

LIBERTY CALL

Local Java

THE Waialua Coffee Visitor's Center opened its doors to the public in December 1998. The center, located in the country town of Waialua near Oahu's North Shore is a reminder of Hawaii's integral part in sugar plantation history. While sugar is no longer grown, Waialua's sugar mill carries on the city's agricultural tradition through its production of Oahu's only commercially grown and processed coffee.

The coffee is grown at ideal altitudes on the fertile volcanic slopes above Oahu's beautiful North Shore. Passersby can get a good look at the coffee fields on their way to the North Shore. The fields that line both sides of Kamehameha Highway can be found just a couple of miles past the famous Dole visitor's center.

The renovated Waialua Sugar Mill, still owned by Dole Food Co., is set against the lush backdrop of Mt. Ka'ala. Its historic location mixes nostalgia with the hope of new industry. In the heart of the old Sugar Mill, the visitor's center provides a place for kama'aina (locals) and guests to see the only working coffee mill on Oahu.

In the heart of the visitor's center stands the Waialua Coffee Shop where most visitors begin and end their tour of the coffee mill. After a warm welcome, coffee shop employees extend guests an offering to peruse their shop full of various Waialua Coffee logo T-shirts, aprons, coffee mugs and more.

In the back of the coffee shop, guests will find the coffee bar tended by a local Barista (coffee bar tender) who will offer free samples of Waialua coffee, or mix up a more complicated java drink to order.

Maria Mehr has worked as a Barista and tour guide at the visitor center for the last two months. Although she hasn't worked there long enough to see the mill in full operation - the coffee harvest season runs from August to January - she is able to answer most questions posed to her about the mill and the coffee production process.

"In the spring, the plants flower three to five times, and when the flower falls off, a cherry forms," said Mehr. "And since it flowers at different times, cherries form at different times. It's a ripening harvest; so some of the cherries will be ripe in August and some won't be ripe until January," added Mehr.

According to Mehr, since the production process happens a step at a time, there are only a handful of workers who work at the mill during harvest season, not the dozens that some people might imagine.

"This is the actual mill, the working mill," said Mehr. "A lot of people think this is not the real mill because it's kept really clean. The machines are capable of processing 10-thousand pounds per hour, and last year we processed more than 400-thousand pounds of coffee with these machines," she added pointing to the sign posted on the wet mill.

According to Mehr, the process involves sending the cherries through a wet mill, which squeezes the bean out of the skin. Then the beans are dried in sheltered containers outdoors until less than five percent moisture remains for about two to three months. After the drying process, the beans go through the dry mill to clean and remove the parchment, grade and produce the green beans that are stored until they're roasted at a facility in Honolulu.

Throughout the eight-minute tour, visitors are given some interesting facts known mostly by those only in the coffee business. One such fact is about the Peaberry coffee bean used to make Waialua Coffee's highest grade of coffee.

"It's a deformity in the coffee bean," said Mehr. "There are two half beans in the cherry and they form into one pea-shaped bean. The peaberries are 10-percent of the crop. They're a lot more expensive, because there's a lot less of them. And no matter what type of coffee, Kona or Guatemalan, there's not a lot of peaberry in it," added Mehr.

The short, fact filled tour brings visitors back to the coffee shop to enjoy a complimentary cup of freshly brewed house offerings, which comes in three varieties: Waialua Coffee - a rich, full-bodied coffee made from 100-percent Waialua Coffee beans; Mt. Ka'ala blend - a smooth and mellow coffee made from Guatemalan, Blue Mountain and other varieties of Waialua coffee; and Peaberry - Waialua's premium offering made from 100 percent Waialua Peaberry beans.

So, if you're looking for a place to get a first-rate cup of coffee while absorbing a bit of coffee history, check out the Waialua Coffee Visitor's center. The center is open everyday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information, call toll-free 1-877-637-2411 or check out the following web site: <http://planet-hawaii.com/dole>.



Top - In the mug: Waialua Coffee Shop Barista/tour guide Maria Mehr displays a handful of drying coffee beans, still in their shells. The beans must dry until less than five percent moisture remains.

Above: The entrance of the Waialua Coffee Visitor's Center stands ready to welcome guests daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Left: Bags of green coffee beans, ready for roasting, sit on display at the visitor's center. The green coffee beans have a shelf life of seven years. After they're roasted, the duration of freshness lasts only two to four weeks.

Background: Green coffee cherries wait for harvest season, August to January, before being picked. The cherries turn bright red when they're ripe.

Story and Photos by JO1 Gerard Sekerak