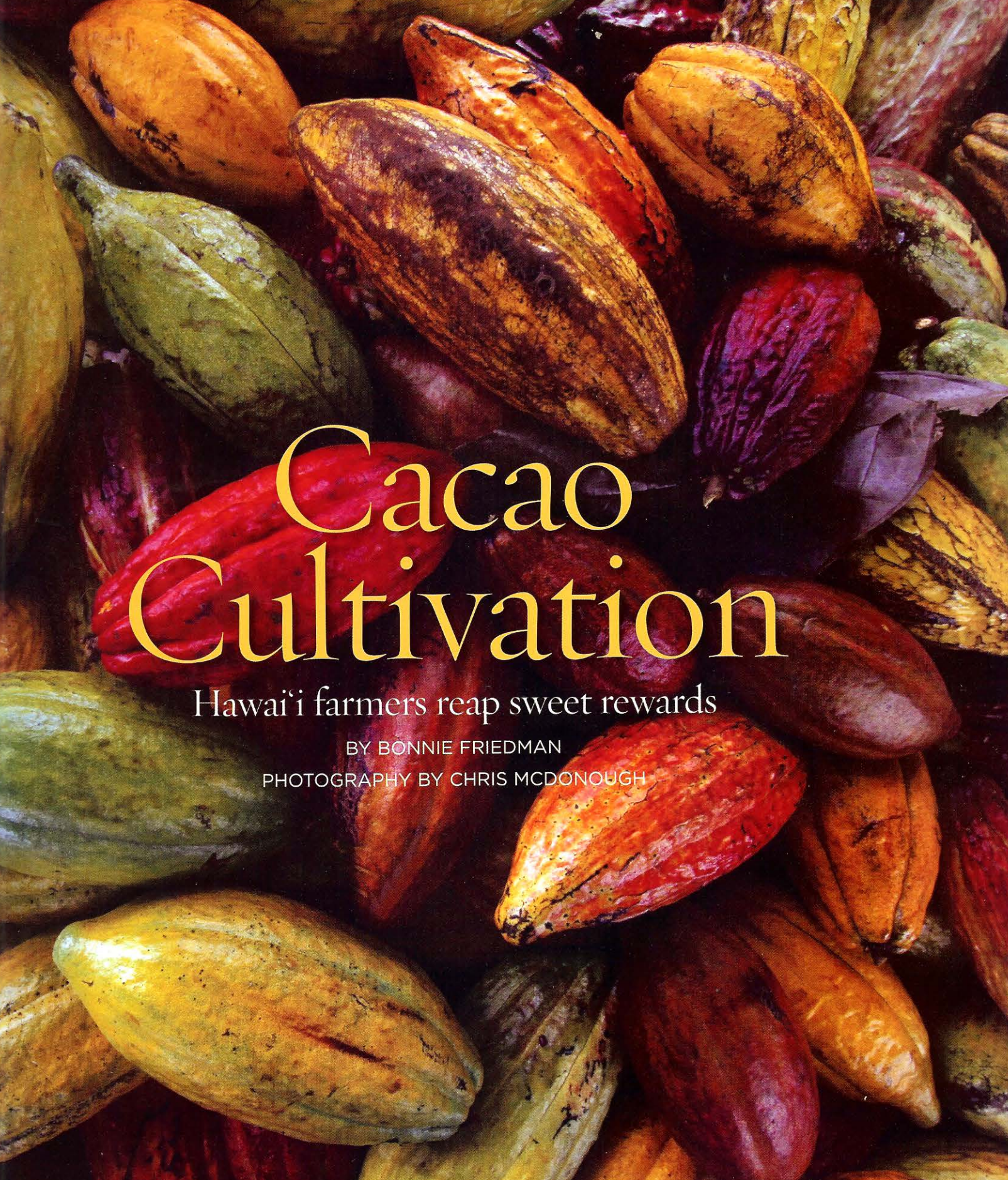


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Cacao Cultivation

Hawai'i farmers reap sweet rewards

BY BONNIE FRIEDMAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS MCDONOUGH



Like its earliest devotees, we drink it to warm our bodies and souls. Processed into a fine, brick red powder, it makes our favorite brownies even more scrumptious. We create a thick, hot, fudgy syrup, pour it over vanilla ice cream and make an incomparably luscious mess. We savor a dark, bittersweet, basil-infused truffle or, heck, just pop it in our mouths in the form of a lowly m&m™ to put a smile on our faces and a song in our heart, not to mention what it does to our brains. Is there a more storied — or studied — food? Claims range from heart health to recreating the feeling of falling in love. For many of us, it is a food group unto itself. Say it with me. Chocolate.

Its history dates back millennia but its original form bore almost no resemblance to the stuff we crave. For thousands of years the Mayans drank the bitter liquid during religious ceremonies and ate the beans after grinding them up with other seeds and grains. By the 16th century, chocolate was being used as currency. And members of the Spanish court discovered that heating the beverage, adding sugar, vanilla and cinnamon made it taste mighty fine. They tried to keep their secret from the rest of Europe, which didn't last long. By the 1800s, anyone who could afford cacao was drinking it. But it took another two hundred years to figure out a way to process the magical — even medicinal — elixir in a way that made it accessible to all. And not just in beverage form. British physician Joseph Fry is credited with inventing the popular chocolate candy bar. Since then it's been mass produced by huge corporations all over the world, attesting to its universal

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FROM LEFT: THE TREE IS FIRST
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ITS INTERIOR EXTRACTED.



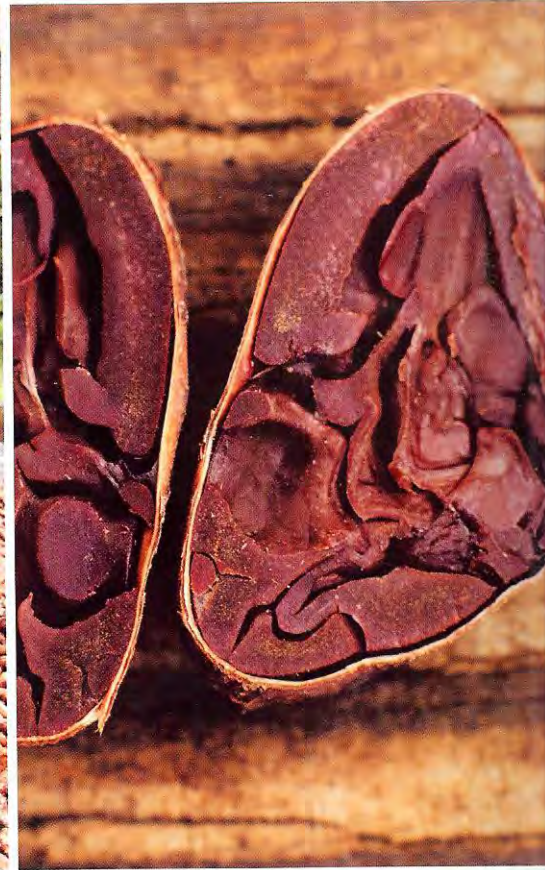
appeal. In the last decade or so, chocolate has taken on a cachet previously reserved for wine and, more recently, coffee. In supermarkets, you'll find displays of bars with labels boasting their high percentages of cacao and whether the beans are "single origin," estate-grown. Flavors are described in terms familiar to oenophiles: "fruity," "nutty," "notes of coffee, tobacco, grass." Savory elements are added, most notably sea salt of every conceivable variety, and herbs, lots and lots of herbs. Milton Hershey surely wouldn't recognize the stuff he popularized in the United States more than a hundred years ago.

Whatever your taste — and the vast majority of Americans still prefer the sweeter, more commercial milk chocolate to its bittersweet, more upscale cousin — it is a long, winding and difficult road from cacao tree to chocolate truffle, from bean (or, more precisely, pod) to bar. And even before the trees are planted, the growing climate is so critical that most of the world is unsuitable for cacao cultivation.

Hawai'i is well situated — although not perfectly so — for growing cacao. But the almost limitless variables (rainfall, wind, pests, and fungus among the most critical) have prevented cacao cultivation from taking hold in the Islands in a big way. That is subject to change. Cacao was first planted here in the 1850s and has come and gone in fits and starts. Today, according to Dr. H.C. "Skip" Bittenbender, there are about 65,000 cacao trees (about 60 acres) producing about 60,000 pounds of dry beans per year statewide, which is not very much at all. "But there's a lot of potential for expansion," adds the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Extension Specialist for Coffee, Kava and Cacao.

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FROM LEFT: BEANS FERMENT FOR THREE TO SEVEN DAYS, DURING WHICH TIME FLAVOR IS SHAPED.



Dole's Waialua Estate on O'ahu's North shore is, by far, the largest cacao orchard in the Islands, with more than 20 acres. First planted in 1996, "it was an experiment," says Derek Lanter, Sales Manager for Coffee and Chocolate Operations. "Hawai'i is not cacao's natural area, but the trees will adapt outside of their normal range." In addition to growing the trees, the harvested beans are fermented and dried on site. Then they travel to the Mainland, where they're processed by Guittard into 70% dark (bittersweet) chocolate, 55% semi-sweet and 38% milk, these last two marketed under the Kokoleka brand. "The majority of our production is for the local market, both retail and in top end restaurants which are using it for desserts," says Lanter.

It is a complex, expensive, multi-step process to get from pod — in which the cacao beans grow — to bar (which is one of the main reasons Waialua sends it off). Pods are harvested from the trees and then beans removed from the pods by hand. The beans are fermented, dried, then roasted. After being tested and cleaned, they are ground and finally conched, the process by which all the individual components of the processed beans are combined into chocolate. Only then can it be made into bars or desserts or other confections.

Bob and Pam Cooper go this full distance on their six-acre farm, with just one acre growing cacao, in the Keahou district of Hawai'i Island. "We didn't even know cacao grew on trees," says Bob of their initial inexperience with the crop. But when they bought the property in 1997, the cacao that the former owner had planted years before was thriving. "They were at full fruition. We had pods and beans. We didn't want

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FROM LEFT: THE DRYING PROCESS REQUIRES VISUAL AND AROMA INSPECTION, COMPLETING THE CHOCOLATE GROWER'S DUTIES.



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FROM LEFT: CACAO
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to process on the Mainland,” he adds. So they asked a chocolate-making veteran from Great Britain to help them set up their own little production facility. Original Hawaiian Chocolate made its first batch of chocolate in 2000. “We’re making about 10,000 pounds right now; we can make between 50,000 and 80,000 pounds a year with the trees and facility we have.” The Coopers’ finished product is distributed through 60 retail locations throughout Hawai‘i, and direct to consumers online. Chefs use it, too. Jackie Lau, Corporate Chef for Roy’s Restaurants statewide, loves it. “We try to use it as much as possible for specialty desserts,” she says. “At the Tavern in Princeville (Kaua‘i), I feature it in my Tavern Pie – Chocolate Pudding ‘Pie’ with Hawaiian Salted Caramel and Cream. I also do a Hawaiian Hot Chocolate. Most of our restaurants use the cocoa nibs. I like that fact that the cocoa is from Hawai‘i and stays in Hawai‘i! I especially like to feature Original Hawaiian Chocolate when we do events on the Mainland. It gets the word out.”

Veteran Island restaurateur Philippe Padovani is a culinary triple-threat – chef, pastry chef, and, arguably, Hawai‘i’s most experienced and knowledgeable chocolatier. He sells Waialua Estate chocolate in his Dole Cannery shop and uses it in the tropical-flavored confections he makes for special events. “It will take a commitment from the growers and a European-style processing plant” to make cacao a big, successful crop here. And he thinks it can – and will – happen.

Waialua Estate’s Lanter, too, sees positive signs. “Awareness continues to grow,” he says. “And the future is looking sweet.”