

H A W A I I



HAWAII FACTS

Location The southernmost state of the U.S., this archipelago is in the mid-Pacific.

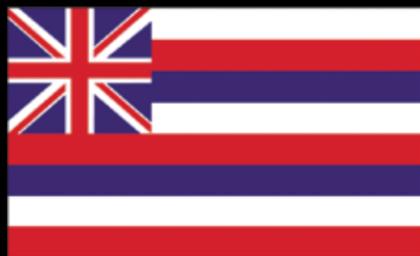
Area 2,000 square miles

Capital City Honolulu

Language English, Hawaiian, Pidgin

Population 1,285,498

Climate Tropical and subtropical



State Flag of Hawaii

AS THE ONLY STATE within the U.S. that produces coffee, Hawaii is in a unique position in the specialty world. For many consumers, Hawaii is their doorway to the coffee world—not only is it the first growing area they visit, whether on purpose or by accident, it also has a special place in many coffee-drinkers hearts because of their relationship to the area, either as a tourist or as a U.S. citizen.

Coffee is grown on five major islands in Hawaii, including Hawaii, Kauai, Molokai, Maui, and Oahu. Kauai leads the area in production, with more than 4,000 acres, followed by Hawaii, at 3,500 acres and Molokai with 550 acres. The remainder is produced on Maui and Oahu.

Because Hawaiian coffee is grown on five islands—each of which is different in climate, elevation and processing—it is hard to classify the coffees as one thing or another. “In general, all the coffees taste different because they come from different areas and have different processing methods,” says Dan Kuhn, current president of the Hawaii Growers Association and general manager of Coffees of Hawaii. “Generally, however, Hawaii coffee is a mild coffee with high acidity.”

Kona, Hawaii’s most famous coffee, is grown on the big island, and has what most people think of as the Hawaiian flavor profile. “The Kona profile is very aromatic, bright but gently sweet acidity, well balanced flavor, medium body, with a very clean aftertaste,” says Gus Brocksen,



who co-owns Pele Plantations with his wife Cynthia.

History

It is believed that the first coffee trees arrived in Hawaii in the early 1800s. The story goes that Chief Boki, governor of Oahu, had acquired coffee trees from Brazil and had them delivered to Hawaii via the British warship, H.M.S. Blonde. The trees were planted in Manoa Valley, Oahu and plantings spread outward from there. In 1828, Reverend Samuel Ruggles took trees to Captain Cook, Kona. By 1842, coffee was established in Hanalei Valley on the north shore of Kauai, but it was wiped out by coffee blight prior to 1860.

Despite economic setbacks, coffee plantations continued to grow and by the 1950s, there were more than 6,000 acres of coffee in Kona. It is now estimated that there are 6,500 acres of coffee over the major islands and that annual production is nearly 7 million pounds of green bean.

Production and Processing

Farms vary in size from a few acres up to hundreds of acres. While the majority of coffee is Guatemalan

Typica, the area also grows yellow and red catuai, caturra and mocha. Elevation also varies from island to island, with Kauai growing coffee as low as 500 feet and Kona as high as 2,500 or 3,000 feet.

Again, coffee processing varies from island to island. Kona is primarily fully washed and sun-dried three days. Mechanical dryers are used only if there is no sun or drying space on the deck. Molokai is also washed, fully fermented and sun-dried, but the area produces a natural as well. Kauai is exclusively mechanically dried, while the other areas typically use a combination of sun and mechanical drying.

Often, Hawaii’s coffee is best roasted to a fairly light roast, suggests Kuhn. “Generally, our roasts tend not to be very dark,” he says. “They typically roast best after the first crack. How much past? Between the first or second, but maybe on the first crack side. In our case, it makes quite a difference if we have three degrees more or less.”

Many of the boutique roasters in Hawaii use air roasters, adds Brocksen. “The air roaster maximizes the clean taste and avoids smokiness,” he says. “Kona should be roasted lighter, to a city roast, to display the complex characteristics which will get lost in a dark roast.”

Pros and Cons

Being the only U.S.-based coffee origin brings a number of benefits to Hawaii. Namely, the tourist industry. “We have six million tourists per year, so that’s a fantastic market,” says Kuhn. “And when you have tourists, you also have agro-tourism. Most of the farms on the big island offer visitor attractions like drawn-wagon tours, coffee tours and cupping experiences.”

In addition, there is increased access to information and knowledge, as well as to the U.S. market. Growers in Hawaii have a keen understanding of what consumers are looking for, how to package and market their coffees as well as how to use tools like the Internet to sell their product.

Being part of the States has its drawbacks, however; the main one being the costs of production. Labor, especially, is expensive, and Hawaii’s current labor shortage makes a difficult problem worse. “We have to bring in labor, house them, pay them the prevailing wages,” says Kuhn.

All of this leads to mechanization of both growing and harvesting in many areas. “So, then the question becomes can you have quality coffee with machine picking?” says Kuhn. “The misconception is that when you pick by machine, you pick ripe, over-ripe and under-ripe. But the sorting machines are precise now; they sort the cherries so that you can get only the ripe.”

Another hurdle has to do with the high prices that Kona coffee has garnered in the past. “One of the difficulties has been that in the past, the neighboring islands came on with major productions

when the price cycle was very low, so while we all got more than the world price due to

Kona, it was a tight squeeze,” Kuhn says. “All those farms on the neighbor islands that exist now have either been abandoned or are dilapidated.” While many of these farms are now being rehabilitated, it’s a long and costly process.

And no one can forget Hawaii’s most notorious issue—that of Kona coffee being misrepresented. Now, laws are in place to ensure that this won’t happen again. However, the laws aren’t as straightforward as they could be. “Kona coffee today is still one of the most counterfeited coffees in the world,” Brocksen says. “There is a 10 percent minimum Kona requirement—which is not nearly enough to taste the Kona, but it’s the current law the way the blenders want it—to make a Kona blend, but it only applies in the State of Hawaii. On the mainland US, there is no minimum, so anyone can use the name Kona to describe a coffee, as in Kona style, Kona blend or just plain Kona, and all without using even one Kona bean.”

The good news is that Hawaii’s coffee culture and product continue to improve in both quantity and quality—new growing regions are being developed and more small boutique growers and roasters are taking advantage of the agro-tourism market. And, as consumers gain an increased understanding of where and how coffee is grown, Hawaii will continue to be the place for many to see their first plantation, and fall in love with the culture that happens behind their coffee cup.



HAWAIIAN COFFEE AT A GLANCE

Coffee Typica, as well as yellow and red catuai, caturra and mocha.

Cup Profile Mild coffee with high acidity

Main Growing Regions Hawaii, Kauai, Molokai, Maui and Oahu

Altitude 500 to 3,000 feet

Harvest Mostly Sept.-Dec.

Processing Varies by island