

**A Sense of Place  
with Global Appeal**

**“Kona Brewing Company  
had a spirit way beyond  
the technical facility.  
It was a lifestyle.”**

**— Mattson Davis '83**



# Branding a Lifestyle

“When eating an elephant, take one bite at a time.”

Mattson Davis stared at the message on his bathroom mirror for a moment. If he was going to optimize production at Kona Brewing Company, conceptualize and build out a restaurant, create a unified brand and, ultimately, a lifestyle, he knew that every decision would be a building block to accomplishing his goal. He internalized it, took a deep breath and continued with his morning routine. One bite at a time, he reminded himself, one bite at a time.

Mattson grew up in the verdant Pacific Northwest, in Seattle and Spokane, Washington, graduating from Saint George’s School. He moved to Portland, Oregon in the 1980s in the very early days of the craft beer movement. He was bouncing around between city and state colleges, waiting tables at fine dining restaurants to pay the bills. He quickly became enamored by the complete dining experience—the hospitality, the smell of great food, beverage service, the instant gratification of making someone happy and getting a great tip.

While working at a gourmet pizza restaurant in 1996, he was approached by Cameron Healy, owner of potato chip manufacturer Kettle Foods. Cameron, a three-day-a-week regular at the restaurant, had been watching Mattson for several months, observing how he interacted with the staff and the guests. Cameron asked Mattson if he would be interested in working for him and running his brewing company on the Big Island as the general manager.

Luckily for both men, it turned out to be one of those serendipitous moments in life. Mattson was looking for a change, hungry for direction and meaning in his life. After a month and a half of interviews and conversations, Cameron had instilled his goals and objectives upon Mattson, who eagerly made

the move to Hawai‘i.

“When I came to Kona Brewing Company in 1997, I was 31 years old,” Mattson recalls fondly. “Kona Brewing Company had these bones and a spirit way beyond the technical facility. It was a lifestyle. It took me about six months to be enveloped by Hawai‘i, by community, by incredible beauty.”

Mattson recognized that the beer was not just a product, but also a relationship with the community. Organizations and companies were flocking to him to form partnerships so they could have Kona Brewing Company beer at their events.

During his first year on the job, however, there weren’t many celebratory beers sliding across the bar to hoist into the air. In May, he took a phone call from Dave Campbell, brewer for Aloha Beer Company. Dave told Mattson that an odd flavor was permeating Kona Brew’s bottled Pacific Golden Ale. Mattson immediately went to the brewery and sampled the batch. He tasted it, too. Bacteria had entered the system and compromised the flavor.

Quality and flavor consistency is of utmost importance to the craft brewer. You can’t effectively brand a small-batch ale, pilsner or lager if every batch tastes different. Mattson and the company’s head brewer found the source of the foreign bacteria and, in turn, discovered an even larger problem; Mattson had \$10,000 worth of bad beer sitting at the distributor on O‘ahu. To make matters worse, Kona Brewing Company was struggling financially, surviving paycheck to paycheck.

Mattson called Cameron, who was in England at the time, to break the bad news.

“What should we do?” Cameron asked.

“Destroy it,” Mattson replied. “Throw it away.”

“You’re exactly right,” Cameron said.

“You never have a second chance to make

**Mattson  
Davis ‘83  
Discovers the  
Formula for  
Liquid Aloha**

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**“We live here for what we get every day, the spirit of aloha, the nature—we must take care of it and that’s a big thing for Kona Brewing Company.”  
– Mattson Davis ‘83**

that first impression. If you don’t commit to the quality of your product, you don’t have a product. It’s going to be painful, but we’re going to figure it out, so make it happen.”

Mattson reimbursed the wholesaler for the entire lot and paid a substantial fee to have every case destroyed. It was a turning point in his career. He recognized the importance of the values he shared with Cameron. They agreed on the objective and end goal, and Cameron trusted Mattson to get them there. “I wasn’t the smartest guy in the room, but I was willing to work harder than anyone else to eat that elephant,” Mattson says with a chuckle.

When Mattson arrived in Hawai‘i, Kona Brewing Company was only a brewery. Despite growing costs for the initial Kona restaurant, Cameron stood behind Mattson and continued to fund the Big Island restaurant endeavor. The restaurant proved to be a success. With the Kailua-Kona restaurant averaging 27,000 meals a month in 2003, Mattson decided to bring the restaurant experience to O‘ahu, opening the Hawai‘i Kai location. “The restaurant’s objective is to deliver the preeminent Kona Brewing Company beer-drinking experience to the guest,” he says.

That experience was increasingly enjoyed by people outside Hawai‘i, so in 1998 they started brewing their bottled beer on the mainland. That way, they didn’t have to ship empty bottles and paper products to Hawai‘i, just to turn around and ship the cases of beer back to the mainland. A stroke of good luck came in 2002 when specialty store giant Trader Joe’s ordered 19 containers of Kona Brewing Company beer, which increased demand for the brand on the mainland and garnered the attention of some big-time mainland craft brewers.

As Kona Brewing Company grew over the years, it opened up four more breweries in strategic locations across the contiguous United States, ensuring that the beer is produced as close to the people consuming it as possible. Kona Brewing Company produced 3,000 barrels of beer in 1997. Today, they

produce almost 300,000 barrels a year.

“Kona Brewing Company is about sense of place. It’s about Hawai‘i. It’s about transporting that feeling of aloha through liquid—liquid aloha—thousands of miles or to 19 countries, like we’re in today,” explains Mattson.

For all its global reach, the company’s connection to the Hawai‘ian community and commitment to its environment has never been stronger. Kona Brewing Company was the first west-side business on Hawai‘i Island to practice commercial recycling and the company went 60 percent solar in 2010, installing 1,000 solar panels on its rooftop as well as on a neighboring structure.

Part of Mattson and Cameron’s fundamental mission is to give back to the community, not only by lessening their environmental impact, but also with charitable donations. This year the popular Kona Brewers Festival, a celebration of craft brew in early March on the Big Island, raised over \$140,000 for educational and environmental nonprofits.

While Kona Brewing Company promoted liquid aloha across the country and raised money for local nonprofits, things were changing internally. In 2010, the company fully merged with its mainland sales, marketing and manufacturing partner, Craft Brew Alliance, in a cash and stock swap. Mattson remained president and CEO for three years after the merger to make sure Craft Brew Alliance fully understood Kona Brewing Company’s “invisible balance sheet.”

Today, Mattson is the chairman of the Kona Advisory Board and the managing director of restaurant and retail in Hawai‘i. He advises on the strategy of the brand and serves as a resource for keeping the brand on track and mentoring others in the company. Because no one understands the connection between business, environment and community more than Mattson, a man who is still eating that elephant one bite at a time.

– Kevin Whitton (Reprinted by permission from Pacific Edge Magazine <http://thepacifiedge.com>)

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