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## Demand for Kona coffee bubbling all over America

By Matt Sedensky  
Associated Press

CAPTAIN COOK, Hawai'i — It started as a backyard business for Marin Artukovich, a few acres of coffee planted high above the coastline here on the slopes of a volcano.

Today, just seven years later, his Koa Coffee Plantation on the Big Island's Kona coast, encompasses 80 acres of coffee trees on seven parcels of land. It yielded around 700,000 pounds last year, and employs 45 people during the busiest part of the season.

It's a far cry from Artukovich's first year in business, when 38,000 pounds of the shiny red cherries holding the beloved bean were picked by family and visiting friends.

"The demand for Kona coffee's gotten better and better," said Artukovich, whose beans are considered among the best in Hawai'i, the only U.S. state with commercial coffee production. "We didn't envision that."

Coffee has been grown here for nearly two centuries, but demand for the pricey beans from Kona is swelling.

In tourist shops, most Kona coffee is sold in blends containing just 10 percent of the locally grown beans. Bags of the pure stuff typically sell for \$20 to \$25 a pound here, and can go for \$40 or more on the Mainland.

Never mind that Kona coffee is among the world's more expensive brews. Aficionados are driven to Kona coffee's unique taste, and with supply short, there's barely enough to go around.

### **Kona's king crop**

About 650 coffee farms occupy a 20-mile-long stretch along the Big Island's western coast. Tourists flock here for tours and to snatch up bags of beans.

"We're becoming the Napa Valley of coffee," Artukovich said.

Kona coffee is strong yet smooth, a full-bodied brew, sometimes with a fruity hint. Coffee thrives here in Kona because the soil is perfect, as is the rainfall.

Kona is home to an estimated 93 percent of the Big Island's total acreage of coffee crops, producing an estimated 96 percent of the island's coffee.

The total acreage of Big Island coffee fields rose from 2,800 in 1998 to 3,500 last year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates. Industry sources say the number of plantings in Kona will continue to rise because all the coffee grown is being sold.

"Everyone who's in the market is selling all of their product," said Roger Dilts, president of the Kona Coffee Council and owner of the five-acre Aloha Farms.

### **Starbucks drives growth**

Now, Kona beans have found their way back onto the shelves of Starbucks — all of the nearly 4,200 company-owned stores in North America. It's the first time in seven years the coffee giant has offered Hawai'i's choicest brew, and its reappearance can mean only one thing, farmers here say — even more demand.

Starbucks won't say how much 100 percent Kona coffee it bought. Its stores put the beans on sale this month in half- and full-pound bags

priced at \$19 and \$35.

Growers say Starbucks, in some ways, is responsible for Kona coffee's growth. Its track record of introducing coffee lovers to exclusive brews, combined with its remarkable growth, has fueled interest for specialty coffees.

### **Supplies limited**

Trouble is, the Kona market's current output probably couldn't fill all the cups it needed to be a mainstay at a national coffee chain. "If you took a year's crop, harvested it, roasted and brewed it, and served it to the coffee-drinking population of the U.S., 65 percent of coffee drinkers would have one 6-ounce cup and be done," Greenwell said.

Farmers say they're not getting rich off their crops. Greenwell estimates a five-acre farm here could yield about \$50,000 annually before overhead. It would require the work of a five-person family and still necessitate hiring seasonal help, he said.

The costs for labor and land alone in Kona are many times higher than those in a foreign coffee center like Costa Rica. Artukovich says workers here make an average of \$8 to \$10 an hour, while a Central American or South American worker might go home with \$1 or \$2 for an entire day.

"I'm basically doing it for free and I'm having a hard time," said Bob Nelson, who has increased the number of trees at his Lehuula Farms from 1,100 in 1989 to 4,000.

Kona farmers produced about 3.3 million pounds of coffee in 2002-2003, according to the Hawaii Agricultural Statistics Service.

It amounts to just a tiny fraction of a percent of the world's total coffee crop. But the increasing popularity comes as coffee consumption dips in the United States — from an average of 1.9 cups a day in each American household five years ago to 1.5 cups a day last year, according to the National Coffee Association of U.S.A.

"If we burned up tomorrow, coffee drinkers just wouldn't have a nice cup of coffee to drink," Greenwell said. "But they would still have all the coffee they need."

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