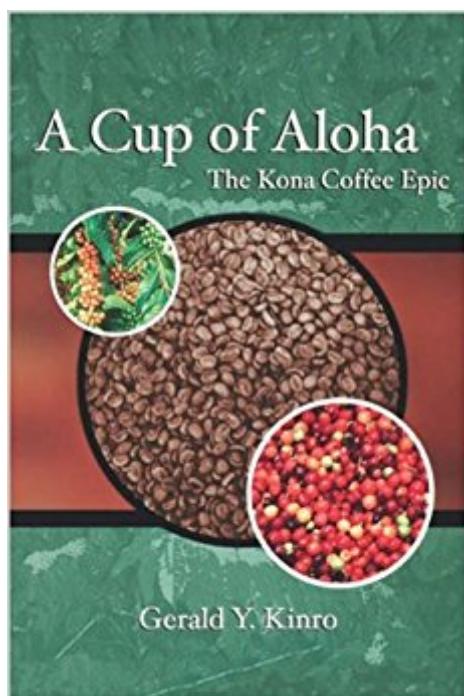


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A Cup Of Aloha: The Kona Coffee Epic (A Latitude 20 Book)



Synopsis

Kona is one of the world's premium coffees. Given its small-scale cultivation on family farms, however, it has been especially susceptible to price swings and market gluts. A Cup of Aloha is a heartfelt portrait of the farmers, millers, landowners, merchants, and laborers who struggled to keep themselves and their industry alive. The author traces coffee's history in Hawaii--from its arrival in 1828 to Kona's position in today's highly competitive specialty coffee market. Through the author's use of oral history interviews, readers will experience day-to-day life on a coffee farm and the challenges, natural and man-made, that inspired innovations and adaptations to the agricultural, economic, and social life in the Kona Coffee Belt.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Gerald Kinro was born and raised on a coffee farm in Kahalu'u, Kona. A pesticide specialist with the Hawai'i State Department of Agriculture, he has authored more than a hundred articles on agriculture and other subjects in local, national, and international publications.

This was a gift along with a pack of Kona coffee. Giftee thought it was interesting and thoughtful. Short book, lots of photographs. If you have ever wondered why Kona coffee is so expensive, this book explains it all!

There were two epics of Kona coffee -- the reputation of the coffee itself, and the struggle of the farmers who grew it. Gerald Kinro, who grew up on a Kona coffee farm, hits the highlights and lowlights in "A Cup of Aloha," which reveals that there was nothing inevitable about it. In fact, until 1969, although Kona farmers were growing the delectable arabica variety, they were selling into the world market for the common robusta beans. It was the Superior Coffee Co. of Illinois that rescued a nearly dead Kona coffee business by buying the entire crop and paying a premium price. Not until 1984, when growers formed the Kona Coffee Council, did the reputation of the Kona bean establish itself widely. As a result, prices went from less (sometimes much less) than a dollar a pound to more (sometimes much more) than \$10. The image of Kona coffee now, at least in the islands, is of tiny mountainside farms worked by Japanese families, with the help of Kona nightingales (donkeys). The image has charm, and people like Kinro remember that episode fondly, but it was not an easy life, and it was not the whole story. The sunset side of Mauna Loa and Hualalai is now regarded as perfect for the coffee tree, but in the 19th century coffee was planted all over the islands, not by small farmers but by plantations, or, in Olaa, by Russian revolutionaries. A price slump in the 1890s encouraged these capitalists to sell out to immigrants -- largely but not only Japanese -- who were finished with sugar plantation labor contracts. The business prospects were not rosy, but Kinro says "they came for independence." Of course, they knew nothing about growing coffee, but after World War II extension agent Edward Fukunaga began a series of experiments that "revolutionized coffee production in Latin America," though the Kona growers were slow to respond his suggestions. The experience of the Kona families was not greatly different from immigrants in other parts of the Territory. They struggled to see their children educated, they formed cooperatives, they became sophisticated -- at least, those who made it through the Depression did. About two-fifths of the farmers gave up during the 1930s, and those who kept on were able to only because AMFAC (an agricultural/commercial conglomerate, since gone bust) wrote off their debts. Kinro describes the efforts of the farmers as "heroic." The heroic phase may be over now, although the margin between profit and loss is nearly as precarious as in times past. But one thing has changed. For the first century of Kona coffee, it was more hope than calculation that kept people at it. Today, Kona coffee provides the most promising model of island agriculture -- a premium crop that can be marketed at high prices with elite branding. That doesn't solve the Kona farmer's problems of shortage of labor, periodic droughts and the other difficulties that face every other Hawaii farmer. But at least it promises a good price in the market, which is more than the people who keep saying "we should be growing all our own food" have figured out. Although this book does not mention it, Kona has now been surpassed in volume of beans by Kauai and will soon be by Maui and perhaps Molokai. Coffee

is now grown in a variety of environments, some very different from Kona's. This will give connoisseurs many more opportunities to practice oneupmanship.

At first glance, "epic" might seem a bit strong, or even pretentious, a term to describe this thin book on the history of Hawai`i's Kona coffee crop. It becomes more appropriate when you realize that Gerald Kinro's book is (much) less a touristy guide to Hawaiian coffee plantations than it is a work of social history and (perhaps inevitably) a look at a dying way of life. Author Kinro was born and raised on a Kona coffee farm, and this book has the personal feel you'd expect from an author with those experiences. His is a story of people and families ... of the causes and consequences of individual decisions ... and how they and their culture were shaped by, and themselves helped shape, the local and even international economy. People with an interest in coffee, commodity economics, or Hawai`i generally might find this worth a read. But its main audience, I think, will be readers drawn to the social and cultural history of Hawaiian communities, the mixture of Japanese, Hawaiian, and European-American influences, and the way those communities and influences have blended (good coffee term!) over time.

I thought that I knew a fair amount about Kona coffee, but I was wrong. The author (who grew up on a Kona coffee farm) says exactly the same thing. The coffee industry has gone through a number of transformations during its 175 years in Hawai`i. So if you were involved in the industry for "only" 20 years, you would only see a small part of the story! I couldn't put this book down because it's actually high drama! Many times in its history, coffee growing in the Islands has been pronounced dead by experts, but each time the farmers have bounced back (often just barely). Survival often meant changing old ways, introducing something totally new, or following the lead of a particular individual. Being a Kona coffee farmer has never been easy, and it still isn't. Kinro packs the entire story of the Kona coffee industry on the Big Island (and its grower's and promoter's business and social histories) into this small, very readable little book.

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Affairs, pirates, the death of a king and queen—who knew the history of kona coffee was rooted in such intrigue and heartbreak? After reading about the process involved in getting those beans to market, I have gained a new respect for that cup of coffee in the morning. Photos included add interest to the story. The book inspired me to try kona coffee for the first time, and now I'm hooked.

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