

Isle coffee farmers have some company

By [Andrew Gomes](#)

January 25, 2016



COURTESY GOOD LAND ORGANICS

Jay Ruskey's endeavor with growing coffee in Goleta, Calif., began more than a decade ago. He also grows avocados, cherimoyas and finger limes on his farm.

Hawaii has long held a distinction as the only place in the United States growing coffee commercially. This claim, though, isn't exactly true. At least not anymore.

An enterprising organic farmer in a coastal California city actually ended Hawaii's exclusive reign of U.S. coffee production several years ago, and now the crop has spread to more than a dozen farms in other parts of that state between San Diego and San Luis Obispo, a roughly 300-mile stretch.

So, this is perhaps something of a bummer for Hawaii. And it might take time to correct descriptions of U.S. coffee farming that reference only Hawaii, such as the one still proclaimed by the National Coffee Association, a New York-based organization led largely by representatives of major coffee merchants, distributors and retailers.

Fortunately for coffee growers on Hawaii island, Oahu, Maui, Molokai and Kauai, the recent establishment of California coffee doesn't represent competition with the islands or diminish the Aloha State's coffee industry.

"Hawaii does lose something, but I agree that the direct impact will be minimal," said Stuart Nakamoto, a University of Hawaii College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources faculty member whose research areas include coffee.

Jay Ruskey, who is growing coffee in the city of Goleta not far from Santa Barbara in Southern California on his Good Land Organics farm, said people express surprise about the crop he has mixed in with avocados, cherimoyas and finger limes.

“Yeah, I deal with that a lot,” he said of the notion that Hawaii and its tropical climate had a lock on commercial coffee production in the U.S.

Ruskey’s endeavor with coffee began more than a decade ago as part of his appetite to try new crops, which he has explored with help from a researcher and farm adviser at the University of California, Mark Gaskell.

Gaskell, who once worked with coffee growers in Central America, knew coffee would grow in California because it can be found in botanical gardens and in homeowners’ yards. However, growing coffee in California and producing a big enough yield of quality coffee cherries that can be sold for more than the cost of production was something the researcher didn’t think was possible.

“I didn’t think the economics were there,” he said. “Between a curiosity plant and a commercial crop is a pretty big leap.”

That view changed during a trip Gaskell made to Kona a little over a decade ago for research on lychee and longan. “I said, ‘This looks just like Goleta,’” he recalled, referring to Kona. He thought Ruskey would be up for trying coffee on his farm, so he delivered a variety of seeds from Central America to the entrepreneurial farmer.

“Jay is a real innovator,” Gaskell said.

Ruskey was doubtful. “I had very little confidence I could pull this off,” he said.

Coffee typically is farmed in the tropics. Ruskey’s farm is about 1,000 miles above the northern edge of the tropics, and 2 miles from the Pacific Ocean on a hillside about 600 feet above sea level. The temperature there gets very cold for coffee, as low as around 38 degrees, but doesn’t freeze.

Ruskey planted a test crop in 2004 under avocado trees, and the coffee plants did well.

The coffee on Ruskey’s farm, which is irrigated, doesn’t grow like it would in Hawaii. The fruit stays on the tree a lot longer — about 12 months because plant growth slows down in the cold months. Ruskey said the added time coffee cherries spend on the tree imparts a special flavor to the beans.

Ruskey said he had a decent crop by 2006 or 2007, and continued trying to improve the quality through post-harvest processing techniques. About three years ago he had his first official cupping, or taste test, by well-regarded tasters. And in 2014 the buying guide Coffee Review put Good Land Organics coffee on its top-30 list.

“We’ve proven that we can get some of the finest, best-tasting coffee in the world,” he said.

Ruskey, who has 2,000 coffee trees on his farm, sells most of his coffee beans green for \$60 to \$80 a pound and also roasts some that he sells online for \$30 per 5-ounce bag.

Over the past two years, Ruskey has been collaborating with other avocado farmers, getting them to plant coffee on their farms. Ruskey said there are now 16 California coffee farmers who collectively have 15,000 plants.

Though Ruskey envisions potentially much more growth, he said California isn't going to become a major coffee-producing region of the world. "We're a niche market," he said. "We're not here to take on commodity coffee. We're doing high-end coffee."

Added Gaskell, "We're never going to be selling into the world market."

Hawaii also is a relative niche player compared with behemoth coffee-producing places of the world such as Brazil, Vietnam, Columbia, Ethiopia and Indonesia. Still, Hawaii has earned widespread recognition for its crop that has been grown in the islands for nearly 200 years.

The Hawaii Coffee Association said coffee farming got its start locally in the early 1800s after the governor of Oahu, Chief Boki, picked up some trees in Brazil on a return trip home from London. After efforts to start coffee plantations failed, small farms developed in Kona and grew to more than 1,000 by the 1930s.

Coffee production peaked in Hawaii at 15 million pounds of green beans in 1957-58, according to the state Department of agriculture. Over the past three decades, coffee was planted on other islands as part of efforts mainly by sugar cane plantations to diversify. In the past few years, there were an estimated 950 coffee farms covering close to 9,000 acres in Hawaii, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Last season, the industry statewide harvested 7.5 million pounds of coffee valued at \$50 million.

Local farmers who have heard of the California effort have generally been supportive.

"I wish them luck with it," said Steve Hicks, chief financial officer of Greenwell Farms and president of the Hawaii Coffee Association. "I don't think it's seen as a threat here by anyone."

Anita Kelleher, operator of the Kona Coffee farm Blue Corner Coffee, added, "I say good luck, and I look forward to tasting a cup someday."

Some local farmers aren't familiar with Good Land Organics and wondered whether the farm qualifies as a commercial coffee producer. But Ruskey said he is selling coffee for more than it costs to produce. And Nakamoto at UH agrees that Hawaii no longer owns the turf of the only state with commercial coffee production.

"Good Land Organics is small but a commercial producer nonetheless," Nakamoto said.