



**Agricultural
Leadership
Foundation of
Hawai'i**

99-193 Aiea Heights Dr., Ste. 300-A
Aiea, Hawai'i 96701
telephone/fax (808) 947-2914
email office@agleaderhi.org

ALUMNI PROFILES

Jim Reddekopp, Class VIII

Hana Hou!

THE MAGAZINE OF HAWAIIAN AIRLINES



Magic Bean

story by Chad Blair photos by Linny Morris



Johnny Cash's voice is blasting from a CD player, and his solemn wail manages to rise above the din of workers wielding hammers, saws and drills. I look up to see a sign reading, "Jesus is the Lord of the Harvest," and walk gingerly through what will soon become the kitchen of the Hawaiian Vanilla Company Mill and Visitors Center. I'm thirty-six miles north of Hilo, several miles mauka from Highway 19 and the town of Pa'aui. The driving instructions to the mill were color-coded: Take a sharp left at the blue house, go past the old Shell gas pump, look for the large yellow building on your left. There were so many eucalyptus trees along the way that I thought I must be in Oregon. But the remnant tufts of sugarcane sprouting along the two-lane road indicate otherwise: This is the heart of Hamakua—the fertile swath of land stretching from Hilo to Waimea that was, for much of the 20th century, dominated by sugar plantations, and is today home to a growing (pun intended) diversified agriculture movement. But even by rural Hamakua standards, Hawaiian Vanilla is pretty far off the beaten path, both literally and figuratively. "People come out here and say, 'How did you ever find this place? Why did you come out here?'" says owner Jim Reddekopp. "Well, I've got a disease," he continues. "It's called 'vanilla-ism.'" Jim Reddekopp (it's pronounced "ready cop"), 42, is currently the only successful commercial farmer of vanilla in the United States. When we met, he wore jeans

and a T-shirt with an American flag on the front and a logo for Toro lawnmowers on the back. Needless to say, the Hawai'i Kai native has come a long way since he first envisioned becoming a Big Island farmer. "It was a dinner with my wife Tracy— she's from Kailua—and someone said, 'What about macadamia nuts? Papaya? Saffron?' And then my mother-in-law suggested vanilla." Intrigued, he began to research. "Well, I found out it was an orchid; I found out that it grew only 25 degrees north or south of the equator and that it only bloomed one day out of the year. And, I found that it was the most labor-intensive crop in the world."

Owing to its fickle nature, vanilla is also one of the world's most expensive spices. Pollination is done by hand, not machine, and it can take five years to produce just one bean. Worldwide, the vanilla trade is a billion-dollar industry: Madagascar is the world's number one grower, having exported more than \$600 million dollars worth of beans in 2004. The United States, meanwhile, is the world's number one importer, to the tune of more than \$190 million per year. Dried vanilla beans sell for \$200 per pound wholesale, \$1,000 per pound retail—that's something like \$10 per bean. At the Hawaiian Vanilla gift shop, a four-ounce bottle of pure vanilla extract sells for \$15. But to hear Jim speak of it, vanilla is more than just a cash crop, more than just a plant: "It's funny, but there's a romantic side of me that thinks it's very alluring—the beauty of the flower, how it reproduces, the smell, the sense. It's unlike cardamom or cinnamon or allspice. For someone like Chef Mavro, it's the flavor that marriages all the other flavors together." Jim is referring to his friend and customer, award-winning Hawai'i chef George Mavrothalassitis. Hawaiian Vanilla also supplies Alan Wong's, Roy's and Hiroshi's. I shake a glass of ice tea Jim had handed me earlier. "Vanilla?" "Are you kidding me?" he says, with a grin as wide as Waipi'o Valley. "Everything has vanilla in it here." Jim provides other examples: "We had forty of our best friends over for dinner recently, and I served beef tenderloin in a red wine balsamic marinated in Hawaiian vanilla tarragon. Just awesome. In fact, I just had a little piece before you came..." He says it in a way that suggests nothing I have ever eaten comes close to approaching such divinity. Then he catches himself and laughs. "I was the classic pizza and burgers guy before I discovered vanilla. Now I've become a snob!" And an expert on vanilla, for which Jim credits the late Tom Kadooka, founder of the Kona Orchid Society. Kadooka first began experimenting with hybridized vanilla in the 1940s, seeking a hardier strain of the notoriously hard-to-grow plant. Jim sought him out, but Kadooka didn't return calls ("I was just some guy with a dream," he recalls). Finally, he sent Kadooka's wife a hand-written note and a \$10 gift certificate to Longs Drugs. It worked. The older man began mentoring the younger on the orchid that had become his life's love. Today, a painting of Kadooka hangs in the mill's dining room. "It was the old Japanese way of doing things," Jim relates. "He would only give small amounts of information at a time, to measure my seriousness. But he came to realize I was very determined."

Jim and Tracy moved to Kona six years ago and took over a 4,000-square-foot shade house, where they eventually produced an annual harvest of 500 pounds of vanilla. Three years ago, they expanded to a 30,000-square-foot greenhouse on several acres of land near the mill site above Pa'auilo. In addition to half a million dollars of their own money, they've been helped with matching grants from the USDA's Small Business Innovation Research Program, and a RETA-H, which stands for Rural Economic Transition Assistance. Just a few months ago, a Silicon Valley investor put up another half mil or so to fertilize Jim's vision thing. Even so, the Reddekopps run a small tourist business on the side to make ends meet. "This has been the most humbling experience," Jim says. "Growing up, I didn't know anything about agriculture. But I learned you have to have compassion for what you are doing, because it takes a lot of care. It's just like raising kids."

As we tour the vanilla farm, three-quarters of a mile down a bumpy road, Jim's 4-year-old son Aidan walks by. All five Reddekopp kids are home-schooled and are part of the family business. That business has yet to turn a profit, but Jim thinks he'll give himself his first paycheck by next spring. They've already hired staff, and are expanding the farm. Tracy—a.k.a. the "vanilla momma"—prepares gourmet lunches and teas at the mill, which now draw hundreds of visitors every week from visiting Norwegian Cruise Line ships. A bumper crop on the world vanilla market two years ago momentarily cut the wholesale price in half. Some manufacturers moved to synthetic vanilla, but not Jim Reddekopp. He believes the same natural conditions that give Kona Coffee brand recognition—"Hawaiian heat, sweet rains, mild breezes"—apply to his crop. The curing process at Hawaiian Vanilla includes placing the beans in sweatboxes, massaging them to get the oil and juices flowing and letting them dry in the sun for months. At present, there are a handful of other farmers in the Islands growing vanilla, but none have succeeded like the Reddekopps. And so Jim also holds growing seminars to inspire others. "There're 700 gourmet farmers on the Kona Coffee Belt, and if we could do 100 vanilla farmers, wouldn't that be great? I live on the land, I'm proud to grow a crop and have a rural lifestyle. But others can do this, too." He pauses, reflecting again on his intimate involvement with the bean and its bounty. "There've been studies on how vanilla affects the body and brain. It's very calming. I've even seen a study that says it's the closest thing to mother's milk. That's very internal, very special, the time we spent with our mothers. That says something about the effect vanilla has on people." Jim Reddekopp smiles. "More tea?" **HH**