



Hawaiian Melting Pot

It's 11am on a Monday and Wayne Harmon is knocking back shots.

The cups are only partly filled, though, and not with alcohol but with strong, black coffee.

We're at Greenwell Farms in the district of Kona on Hawaii's largest island, which is called Hawaii but is unimaginatively nicknamed 'Big Island' to avoid confusion. Wayne is leading a tasting, or 'cupping', of some of

Greenwell's 11 coffee varieties.

It's a little like wine tasting, he explains. "After assessing the aroma, take a sip and swirl it over your tongue to check for body and acidity. Once you've swallowed, evaluate for finish and aftertaste."

Let's be honest, there's not much you can teach a Kiwi about good coffee. Having experienced the muddy water that often passes for coffee in

the US, I'd been a little sceptical about this proposed coffee tour as we drove here along the Big Island's volcanic rock-fringed coastline. Plus, with temperatures nudging 33°C, I wasn't sure that sipping hot coffee was the most sensible of activities.

But Kona, on the island's lush west coast, is the holy grail of caffeine. Bookended by Hualalai and Mauna Loa volcanoes (the latter the world's

Perfect surf and active volcanoes are all very well, but Sharon Stephenson prefers to get her thrills seeking out the hidden gems of Hawaii's fusion cuisine

largest active volcano), Kona's coffee belt stretches for 50km and features around 700 plantations, most of them small, family-run operations.

Warmed by the skin-blistering temperatures, lashed with rain that Wayne admits you can set your watch by ("the clouds roll in at 2pm and it rains from 4pm to 7pm") and with an elevation as high as 975m above sea level, the mineral-rich soil coughs up

some of the most expensive caffeine in the world, with premium Kona coffee selling for \$US122 (\$159) a kilogram.

As we wander among some of Greenwell's 65,000 coffee trees, heavy with bright red fruit, Wayne plucks a coffee cherry from a branch and suggests I taste it.

"It mimics the coffee process, because when you chew the outside of the cherry, you're pulping the fruit

and when you suck on the bean, you're fermenting it."

The best part comes after a tour of the milling and roasting facilities when we enter an alfresco area to taste mild, medium and full-bodied roasts which, much like wine, offer floral notes with hints of plum, peach and berry. I follow Wayne's instructions and sniff, swirl and swallow a mouthful from each cup... and discover that →

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American coffee can indeed be good. My favourite is the rich chocolate and macadamia nut blend, which proves the region's two main crops – coffee and nuts – can hold hands.

The Big Island is Hawaii's largest agricultural region and its sweet spot is the twice-weekly Hilo Farmers' Market, named as one of the leading farmers' markets in the US by the influential *Huffington Post* website.

The sun is high in the sky when we arrive in Hilo, the Big Island's charmingly ramshackle capital. Fresh coconut water, sipped from the nut, is a welcome thirst quencher as we wander the stalls piled high with bright pink pitahaya or 'dragon fruit', fragrant liliko'i (passionfruit), pawpaw the size of my head, and other produce I can't identify.

Started in 1988 with four vendors, more than 200 stallholders now crowd the parking lot with their multi-ethnic wares, including Peruvian tamales, Portuguese bread and a trio of delicious local desserts – haupia, kulolo and haulolo – that involve coconut, sugar and taro in various combinations and are far more delicious than they sound.

Around five million visitors a year flock to Hawaii's main island, O'ahu, drawn by its sun, surf and resorts; it's only Hawaii's third largest island but the most populous by far. But beyond pineapple, seafood and spam (thought to be one of Hawaiian-born President Barack Obama's favourite foods), little is known about its cuisine.

Although traditional food is

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celebrated, many of Hawaii's menus reflect the successive waves of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese and Portuguese immigrants, many of whom arrived last century to work the sugar cane plantations and stayed to cook up a taste of home.

But if you're a visitor, how do you discover the coolest hole-in-the-wall places and get a side order of history to boot? Enter the food walking tour. Ryan Conching, who gave up a career in IT to set up Aloha Food Tours last year, loves two things above all else – good food and his country – which makes him the perfect person to guide us through Honolulu's Chinatown area.

Seven of us meet at the delightfully named Pig and the Lady, an Asian-fusion restaurant on North King St (the name comes from chef Andrew Le's family; he's the pig and his mother, who works in the kitchen, is the lady) famous for

This page: Coffee cherries in Kona's 'coffee belt'. Opposite page: Colourful scenes from Hilo's farmers' market; tempting treats from Honolulu's food trucks; Team Meredith (with Michael wearing a lei); dishes of abalone at the food and wine festival.

its Vietnamese pho. While the others dig into steaming bowls of noodle soup crammed with smoked bacon and brisket, I make short work of a version featuring pickled shiitake mushrooms, fried okra and mung bean falafel.

It's a short stroll to our next stop, JJ Dolan's, the New York-style pizza place of a thousand movies. Imagine Tony Soprano's younger, better-looking brother and you've got Jay Niebuhr, an exuberant former US marine from New Jersey who came to serve in Hawaii 25 years ago and never went home.

Jay invites us out the back to watch him spin the simple dough he uses in his "real New York" thin-crust pie

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("Get outta here, only people from Chicago eat deep-dish pizza!") before slathering bases in cheese, spinach and piped ricotta cheese. Six minutes later, we're chowing down on those slices of heaven and slurping ice-cold beer, while Jay regales us with tales of being an extra in the new *Hawaii Five-O* TV series that's filmed around here.

There's a slightly more authentic Hawaiian experience in store at the Korean Kitchen, a tiny eatery that looks as though it hasn't been decorated for decades. But one bite of their loco moco and you won't care. Created in Hilo in 1949, this concoction of white rice, hamburger patty and fried egg smothered in brown gravy is served all over the islands and Ryan tells us it's a crime to visit Hawaii without trying it.

Platters of crispy Thai garlic shrimp and fried tofu at our next stop, the Fort Street Café, almost finish me off but we're warned to save room for our last

port of call, Cake Envy, where Spanish import Amy Brookes makes around 70 varieties of not-too-sweet cheesecake, including double chocolate Jack Daniel's, caramel pecan, and piña colada.

I hardly need more calories, but our visit coincides with Eat the Street, a collection of around 40 food trucks that assembles on the last Friday of every month. The sun is out – as it almost always is – and around 2,000 people are devouring delights such as hula shrimp, sushi sliders, malasada (Portuguese doughnuts) and spam musubi – a popular snack composed of a slice of grilled spam on top of a block of rice, wrapped together with nori seaweed.

One truck offers steaming plates of the traditional Hawaiian luau, which is similar to hangi, but I'm content to sip mimosas and indulge in the endlessly fascinating sport of people watching.

No foodie worth her sea salt would turn down the opportunity to attend

a wine and food festival and as the fourth Hawaii Food & Wine Festival is in full swing during our visit, we frock up for an alfresco event where 14 chefs, including Auckland's Michael Meredith, are showcasing their talents.

Although Meredith's ceviche with avocado sorbet and spritz of coconut cream is going down a treat with the crowd, the sizzling temperature is causing him issues. "The sorbet keeps melting, which never happens in Auckland," he laughs. But Meredith is pleased to have been invited and says Pacific-Polynesian fusion food aligns closely with his own roots.

"Why wouldn't you come to Hawaii?" he says. "The weather is great, the food is fantastic and the people are so friendly. I may never leave." ●

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