

# IMPOSTERS

## JAMAICA BATTLES

Vendors and consumers are rarely fooled by so-called designer knock-off products—they know their \$100 “luxury” watches aren’t genuine, and so does the retailer responsible for the sale. But when it comes to designer knock-off coffee, its origin isn’t always as transparent, especially since these suspected coffee imposters are purposely trying to pull the wool over the eyes of would-be customers, according to the Jamaican Coffee Industry Board, a government agency that regulates coffee production in the small Caribbean nation.

For years, the CIB has been working to squelch coffee imposters who illegally use the name Jamaican Blue Mountain Coffee—the country’s most coveted bean brand—to describe beans or bean blends with little or no Blue Mountain constitution (especially lately, as more coffee dealers are selling beans online). But unlike the purveyors of those fake Louis Vuitton handbags or phony Gucci sunglasses, these imposters don’t state the coffee’s alleged substandard roots. The result: loss of revenue for Jamaican growers, swindled customers (roasters, retailers and coffee drinkers) and a very unhappy CIB that devotes time and resources to nabbing the culprits when it would rather be promoting the Blue Mountain name.

“This has been an ongoing problem with coffee from Jamaica for at least 25 years,” says Ted Lingle, executive director of the SCAA. “I think they have become highly frustrated with the problem and have decided to fix it once and for all.”

### CATCHING THE CULPRITS

Though Graham Dunkley, director general of the CIB, won’t reveal the identities of imposters or provide an estimate of the number of frauds his agency has debunked, he does indicate that plenty exist. They are caught by mystery shoppers sent out by the CIB to retail establishments and websites that claim to sell genuine Blue Mountain coffee. The CIB also operates a trademark watch service to “detect attempts to register our marks” and relies on the Jamaican community at-large to keep the agency apprised of products on the market that boast the Blue Mountain label. “[The

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## COFFEE CON ARTISTS

attempted deception] is quite prevalent,” he says. “It happens more often than we would like.”

The mystery shoppers’ palates are trained to recognize authentic Blue Mountain flavor, so apparently, when they sip something bogus, they know. “On occasions that we have sampled ‘imposter’ Jamaican, the coffee has tasted horrible when compared to what we know to be Jamaican coffee,” Dunkley says.

Another fact Dunkley prefers to keep to himself: the consequences that known imposters face. “We have brought legal proceedings, but we are more interested in settling the matter,” he said, further explaining that, on the advice of Duane Morris, an Atlanta law firm that represents the CIB, he will “progressively increase the types of actions we take until the situation is resolved to our satisfaction.”

### DEFINING AUTHENTICITY

Dunkley describes Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee as the finest in the world, “perfectly balanced with low acidity, a slightly sweet taste and an incomparably pleasant aftertaste.” The beans, he says, have a bold and uniform appearance, a distinctive aroma and lack any sort of flaw. Grown on the lower slopes of the mountains above Kingston, Jamaica’s capital city, the Blue Mountain region itself is quite small in comparison to many other coffee-growing regions around the world—only about 5 million pounds are produced each year (most of which wind up in Japan). A bushel of beans from across the street won’t make the grade.

“The boundary is one of a number of criteria ... and coffee that is grown one mile, two miles or three miles outside of this area is automatically not Jamaican Blue Mountain,” Dunkley says.

Even within the proper geographical boundaries, the coffee must be produced by a registered grower in order to qualify as official Blue Mountain. From there, the beans head to a licensed coffee mill, where they are processed and presented to the CIB’s board for quality assurance and certification. After the board makes sure the coffee encompasses all the desired characteristics, with absolutely no input from the grower, it is ready for export, but only through carefully screened companies and individuals, Dunkley says, adding that all exporters and importers are “required to execute a trademark user agreement with the CIB.”

At this point, the assurance of authenticity falls into the hands of roasters or others involved in purchasing coffee beans for wholesale or retail distribution, and Dunkley strongly urges roasters to demand proof of authenticity and to also look for the official Jamaican Blue Mountain seal on any packaging. (The CIB has been using this seal since 1985.) If the importer or dealer can’t show proof, it is advised that the transaction be discontinued and reported to the CIB or a nearby Jamaican consulate or embassy.

“[They should] enclose the offending packaging, copy of store receipt, date of purchase and a note of how they felt when they discovered the imposter beans or why they feel the

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beans are not Jamaican coffee,” Dunkley says. “Our quality assurance division will evaluate the coffee and the necessary follow-up with the clients, and our trademark lawyers will be pursued.”

Aside from this process, getting information on illegitimate Blue Mountain coffee is difficult at best, in part because the CIB is tight-lipped about whom they have, or have not, caught in the act. The United States Customs and Border Protection division also does not disclose such information, according to the agency’s public affairs department.

“You would actually have to find retailers or roasters that are selling it on a price list but have no record [according to the CIB] of ever purchasing any,” Lingle says. And while Lingle doesn’t doubt the seriousness of the situation, he has not personally heard from anyone who has been cheated.

Still, the SCAA is taking a somewhat proactive role in putting a stop to not just the Blue Mountain imposters, but to anyone involved in mislabeling. “We are [in the process of] developing the controls so that we can trace coffee to where it was originally put in the container,” Lingle says, explaining that it would likely be a “tracking number” system (similar in nature to the way UPS keeps track of packages).

The Coffee Quality Institute also is working toward creating programs that emphasize traceability and transparency, and the coffee industry in general is starting to make this more of a priority, says director of marketing and communications, Tracy Ging. “Hopefully, a situation like this will only encourage everyone to continue those efforts.”

The implementation of tracking systems might help in theory, but their mere existence doesn’t guarantee an end to purposely mislabeled Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee. Yes, it is a criminal act—the FDA’s Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act states in clause 21 CFR 101 that the adulteration or misbranding of any product is prohibited, according to an FDA spokesperson—but that doesn’t mean anyone, be it a government agency or the legal system, is going to enforce it. The FDA does investigate violations if they are brought to their attention, a lengthy process in which a warning letter is sent to the alleged violator, who then has a chance to respond along with certain amount of time to bring the product into compliance; if they don’t, the FDA can seek a temporary or permanent injunction. “It is very difficult to find a D.A. at the state or federal level that will pursue a case like that,” Lingle says. “It is a crime, but not the kind that attracts the attention of the authorities.”



But sometimes the authorities are interested enough. Nearly a decade ago, a federal grand jury indicted Michael Norton of Kona Kai Farms in Berkeley, Calif., on charges of money laundering and wire fraud. The charges stemmed from Norton’s involvement in a coffee re-bagging scam, in which he purchased cheap coffee from Panama and re-packaged it as pure Kona coffee.

But despite the seemingly similar circumstances, Lingle considers the CIB’s grievance a different state of affairs: Instead of re-bagging, illegitimate sources are selling the coffee directly to roasters with the claim that it came from the Blue Mountain region. “There is no one outside of Jamaica who is importing and re-bagging coffee, so [there is] not a parallel,” he says.

## FINE FLAVOR OR ENORMOUSLY OVER-RATED?

Roger Scheumann, president of Quartermaine Coffee in Rockville, Md., has been purchasing Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee around Christmas for the past 10 years. Retail customers, he says, ask for it by name, so he makes it part of his regular holiday-season inventory. All of his coffee is purchased from legitimate dealers, and the Jamaican Blue Mountain arrives in a barrel stamped with the CIB’s official seal. “We have a long-standing relationship with [the U.S.-based dealers] ... and we know that they are following the path of certification and origin,” he says.

Scheumann agrees that Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee can be excellent, but the “finest in the world,” as Dunkley proudly states? “Just because it is from the Blue Mountains doesn’t mean it is better than something across the road that happens to be the dividing line of that district,” says Scheumann.

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Quartermaine has even put Jamaican Blue Mountain through its own testing, with mixed results. “We have certainly been disappointed in the taste of some certified Jamaican Blue Mountain that we have sampled,” Scheumann says, adding that their opinion caused “quite a ruckus” in Jamaica. “Their response was one of incredulity,” he says.

The sometimes-disappointing flavor, coupled with the expense of offering Jamaican Blue Mountain to Quartermaine’s wholesale customers, inspired the company to develop its own Jamaica Mountain Blend, incorporating coffee from other areas of Jamaica with the Blue Mountain beans. The blend is sold under the brand names Quartermaine and Barista Brava. This doesn’t bother Dunkley, as long the label is straightforward. “Blends should inform the consumer of what the elements are, and the relative percentage,” Dunkley says. “The minimum someone should use is 30 percent.”



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### The Blue Mountains of Jamaica

Like Scheumann, Coffee Review editor Kenneth Davids discounts the claim that Jamaican Blue Mountain reigns supreme over all other coffees. Many people (especially novice coffee drinkers) like it simply because it isn’t particularly assertive and doesn’t have a lot of acidity, he says. “[It] can be a very good coffee and kind of interesting, but there is no way it can be seen as [the best in the world], and that is a universal opinion. I don’t think you will find anyone outside of people selling [it] that would say anything differently.”

This difference in opinion, however, ends there. While Scheumann questions whether fraudulent sales of Jamaican Blue is as serious an issue as some believe, he is adamant about selling exactly what he says he is selling. Doing otherwise, he says, would only damage Quartermaine’s credibility in the marketplace, and maintaining an honest relationship with his customers is a top priority.

## READING THE IMPOSTER’S MIND

Trish Skeie, director of coffee for Zoka Coffee in Seattle, doesn’t purchase or sell coffee from Jamaica, but she does speculate as to why the imposters might try to get away with it. “There might be [less expensive] coffees of the same quality, and if it can fit the specifications, and if it tastes like something that is happening in Jamaica, the argument could be made that they are trying to please their customers by giving them what they want,” she says. Skeie also says it is getting easier to pass other coffees off as Jamaican. She first encountered Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee in 1993, and she recalls being impressed by the great taste. At the time, she could easily distinguish it from other coffees. Now, the market is plump with beans of similar flavor and quality.

“Since then, so many other countries have stepped up their game,” Skeie says. And if customers are getting what they want (great-tasting coffee), so are the imposters (cold, hard cash). Genuine Jamaican Blue Mountain commands a price as high as \$50 per pound. If an imposter sells a \$10 coffee for \$50, claiming Blue Mountain origin, that adds up to a lot of extra pocket money. Dunkley says he can’t estimate precisely how much money the Jamaican coffee industry has lost as a result, but he does say it is “significant.”

## FARMERS TAKE FINANCIAL HIT

Unfortunately, the Jamaican farmers bear the brunt of this financial loss. According to Lingle and Dunkley, farmers lose business because the imposters are hijacking a portion of their market share, not to mention damaging the integrity of their product, regardless of whether the coffee is truly anything special. Still, since their job is to cultivate the coffee, farmers have no control over what happens when it leaves their hands. Even though they may have the most at stake, stopping any sort of fraud is beyond their control.

“I honestly think that it is up to the roasters to be good stewards and to keep it really honest all the way down the line,” says Skeie.

## SOLUTION IN SIGHT

Dunkley is optimistic that the CIB’s proactive approach will eventually result in the end of fraudulent Jamaican Blue coffee sales, as long as everyone involved does their part. “The goal of everyone around the chain has to be that we are going to take the measures necessary to protect the brand and to improve the customer experience,” he says. This is especially crucial now because Jamaica is still recovering from 2004’s Hurricane Ivan, which wiped out about half of all Jamaican crops. A supply shortage has made the market ripe for imposters. “We are trying to rebuild and do the best we can with the remaining volumes,” says Dunkley. “Certainly, the quality standards are robust and stringent, and only the best will be allowed.”