketing. Moreover, the romance and adventure of farming coffee in Kona began to attract people who had been successful in other parts of their lives and were ready to completely or semi-retire from their previous lives.

With the rise of the estate farm came the dissolution of the Kona flavor profile. Individual farmers, meticulous about quality, suddenly had the opportunity to manipulate their coffee with processing and roasting; two adjacent farms could create two different coffees. Of course, it also meant there were more opportunities for things to go wrong with the coffee. After all, farming alone is difficult. Processing, storing and roasting each bring challenges that, if not met, can detrimentally affect quality.

By the end of the 20th century, coffee farming began to return to other regions in Hawaii, in addition to the locations where the four big agricultural companies had planted. All these new farms were small with intentions of being estate operations. Today, there are 10 geographical regions on five islands growing coffee! Of the 830 coffee farms currently in Hawaii, this author estimates 450–500 are estate farms and the remainder, nearly all of which are in Kona, are cherry farms.

Even with so many estate farms in Hawaii, only two regions seem to be well known throughout the specialty coffee industry: Kona and Ka'u. Why is it these are the only two well known regions? How did they earn their reputations? What's the prospect for the other regions?

Before these questions can be answered, a brief digression about quality must be made. There are many ways one can define high quality coffee. Uber-geeky specialty coffee folk tend to define high quality as brews that contain acidity, complexity, intense body, and little to no roast character (third-wave coffees, hereafter). Other coffee drinkers often shy away from such brews and seek out simpler, less acidic, coffee-flavored coffees which often include roast character from darker roast profiles. These drinkers tend to disagree that third-wave coffees are, in fact, high quality. Many drinkers, perhaps the largest consumer segment, define quality coffee as a caffeine carrier that is very affordable, easily accessible, and reminiscent of what has been available to them for decades. These

These drinkers can barely fathom the fuss about specialty coffee.

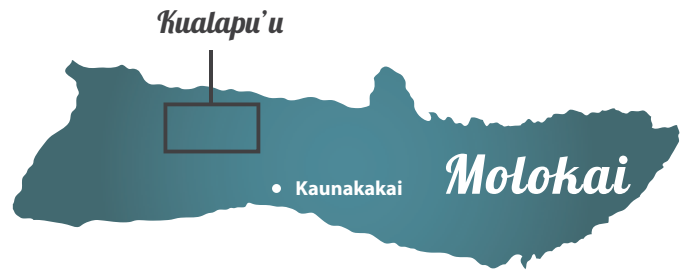
Given any definition of quality, one can graphically represent the number of coffees or, in this case, farms that match that definition. That graph can be constructed by denoting the x-axis as coffee quality with the left side being poorer quality (least like the stated definition) and the line progressing to the right, which indicates a progression to higher quality coffees, according to the definition. The y-axis represents the number of the farms that match a given quality along that x-axis. The resulting graph will take on the shape of a typical bell-curve. There will be two tails that represent the extremes (very poor and very good coffees) with

### ***Work and the perseverance of the farmers created some admirable third wave coffees.***

a hump in the middle that represents the typical (average) quality. This “bell curve of quality” will likely be an accurate representation of any set of farms from any growing region or origin.

It isn't much of a surprise that Kona is well known in specialty coffee. As the only region in the origin for nearly a century, Kona was synonymous with Hawaii coffee. The well-above-average price it has commanded for decades has also helped keep it in the mind of all consumers. That high price haunted Kona in the mid-1990s with the famous Kona Kai scandal. A Kona businessman was purchasing Central American coffees, rebagging them, and then selling them as Kona. This scandal was well covered by the specialty coffee press helping to put the region under the microscope. Conversations about the high price of Kona coffee relative to its average cup quality became prominent. Those grumbings still exist today and may even be louder than ever.

This question of Kona coffee cup quality can only be understood in light of what definition is used and the bell curve of quality. Most Kona coffee is specialty coffee in that it caters to a smaller market of drinkers who appreciate its simplicity in the cup, its tendency to be defect-free, and its cache. By the third wave coffee definition, Kona rarely hits the mark. However, that doesn't mean third wave Kona coffees don't exist. If nothing else, Pete Licata's big win proves that. Rather, third wave Kona coffees are rare—they are the tail on the far right of the bell curve. The hump of the curve doesn't aim to please coffee geeks, rather, it caters to a different market.

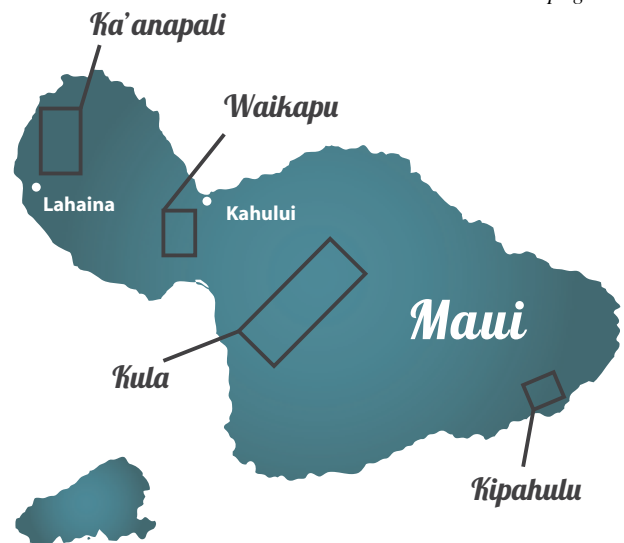
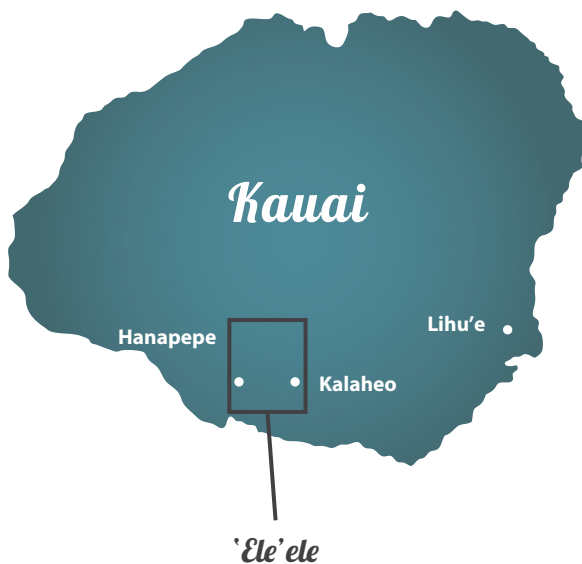


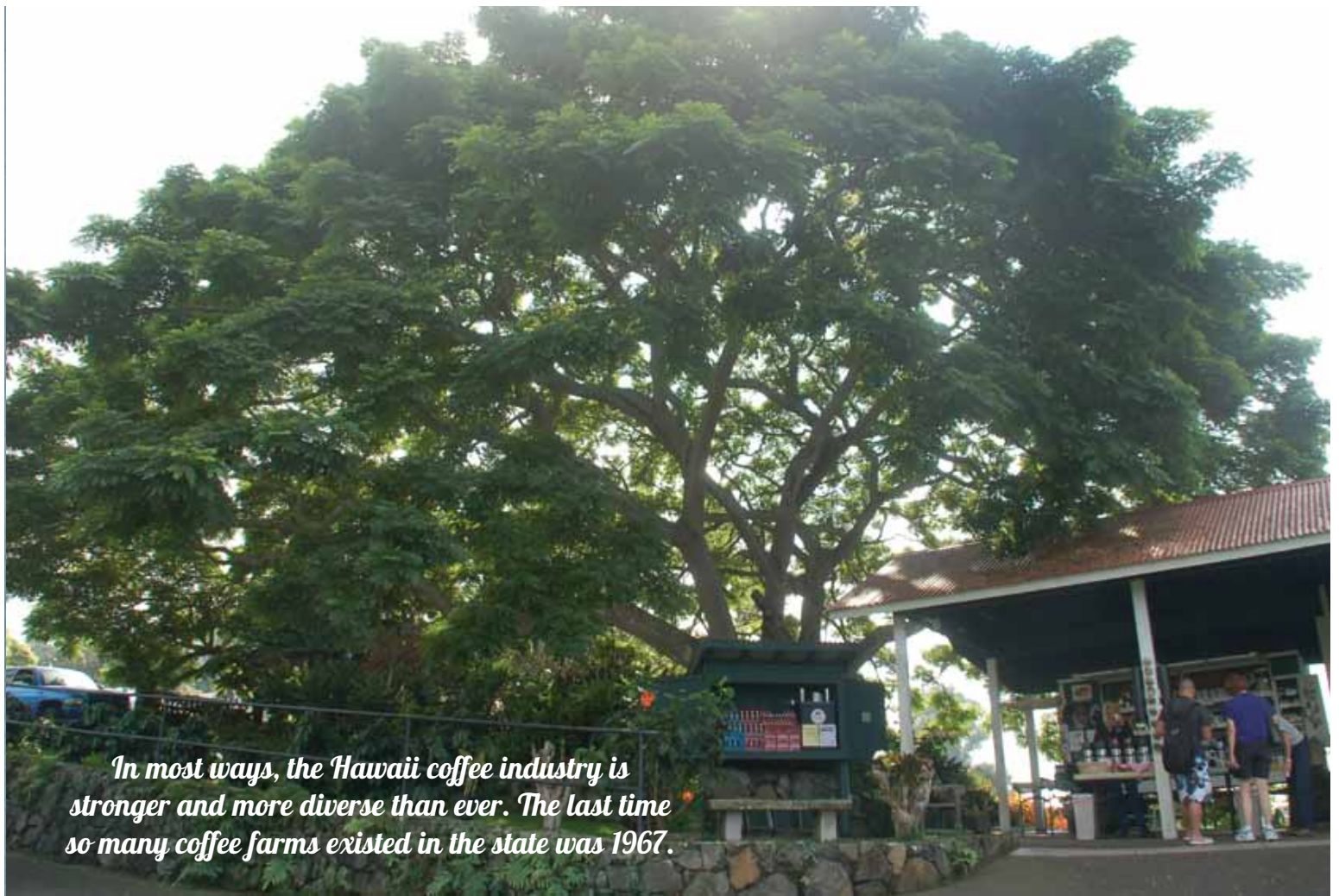
There are third wave coffees in Kona. Unfortunately, they tend to not be marketed well, are not recognized as such by the farmer, or are not sought after by roasters. Kona farmers have been slow to engage the specialty coffee community and participate in workshops, retreats and competitions like the Roaster Guild's Coffee of the Year (COTY). More farmers are beginning to appreciate the third wave market and are striving to create and market appropriate coffee for it. There are several leaders in this and only with the support and attention of third wave roasters and consumers will these and other coffees be able to shift the quality and reputation of Kona coffee to one that supports the third wave mentality.

While Kona has been struggling to demonstrate value to the modern coffee geek, the reborn region of Ka'u has stumbled into a success beyond its wildest dreams. It is now a darling of the specialty coffee industry, winning accolades and contracts around the world. It seems as if young Ka'u, which is not geographically too far from Kona, has snuck up on and surpassed its much older brother.

About a decade after the Ka'u region began growing coffee again, the major landowner sponsored a dozen or so coffees for submission to the 2007 COTY competition. Delightfully, one farm scored very high and surprised many people that year, most of whom had never heard of Ka'u before. Later that year, the landowner hired some consultants to help out some farmers in Ka'u. One of them, so enamored with the coffee and the place, managed to get hired on as a roaster and consultant for a new farm in Kona. When not helping to build the reputation for that Kona farm, the roaster trekked to Ka'u to voluntarily work with the farmers in that region. That work and the perseverance of the farmers created some admirable third wave coffees.

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As we've seen in Kona, simply having good coffee isn't enough to generate a great reputation. What propelled Ka'u to fame was its persistence in marketing. Much of that marketing came in the form of the many connections the roaster/consultant had within the mainland specialty coffee industry. Farmers in the region continued to enter cupping competitions, where some scored well or even won. Of course, Pete Licata and his United States Barista Championship/World Barista Championship competition coffee has done a great deal to promote the region, as well.

Are coffees from Ka'u better than those from Kona? No. A better question to ask, though, is, are all Ka'u coffees fantastic? No. Ka'u coffees, like coffees from anywhere, fall onto their bell curve of quality. Some are terrible, most are okay, and some are stellar. What Ka'u has managed to do better than Kona, in this writer's opinion, is to get those few remarkable coffees into the mouths of third wave roasters and drinkers who appreciate them. Just a handful of coffees have created the buzz and excitement that Ka'u now enjoys.

So what of the other eight regions in Hawaii? They are known by some, for sure, but not by nearly as many. They tend to be smaller in number of farms than Kona and Ka'u and typically less well organized as a region. More importantly, many of the farms aren't interested in selling green coffee as they either produce too little coffee to interest roasters and/or

they'd prefer to only sell roasted coffee due to its higher profit margin. Consequently, they have little opportunity to be discovered or recognized by folks who aren't very actively searching for them.

The other regions map onto bell curves of quality, too. Thus, third wave coffees can be found there. The other regions have just as much potential as Kona and Ka'u in terms of fame and fortune. However, they're each following a different path and will meander along just fine, independent of coffee geeks praising or cursing them.

In most ways, the Hawaii coffee industry is stronger and more diverse than ever. The last time so many coffee farms existed in the state was 1967. Farms vary in size (from one to 3000 acres) and they produce a multitude of flavor profiles that cater to different markets all over the world. Unfortunately, the coffee berry borer, the world's most treacherous coffee pest, recently found its way to Hawaii. While currently restricted to Kona and Ka'u, it has already caused devastating losses for some farmers and is likely going to force a price increase in both those regions within a season or two. Moreover, it is only a matter of time, regrettably, before it finds its way to the other regions and islands.

Hawaii farmers, like farmers everywhere, don't give up easily. The newfound excitement the specialty coffee industry has for this origin will lend strength to the coming struggles. Moreover, one must never forget that what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger. **b**