

A local venue for island-grown coffee

By Brandon Bosworth

Hawaii may be the only U.S. state to grow coffee commercially, yet its coffee-shop landscape is dominated by Mainland chains. As owner and founder of Kai Coffee Hawaii, Sam Suiter aims to change this trend by adding a local touch to the state's café market.

With 15 years of experience in the coffee industry, Suiter has been involved in everything from roasting and brewing to management. For eight years, he ran retail operations for Honolulu Coffee before eventually opening Kai Coffee Hawaii earlier this year.

For Suiter, the priority is to set his shop apart from bigger competitors. "My wife, Natalie, and I started Kai Coffee Hawaii to continue our dream to build a



Sam Suiter

unique company that provides spectacular service with an amazing product," he said. "I believe owner-operated business is the best because it gives the business a family feel, which is what I want my guests and employees to be a part of."

Kai Coffee Hawaii is located inside the Pualeilani Atrium Shops at Hyatt Regency Waikiki Resort and Spa. Once Suiter and his wife settled on a spot, they remodeled the existing space themselves, essentially building their shop from the ground up.

Kai Coffee Hawaii aspires to offer a "total café experience." To accomplish this, the company stocks distinctive local coffees sourced from Maui, Big Island and Oahu, as well as brews from Latin America and Sumatra. The house coffee is an all-Hawaiian blend made with beans from Kona and Kau on Big Island, as well as from Maui and Oahu.

Aiming to satisfy a wide range of tastes and preferences, Kai Coffee Hawaii also sells a large selection of organic hot and iced teas, as well as fresh foods from The Baker and Butcher. Additionally,

the shop offers specialty sips such as its signature Kai Latte, presenting a macadamia-nut latte topped with macadamia-nut whipped cream.

Suiter explains that while Kai Coffee Hawaii's offerings are very simple, a great deal of training and preparation goes into each cup. "Our baristas go through numerous tests in order to qualify to work on the bar," he said. "Not only must drinks be delicious and beautiful, they must be timely."

Not surprisingly for a Waikiki-based company, about 70 percent of Kai Coffee Hawaii's customers are tourists. The business does cater to local patrons, however, by offering a 25 percent kamaaina discount.

Looking ahead, Suiter hopes to open more Kai Coffee Hawaii locations. "We plan to continue to grow at a timely rate," he said. "We do not want all of our locations to be in Waikiki. We would love to be in places that are more convenient for our local clientele. My wife and I are passionate about doing this for the rest of our lives."

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As a Hawaii-based company, the cafe aims to showcase locally sourced coffees.



Photos courtesy of Kai Coffee Hawaii

Hot drinks with a 'latte' character

Inside the gourmet sips offered at Kai Coffee Hawaii, there's a little something extra for patrons that comes in the form of high-quality presentation they won't find anywhere else.

For this cafe, part of the art of coffee-making is creating an artistic statement with latte art. The craft entails carefully pouring steamed milk into a shot of espresso in such a way that it forms an image on the finished latte.

"Latte art requires a high level of skill on the part of the barista," said Kai Coffee Hawaii owner Sam Suiter. "It's a good indicator of the barista's overall technique."

One of the coffee shop's lead baristas, Anthony Luat, is well-known for his abilities as a latte artist, and has done well in both local and national latte art competitions — including placing first in the Latte Art Competition at the inaugural Art of Hawaiian Coffee event in 2011. He won with a design of a delicate fern that he created in 30 seconds. Luat also has competed in the Coffee Fest Latte Art World Championship Open.

The 411

Name: Kai Coffee Hawaii

Address: 2424 Kalakaua Ave., Honolulu (inside the Hyatt Regency Waikiki Resort and Spa)

Phone: 923-1700

Website: www.kaicoffeehawaii.com

Company president: Sam Suiter

Employees: 10

Founded: 2014

Employee benefits: Full medical coverage and paid time off.

Noteworthy: Kai Coffee Hawaii regularly donates coffee and services to different community agricultural events.