

**Serving Sustainability One Cup at a Time in Kona, HI
(Or, how a visit to a local coffee roaster turned into a trip to
a coffee plantation)**

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When you think about sustainably produced food, coffee might not be the first product that comes to mind. A 4,000 mile journey to Hawaii and a tour of Kaldi's roasting facility in St. Louis, though, would quickly prove you wrong.

When I toured Kaldi's coffee roasting facility recently, I was taken back to the Hawaiian coffee farms I had walked through only a few weeks earlier.

In February, I explored the sustainable farms and food artisans on the Big Island of Hawaii, where some of the world's best coffee is grown in a 30-mile area known as Kona.

The trip included a visit to the farm of Honolulu Coffee, a small chain of cafes that Kaldi's purchased a majority stake in back in 2008.

For anyone passionate about food, let alone sustainably produced food, the Big Island is a foodie's paradise and a dream for coffee-lovers.

Coffee Kona-Style

Kona coffee is like liquid gold.

Only coffee trees that grow along a 30-mile stretch of land on the Big Island are certified Kona beans.

The small area that produces Kona coffee means the beans are in limited supply, and the labor-intensive approach to harvesting the beans makes the coffee among the priciest on the market.

Once you experience the rich, robust flavor, though, you might be convinced to splurge. Here's how Kona coffee is a sip above the rest.

- **All about the beans:** Twice a year, Kona beans are picked by hand. The average farm is only a few acres yet even on Kaldi's 75-acre spread—big by Kona standards—the beans are still hand picked.
- **Low tech/labor intensive:** The process of turning the cherries into green beans that are later roasted is still fairly low-tech and labor intensive, and reflects the the hands-on approach to agriculture in the Kona region and Hawaii in general.
- **Farm like it's a religion:** Many locals take an almost spiritual approach to the land, using their senses, intuition and experience. It's a far cry from the more regimented approach in the States (i.e. harvest in the fall, plant in the spring.)

The soil in Kona is also rich with minerals thanks to the volcanoes that dot the landscape. Coffee trees grow at every elevation, under the shade of trees or in the glare of the sun. These variables affect the flavor of the beans and makes each farm's harvest unique.

When I sat down recently with Kaldi's co-owners Tricia Zimmer Ferguson and her brother

Tyler Zimmer, the pair explained how the family made a point of incorporating sustainable practices into every part of their cafe business, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

For the brother-sister team, sustainability comes down to quality; it's as simple as a good cup of coffee.

As owners, sustainability means acting as good stewards of the communities they serve and their customers, and serving as partners with their producers.

All About the Beans

We started by talking about the beans. Tyler points out that Kaldi's pays an average of 50 percent over the Fair Trade price for their coffee. It's Kaldi's way of giving back to the farms, some of which are family farms that have been growing coffee for six generations.

Kaldi's often supports the farmers who produce the best coffee beans by pre-financing harvests; that means paying some farmers they have long-standing relationships with up to 50 percent of their harvest costs up front.

While the majority of the beans that Kaldi's purchases are sustainably produced, only about a quarter of the beans are organic. Surprising? Tyler and Tricia explain that their focus is always on quality, and the reality is that organic coffee isn't necessarily the best tasting coffee.

In their industry, organic coffee farms often aren't sustainable in the long run, due to the high cost of organic inputs and its effectiveness in controlling pests, they explain.

Take a look at what organic egg farmers are experiencing. Organic eggs are in short supply because the cost of organic feed has skyrocketed, causing producers to turn to sustainable farming methods until costs can be controlled. (<http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2014/02/26/283112526/chickens-laying-organic-eggs-eat-imported-food-and-its-pricey>)

I actually spoke to a couple of organic coffee farmers in Kona. Most are quite small, and only produce enough beans for their neighbors or the local farmer's markets. The effort required to control the beetles that have invaded Kona's coffee trees using organic methods is also extremely labor intensive, and simply may not be as effective as fertilizers.

Supporting Sustainability

Kaldi's approaches sustainability at the source, and that means building strong relationships with farmers. It's an approach that the specialty coffee industry has also adopted over the past two decades and is one of the many changes that Tyler and Tricia have witnessed since purchasing the flagship cafe on DeMun Avenue.

They've also seen how the Internet plays a role in growing the industry and shaping consumers desire for good coffee. Many customers visit the cafes already knowledgeable

based on what they've learned online, which raises their expectations when they visit a cafe.

Kaldi's baristas play a key role in the education of customers, as well. As Tyler tells me in the conference room-slash-executive office he shares with his sister, one way to measure their progress is when a regular customer who once, "Came in asking for a vanilla latte starts ordering pour-overs."

And of course, there's the food. Tricia says it's Kaldi's secret ingredient and part of the quality experience they aim to provide customers. "Pairing great coffee with great food," that's locally sourced, "is another way to get people excited" about quality coffee.

What's Kaldi's Brewing Next?

In the coming years, Kaldi's is thinking big. Like, Big Island, big.

Their goal for Honolulu Coffee is to produce the "best Kona coffee" in the world.

They've already started to experiment with different growing methods on the Kona farm and tinkering with the sometimes entrenched ways that the coffee is grown there.

Everything from how trees are pruned—or not pruned—to the way new seedlings are nurtured and where new trees are planted is being put to the test.

And the Zimmer's say they're already seeing results, with the farm yielding better quality coffee beans in just two years.

In a few years, those changes could result in a big payoff for Kaldi's customers.

The methods could result in a bigger harvest which means more beans for the Kaldi's cafes. Tyler says he can envision special lots of Kona coffee available for a limited time in Kaldi's cafes.

In the meantime, Kaldi's customers can visit the Honolulu Coffee online store (<http://honolulucoffee.3dcartstores.com>) to get their Kona fix.

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Tumblr: jenmoirepr.tumblr.com

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