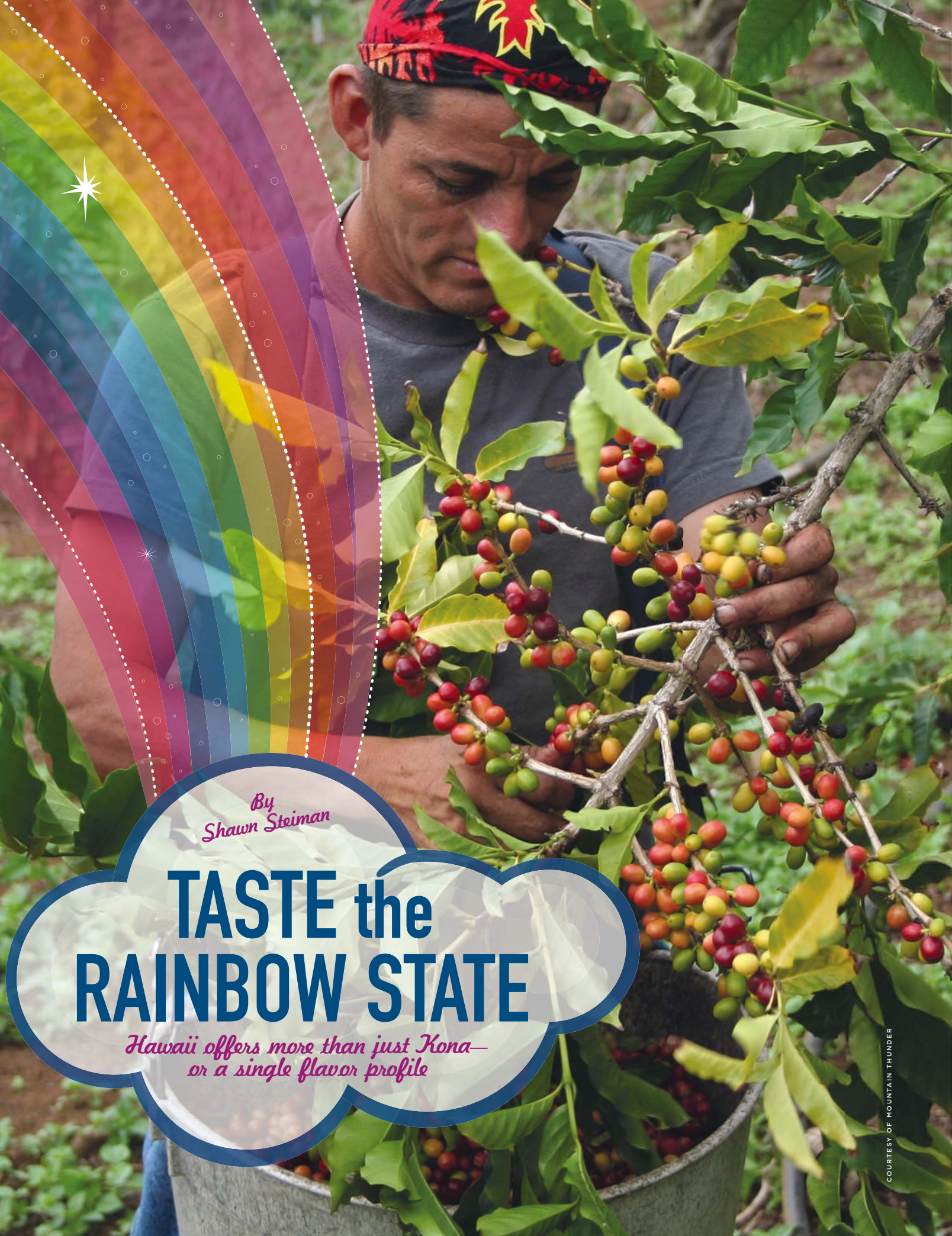


By Shawn Steiman

TASTE the RAINBOW STATE

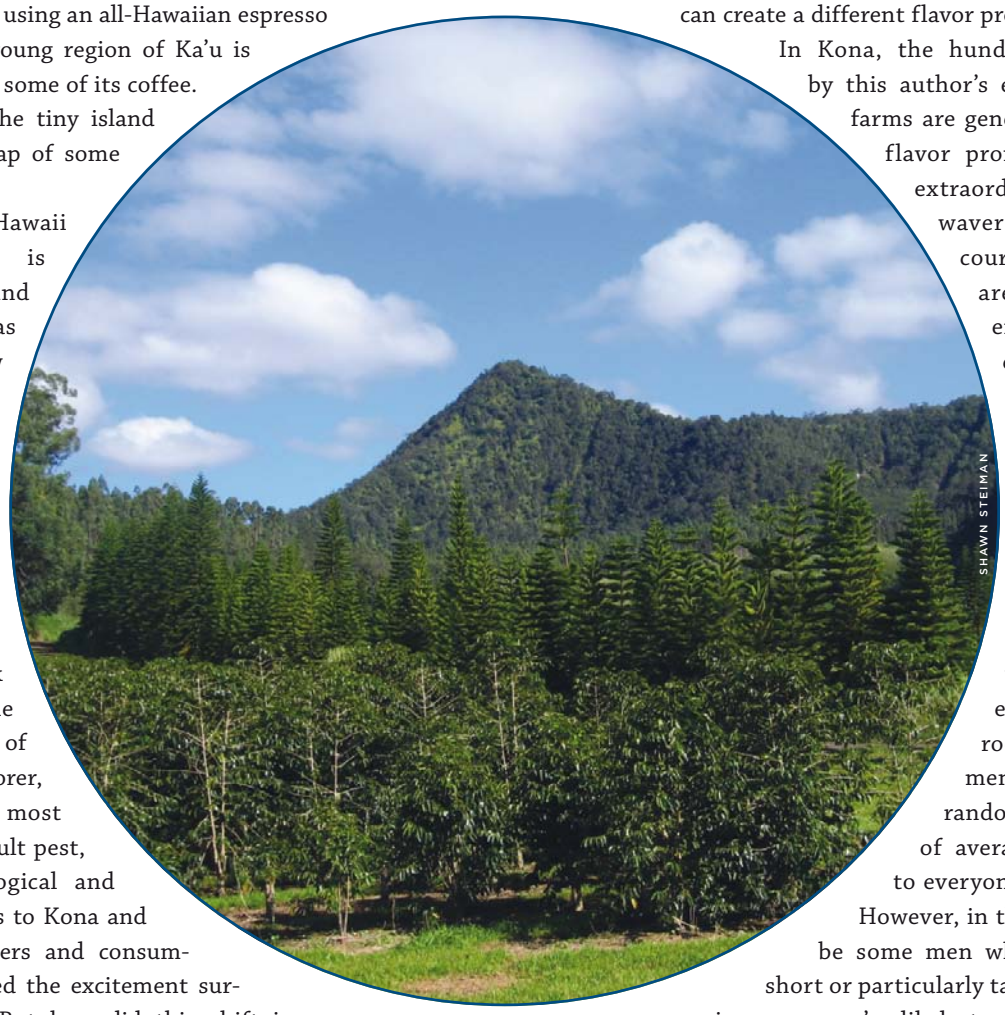
Hawaii offers more than just Kona—or a single flavor profile

COURTESY OF MOUNTAIN THUNDER

A few years ago, if you had asked most folks in the specialty coffee world what they thought about the quality of Hawaii-grown coffees, you'd probably have received a snicker of derision. Until fairly recently, Kona was the king of the Hawaii coffee scene, and its high prices and often mediocre quality were off-putting to coffee geeks (though many roasters still purchased it to fulfill holiday demand).

It seems things are changing. Articles about Hawaii coffee are appearing in mainstream magazines and newspapers, and word of Pete Licata's barista accomplishments are spreading like wildfire (he was the 2011 USBC champion and placed second at the 2011 WBC, in both cases using an all-Hawaiian espresso blend). Also, the young region of Ka'u is turning heads with some of its coffee. All of a sudden, the tiny island chain is on the map of some serious roasters.

The current Hawaii coffee industry is more dynamic and diverse than it has ever been. New farms are appearing regularly around the state. Interesting flavor profiles, previously unknown to the islands, can be found by those willing to seek them out. While the recent arrival of the coffee berry borer, arguably coffee's most despised and difficult pest, has brought biological and financial challenges to Kona and Ka'u, both producers and consumers have maintained the excitement surrounding Hawaii. But how did this shift in Hawaiian coffee happen? How has this once-maligned industry found new favor in the eyes of consumers and roasters?


SHAWN STEIMAN

RISING STAR: Located to the southeast of Kona, Hawaii's Ka'u region has recently been garnering awards for its quality coffees.

HISTORY OF HOMOGENY

For most of the 20th century, Kona was the only region in Hawaii growing coffee (though many regions grew it prior to 1900). It *was* Hawaii coffee. And until the 1980s, nearly all of Kona coffee grown was sold as cherry to a handful of processors. Consequently, Kona coffee was a homogenous blend of many small farms. The flavor profile was simple, clean and more consistent than coffee coming out of other origins. This earned Kona coffee a positive reputation and helped its price rise above that of the C-market.

The advent of the Internet and the arrival of farmers from other professions brought on the emergence of estate farms. In these enterprises, the farmer maintains ownership of the coffee, oftentimes all the way through to the end of the roasting process. These farmers are not simply growing coffee cherry; they are processing, milling, storing, roasting and shipping coffee (or contracting someone to take care of these steps for them). For better or worse, intentional or accidental, this means that each farmer can create a different flavor profile.

In Kona, the hundreds (200 to 300 by this author's estimate) of estate farms are generating all kinds of flavor profiles. Are they all extraordinary by a third-waver's standard? Of course not. But they aren't all terrible either. While some coffees are extraordinary and some are terrible, most, in fact, are average. This probably makes sense to most people on an intuitive level, as a lot of things work this way. For example, imagine a room filled with 300 men. If you pick one at random, he's likely to be of average height relative to everyone else in the room. However, in that room there will be some men who are particularly short or particularly tall. If you keep picking men, you're likely to eventually discover one of those unusual heights.

Now, instead of men and height, consider coffee and cup quality. If a coffee is randomly selected from Kona, there is a high probability of getting one that produces a mediocre brew. Considering that many coffees from Kona are higher priced than most other origins (they sell for $20 to $40 per roasted pound, on average), it isn't too hard to see why coffee aficionados have long snubbed the region: Who wants to pay a seemingly exorbitant price for an average cup of coffee?

However, some remarkable coffees do exist in Kona. Unfortunately, few of them have been discovered. More importantly, the ones that

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have been discovered have not been well celebrated or promoted. This is contrary to what has happened in Ka'u, the region to the southeast of Kona that has become a coffee superstar in the last few years. Like Kona, most of the coffees in Ka'u are of about average quality. However, some of the extraordinary coffees have been "discovered" by baristas and roasters who have spread the word and the product. Several coffees from Ka'u have made it to the top 10 of the Roasters Guild's Coffee of the Year, awarded at the annual SCAA Exhibition, and now the whole region has gained a stellar reputation throughout the specialty coffee industry. The success and fame of Ka'u, perhaps more than anything, has helped propel Hawaii coffee into the minds of quality-focused roasters and consumers.

TOP PRODUCER: Coffee dries in Kona, which for the most of the 20th century was Hawaii's only coffee-growing region.

However, Kona and Ka'u are just two of the 10 geographical regions that grow coffee in Hawaii. There's a reason you hear very little from the other eight: Many of them contain a relatively small number of farms, and in some cases those plantations have done very little to promote themselves. In addition, many of the farms produce so little coffee that they are able to sell it all as roasted product, earning more than they would by selling it green. Thus, specialty coffee roasters rarely have the opportunity to explore and share coffees from those farms. Still, as in Kona and Ka'u, there are gems to be found in these lesser known locales.

REGION BY REGION

Kona and Ka'u are on Hawaii Island (also known as the Big Island). Two other regions are on the Big Island: Puna and Hamakua. North of Ka'u, on the windward side of the island, is Puna, a sprawling region dotted with small farms. The region is loosely organized by a small farm/mill/roaster/café that serves the needs of many of the farms. As the region matures, new farms have continuously started up, and farmers are planting a multitude of varieties.

On the north end of the Big Island is Hamakua, arguably the least organized region in Hawaii. Farmers in Hamakua work independently and seem not to need or want to congregate to create a regional identity. Nonetheless, many farms are successful, and some even struggle to keep up with demand.

The island of Maui also features multiple regions. Kaanapali is dominated by a relatively large, mechanically harvested farm, though some small farms there have recently begun

producing small lots. The Maui region with the most farms is Kula, though it could more appropriately be called Upcountry (the farms span the higher-elevation towns of Maui and encompass more than just the town of Kula). This area probably produces the greatest diversity of cup profiles of any Hawaii region due to the array of varieties grown and the nuances of each farm's methodology. The region of Kipahulu, near the famous town of Hana, is romantically remote and contains just a few farms.

The island of Kauai has only three farms, and two of them are small family operations. In recent years, they've been fantastically popular, barely able to grow enough coffee to appease customers. The third farm, with 3,000 mechanically harvested acres, is by far the largest in the state. The islands of Molokai and Oahu each have just one farm that produces any appreciable amount of coffee. Both farms are mechanically harvested and are growing in favor among consumers. Some new farms have recently been planted on Oahu, but production is still a few years out.

TRIPLE PLAY: Kauai has three coffee farms; the largest has 3,000 acres and is mechanically harvested (top).

Despite there being so many areas and farms, many people seem to want to identify a distinct flavor profile for each region. When a region has one farm, it is possible to answer this question—the farm may have only a few varieties and one or two ways of processing coffees. Describing each is manageable. However, in regions with many estate farms, the idea of a single flavor profile simply cannot exist. This happens not just because farmers choose different varieties, cultural methods and processing methods, but because farmers don't follow a single "recipe" when it comes to growing, processing or roasting. This variation in action causes a variation in taste.

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In addition, most Hawaiian regions are filled with elevation and microclimate differentiations. While there is still only limited scientific understanding of how cultural and environmental factors translate into the cup, it is accepted that the environmental conditions will play a crucial role in shaping cup quality. In Kona, for example, farms are situated at a variety of elevations—the altitude difference between Farm A and Farm B can be as much as 2,500 feet, in fact. Not surprisingly, coffees coming from a variety of different elevations taste significantly different.

SHADE-GROWN: Kona has hundreds of estate farms, in which the owners maintain control of the coffee through the roasting process.

While most people tend to think of the Hawaii coffee industry just as a producer (albeit a very small one; Hawaii produces less than .04 percent of the world's coffee supply), the state also has a strong roasting and consuming culture. As I've mentioned, roasting abounds on some of the estate farms, but wholesale and for-the-café roasting also can be found on all the major islands—and not just the coffee-growing ones. Most roasters carry several Hawaii-grown coffees, although nearly all also import coffees from other origins to supplement their offerings.

In the last year, café culture has reached a new plateau. Around the state, there are now several cafés offering single-serve brews and even one that offers them exclusively. Moreover, some cafés have eliminated foreign coffees from their menus and are celebrating and serving the diversity of coffees found within Hawaii (for more on one such shop, see "Café Crossroads," p. 22). Barista culture, too, has begun to match that found on the mainland. Jams, latte art competitions and evening cupping sessions litter the calendar. The quality of Hawaii-grown coffees has even caught the attention of many of Hawaii's fine-dining restaurants—several of them have coffee menus that feature only coffees grown within the state.

The Hawaii coffee industry has faced challenges and pest pressures in its past and has survived them. At this point, the future of the industry seems promising. With the newfound excitement and support from the specialty coffee community, there is little reason to doubt that the Hawaii industry will continue to flourish and delight all who are willing to experience it.