

Mālama Maui – From the ‘āina to the diner

The “original economy” of Hawai‘i was, of course, based on agriculture. Ancient land divisions – the most important of these being the “ahupua‘a” – were complete ecological and economic systems unto themselves; literally, lifelines for Hawaiians. These land divisions, incidentally, are most certainly still recognized today by traditional Hawaiians. Ahupua‘a may best be described as pie-shaped land divisions with the pinnacle high up in the mountains and the wide base reaching quite far out into the ocean. In addition to providing all the necessary foodstuffs – sweet potatoes, bananas, kalo from the uplands and the plains, shellfish from the brackish water along the shoreline, myriad varieties of limu (seaweed) and fishes from the ocean – the ahupua‘a also functioned as a water management system. There is nothing more critical to the island way of life than fresh water. As rainwater flowed down the mountains, it would be used on its path for drinking, bathing and irrigation. Ancient Hawaiians were agricultural and environmental masters. They had to be. It was literally, a matter of life and death.

Although agriculture has, in modern times, struggled – through the plantation days of sugar, pineapple and, later, coffee – agriculture still ranks right behind tourism in importance to the Islands’ economy. Factor in the hundreds of food service operations that serve what the farmers grow and small-scale farming takes on even more significance. And now, Maui Nui has joined the ranks of other agritourism destinations.

It goes without saying that Hawai‘i Regional Cuisine has its root in the rich soil of these Islands. Thanks to a handful of chefs who, more than a decade ago, went directly to local farmers and producers, visitors and residents alike are treated to the delicious bounty of this land.

Let’s begin right in Central Maui, where Maui Community College’s state-of-the-art, 17+ million-dollar Pa‘ina Building may best be described as the culinary crossroads of the Island – where students, instructors, farmers, producers, chefs and restaurateurs converge. This award-winning culinary arts program not only turns out talented young chefs, servers, and managers to staff the Island’s restaurants, but also operates a fine-dining lunch restaurant, a full-on food court that spotlights local product, provides staffing for non-profit events and culinary galas island-wide, arranges externships with hotels and restaurants throughout Maui Nui, AND partners with local companies to research, test and, finally, market gourmet products.

In 2002, Tedeschi Vineyards not only gave the program its “re-cycled” raspberry lees but provided seed money through the Maui Agriculture Foundation towards the development of

Maui Raspberry Wine Jelly. According to program spokesperson Chef Chris Speere, “The success of the Raspberry Wine Jelly coupled with the local agricultural community’s need for the creation of new and value-added food products served to initiate the Food Research and Development component of our program. Our Research and Development Lab has provided students with marketable skills in the areas of food manufacturing, new food product development, recipe development, and sales and marketing. Tedeschi Winery’s Tasting Room is our largest wholesale account. And we’re currently talking to them about the possibility of distributing our products into all the locations that current stock THEIR products.”

Quickly following suit was Maui Land & Pineapple Company, which provides cull pineapples and “less-than-perfect” cans of crushed pineapple for the program’s second product, Maui Roasted Pineapple Jam. The company also helped with the marketing effort through their Honolulu Store within the Kapalua resort area. And to sweeten both these luscious products, HC&S provides its signature Maui Premium Gold Sugar.

New products are just over the horizon, all of them the result of partnerships between the college and small farmers and producers. And remember, MCC’s students are Maui’s culinary stars of the future

The Food Court and the Class Act fine-dining restaurant, of course, feature Maui-grown/made products – lettuces from D & D Farms, micro greens from Warren Watanabe’s farm (he is now the president of the Maui County Farm Bureau); corn and onions from Uradomo Farms, experimental tomatoes (tomatoes are a tough-to-grow crop here in Hawai‘i) from John Cho, an agriculture specialist from the University of Hawai‘i; and great homegrown beef from Alex Franco and the rest of the ranchers who recently formed the Maui Cattle Company consortium to provide as many outlets as possible in the Islands with fresh-from-the-pastureland beef products.

MCC’s latest foray into the fields is a brand, spanking new (as of April 1st) farmers market. The Aloha Friday Farmers Market, held on campus in Kahului, is produced by the Maui Ag Marketing Coalition and takes place every Friday from 7:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. It’s described as “upscale and ‘European Style,’ appealing to part-time as well as local residents.” This is an open market for Maui-grown agriculture and Maui-produced food products. All vendors and aspects of the Market adhere to a “Real Maui Produce/Real Maui Products” theme.

Entertainment, gourmet meals, door prizes, and special features are a part of the overall market event each week.

(808-268-3276; www.mauifarmersmarket.org)

On Moloka‘i, organic plants, herbs, vegetables, fruit, and local handmade crafts are in the spotlight every Saturday morning at the Kaunakakai Farm & Craft Market and on the Private Isle, the Lāna‘i Market Place is open Saturdays from 8:00 a.m. to noon with fresh produce, home-cooked food, jams and jellies for sale.

Some folks prefer to see the stuff in the ground, as it were, rather than displayed in market stalls and that agritourism experience is available throughout Maui now, too. The three jewels in the crown are in, where else?, beautiful upcountry Kula.

Thomas and Eva Kafsack at Surfing Goat Dairy (www.surfinggoatdairy.com) and Ali‘i Chang and Lani Medina at Ali‘i Kula Lavender (808-878-3004, www.mauikulalavender.com) are the most successful agritour operators on Maui and have also had a positive impact in the marketplace. Surfing Goat – in addition to daily tours – makes more than two dozen varieties of goat cheese with many Maui chefs using the products in their restaurants. Ali‘i’s relaxing and restorative lavender shows up in coffee, cracked pepper, gourmet seasonings, herb dressing, tea, vinegar, honey, jams, jellies, sugar, syrup and yes, even chocolate. Tours here, too, give visitors a behind-the-scenes look at what it takes to run this gorgeous farm high up Mt. Haleakalā.

Just down Waipoli Road from Ali‘i’s spread is the newest member of this triumvirate, O‘o Farms. Owned and operated by the owners and Executive Chef James McDonald (a proud graduate of the MCC Culinary program and affectionately referred to as the program’s “poster child”!) of two of Maui’s most award-winning restaurants – Pacific’O and I’o in Lahaina – it is the only farm in the State of Hawai‘i which has as its sole purpose providing the owners’ restaurants with product. Almost 500 pounds of product is harvested here each week. Visitors are welcome to tour the eight-plus acres with its, literally, dozens and dozens of varieties of salad greens, vegetables, citrus, stone fruit, berries and more and then pick their own lunch. (808-667-4341; www.pacificomaui.com; tours are Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings dependent on minimum of 10 reservations; \$25 or \$50 per person depending on tour chosen). These enterprising restaurateurs have recently begun planting a 15-acre, 100% organic farm in Launiupoko (just outside Lahaina) where they’ll soon begin to harvest exotics, tropicals and

micro-greens. All food waste from the restaurants, by the way, is used for compost at both these farms.

Consulting with the O‘o folks – and many other small farmers – is the undisputed king of organic farming on Maui, Chuck Boerner. His Ono Farms in the Kīpahulu district past Hāna has been a model operation for more than three decades. (808-248-7779; <http://www.maui.net/~onofarms/>; tours arranged by appointment) Health-conscious consumers at stores like Down to Earth (Kahului and Makawao) and Mana Foods (Pā‘ia) have enjoyed his papayas, bananas and other exotic fruits for years. Where once there was price resistance, restaurants jumped on the Ono bandwagon – because the the product is healthier, it tastes better and it’s homegrown.

Hawai‘i’s “king of fruits” is the subject of Maui’s only Hawaiian Pineapple Plantation Tour. Led by plantation workers, commentary weaves the history of the area with facts about Hawai‘i’s most famous fruit. Visitors are taken to fields being harvested, learn about the unique growing cycle, and have the opportunity to pick their own pineapple to take home. (Kapalua Pineapple Tour; 808-669-8088; www.kapaluamaui.com; Mon. – Fri., except holidays 9:30 a.m. to noon and 12:30 to 3:00 p.m.; children must be at least 10 years old; \$29 per person; comfortable, covered shoes [no sandals]; sunscreen and a hat are recommended.)

If your interest lies in seeing a small, family-run operation, Casey Shim’s working coffee and protea farm is a good place for that. A member of the Shim family that settled in the Keokea area of Kula at the turn of the 20th Century, Casey also has fruit trees and lots of flowers, not to mention a million-dollar view “downcountry. Tours are available from March 1st to July 31st by appointment only from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. daily. (808-876-0055; www.shimfarmtour.com; \$7.00 per adult; \$5.00 per child up to the age of 18; \$5.00 for those 60 and older.)

Coffees of Hawai‘i on Moloka‘i, which markets the Muleskinner, Malulani and Moloka‘i Island Princess brands, has been purchased by Mike Atherton, who operates a coffee plantation in Nicaragua. Atherton's Friendly Isle Coffee Co., has recently re-opened its gift shop and espresso bar and is scheduled to re-start plantation tours soon.

Kumu Farms, also on Moloka‘i, was one of the first to supply locally-grown, gourmet produce to Maui restaurants. And it’s still going strong. They specialize in fresh herbs, papayas and they produce specialty sauces. (808-567-6480; visitors welcome.)

Salt is an important product to Hawaiian culture and now there’s a place to see how it’s

hand-harvested and turned into gourmet table salts, bath, beauty and ceremonial products. Hawai‘i Kai Salts in Kaunakakai, Moloka‘i offers both guided and self-guided tours. (553-5970; www.soulofthesea.net)

Although not indigenous, nothing says “a gourmet taste of Hawai‘i” like the rich, delicious flavor of macadamia nuts. Kammie and Tuddy Purdy of Ho‘olehua, Moloka‘i offer tours of their working, 70-year old macadamia nut farm. You’ll learn everything you ever wanted to know about mac nuts from growth, bearing, harvesting and shelling. And the nuts and nut products they produce are, arguably, the best you’ll ever taste. (Purdy’s Natural Macadamia Nut Farm; 808-567-6601; www.molokai-hawaii.com; 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Mon. – Fri. or by appointment.)

There is perhaps no more unusual agri-experience in the Islands than the Honouli Wai Taro Patch Farm on the east end of Moloka‘i. This is a unique look at traditional Hawaiian agriculture – with a twist! – in terraced taro patches. Visitors learn about taro and its importance to native Hawaiians and how Bigfoot, an Asian water buffalo, helped restore these lo‘i. (808-558-8922; www.molokai-hawaii.com; call in advance for an appointment)

For decades, sugar was Hawai‘i’s most important crop. Today, only Maui still grows, harvests and processes sugar cane. Maui Brand Natural Cane Sugars are made here by Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar Company using 100% cane sugar grown on its 37,000-acre central Maui plantation. Handcrafted one batch at a time, the products contain no synthetic ingredients. Across the street from the old mill in Pu‘unēnē, the Alexander & Baldwin Sugar Museum offers a comprehensive look at the sugar industry through photos, artifacts, working models and interactive displays. (808-871-805; www.sugarmuseum.org; call for current hours; \$5 adults; \$2 children from six to 17 years; children under five free)

Railroads traveled through the history of Hawai‘i for more than 100 years, hauling sugar cane to the mills, and transporting workers between their homes and the canefields. One of Maui’s was the Lahaina Kā‘anapali & Pacific Railroad. Today, it’s known simply as the Sugar Cane Train and it transports visitors through the old cane fields complete with a singing conductor who narrates the tours. (808-667-6851; www.sugarcanetrain.com; continuous round trips beginning in Lahaina town from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. am; \$18.95 per adult; \$12.95 per child)

Chef Chris Speere of Maui Community College's Culinary Arts program sums it up best. "I have total admiration for our local farm community. Great cuisine is built on great ingredients. Chefs demand and are inspired by food products that are fresh, vibrant and grown with care and passion. Maui farmers go to their fields each day to support the demands of our chefs and local restaurant industry. Working at the local level Maui's chefs and farmers can provide an inspired, creative and healthy cuisine that matches our island lifestyle. Maui's island lifestyle and beauty is predicated on open space. It is Maui's farm community that allows us to enjoy vistas of green and gold. In essence it is our responsibility to support the endeavors of our local farm community."

So while the crops and methods may be different and modern, the ancient ahupua'a reaching from high in the mountains out to sea still provide residents and visitors alike with the agriculture bounty which Maui Nui enjoys and seeks to preserve.