

Marley son invests in coffee - But it's not Blue Mountain certified

Rohan Marley, son of the late Bob Marley, working with a partner, has acquired lands in Jamaica for coffee farming and launched Marley Coffee, marrying his father's famous name to another world-class brand, Blue Mountain.

But while the company website advertises its product as organically certified "with the beans sourced from the highest Class One Specialty grade", the agency that regulates the coffee trade here says the Marley operation has not yet got its stamp of approval. Stacian Bennett, legal representative at the Coffee Industry Board, confirmed however that the application from Marley was before the board. Jamaica's Blue Mountain coffee is a premium bean, which is said to provide a cup of exceptional balance and an exotic and intense aroma. Marley Coffee chief executive officer Shane Whittle on Thursday said the farm was 52 acres in size, employing six to eight people full-time. Farm location "We have started reaping," he said via email. Whittle ignored the query on the farm's actual location. But the company website gives the Bob Marley Museum on Hope Road in Kingston as the corporate address or place of contact for Marley Coffee.

The CIB's quality assurance manager, Hervine Willis, said that if Marley Coffee were in fact selling beans, it may not be Jamaican coffee and definitely was not Blue Mountain-grown. "The coffee is not from here," said Willis. "I went to the website and they have indicated using blends from Africa. They do have a farm and they were trying to license to sell the coffee, but they have not done what they need to do, including getting their dealer's licence." The Blue Mountain label applies only to coffee grown in that location in the island. The coffee board notes that licensed dealers are required to maintain a farm/production capacity of 6,000 boxes of cherry coffee per crop year. "Anything going out of here as Blue Mountain coffee must be certified by this board. Whoever is buying Marley Coffee has no guarantee that it is Blue Mountain," said Willis on Thursday. "The fact is they have not gotten any permission to market and they have not been processing Blue Mountain coffee." Organic products are grown without artificial inputs such as chemical-based fertilisers, with the clear intent of tapping into another premium market where natural products, especially in Europe, attract a higher price. Bennett said that for the CIB to certify coffee products as 'organic', the farm would need to be independently reviewed by "an appropriate and reputable organisation such as the Jamaica Organic Agri-culture Movement (JOAM)." JOAM standards and certification committee head, Stacy Bennett, said Thursday that the organisation had not been approached to conduct such a review, but Whittle said the company was "in the process" of being certified by international body CERES. Indeed, other local organic growers with whom the Financial Gleaner spoke note that they have received certification in several European countries, but none from the Coffee Industry Board.

The Blue Mountain brand Whittle insisted that the Financial Gleaner view a video clip called 'One Cup of Coffee', saying it had full details of the farm - and had initially made it a condition of answering questions emailed to him about Marley Coffee - but the film on the company's website proved difficult to launch. The Blue Mountain brand is also one of the most expensive to produce, at average rates of about US\$7 per pound. In 2008, Jamaica Blue Mountain and Jamaica High Mountain coffee brands, said to be the most expensive in the world, sold at base rates of US\$11.50 per pound and US\$7.50, respectively, and earned between US\$28 million and US\$50 million a year. The 'AI' box of cherries sold for US\$30 per pound and green beans for US\$12 per pound. Willis says most of the local coffee produced this year was exported green or in the raw state, with number one premium grade Blue Mountain now selling for US\$33 per kilogramme. Sold as roasted coffee, the price is approximately US\$44 per kilogramme. High Mountain fetches up to US\$19.80 per kilogramme for raw beans and about US\$25 per kilogramme for roasted. Organic Blue Mountain attracts the highest prices local growers say, with the roasted selling this year for up to US\$95 per kilogramme. Supply of Blue Mountain coffee has fallen short in the past year or two due to the decimation of farms by past storms, and the inability of uninsured farmers to recapitalise their operations. At the highest levels of production in the 2003/04 crop season, only 523,000 boxes of Blue Mountain and 90 boxes of High Mountain coffee were produced. Jamaica Gleaner