

Hawaii Grown: Ask for It

Special to West Hawaii Today

by Shelley Hoose

Kona Coffee. These words evoke visions of crimson coffee cherries shining in the Kona sun and the aroma of the best coffee in the world. Yet the Kona Blend coffee typically sold at restaurants statewide contains no more than a small percentage of real Kona-grown beans. Coffee connoisseurs know that Kona coffee isn't real Kona unless it's grown here -- all 100 percent of it -- not just the ten percent mandated by the State as the minimum requirement for using the name that Kona coffee made famous.

Locally-grown produce has greater variety, better taste, and a potential for quality that food grown elsewhere and shipped here simply doesn't. This quality and variety are two of the things which make Hawaii's cuisine special. When Hawaii residents or visitors dine in a better quality local restaurant, they may assume that they are eating locally-grown foods and drinking locally grown coffee.

"Visitors want to experience what makes Hawaii different from other destinations," says Dr. Kent Fleming, UH-Manoa Agricultural & Resource Economics professor and extension economist focusing on strategic management. "There is a new emphasis on the cultural aspects of travel, on the sense of place -- including a region's cuisine. Restaurant-goers, whether residents or visitors, usually assume they're eating Hawaiian food -- but too often they are not."

Instead, diners, if they were to go behind the scene, might find that the Dole varieties of pineapple and bananas in their fruit salad were grown by Dole in the Philippines or Central America. The distinguishing positive characteristic of these tougher varieties is that they are cheaper to produce and they ship well. "Most people, given the choice," says Fleming, "would much prefer the taste of the Hawaii grown varieties: the sweeter white pineapple and apple banana varieties." The same can be said for the locally-grown -- as opposed to California-grown -- tomatoes, lettuce and strawberries.

Beef is a perfect example of the failure to capitalize on Hawaii grown products. With Hawaii's extraordinary grass production potential, ranchers can feed three to four times as many cattle as they could on Mainland grass production. It would make economic and environmental sense to "finish" cattle here. Yet most of Hawaii's calves are weaned and sent to feedlots on the

Mainland where they are finished on grain. Fleming thinks that the consumer needs to be educated to appreciate meat from grass-fed ranching operations which would result in a demand for Hawaii grass-fed beef and lamb.

Given the obvious consumer demand for local products, as well as the economic and environmental benefits, why don't more restaurants and chefs specialize in local products? One reason is a lack of communication and coordination between the chefs and farmers themselves, both of which find it difficult to appreciate the other's needs and concerns.

"As a chef, what I need to know from farmers is that if they promise to sell me green beans, I'm going to have green beans, and I'm going to have enough week after week to put them on the menu," says Peter Merriman, owner of Merriman's Restaurant in Waimea and president of Hawaii Regional Cuisine, a non-profit organization of chefs dedicated to the promotion of Hawaiian cuisine. "We can't have guests showing up and then say, 'Oh, we don't have any more beans.' That makes us look bad! We must have availability and consistency, and then we're all in it together." This attitude is the key: we're in it together. Farmers and chefs have a lot to gain by working closely together.

By meeting this need for quality produce grown and consumed locally, farmers here can increase their farm's economic viability and expand their markets without resorting to export. It's a classic case in which the sum of the whole equals more than the parts: growing and selling locally-produced food benefits not only the local farmers, it also benefits the restaurants that serve it, the consumer who enjoys it, and the statewide economy in general. In addition, eating locally grown food is environmentally sound: less energy, both in labor and in fuel, is required to get the product from the farmer to the consumer. While a cuisine based on locally grown produce will be more seasonal, in Hawaii there is always a wide range of items in season. To facilitate the growing and marketing of local produce and to prevent the hit-or-miss mentality under which many chefs and farmers operate when it comes to the supply and demand of products, a strategic alliance is forming: the farmers and the chefs.

Local chefs, farmers, and ag marketing and management experts with experience in this area are creating a forum in which chefs and farmers can communicate their needs and abilities to one another. The forum will follow a workshop format and is called "Hawaii Grown: From Farm to Restaurant."

The brain child of Merriman and Fleming, the workshops will focus on communication between chefs and farmers to create an awareness among farmers about chefs' needs and the value in developing ongoing professional relationships with one another. Another primary organizer behind the strategic alliance is Glenn Alos, executive chef at the Kona Village Resort, and a

member of the American Culinary Federation. Alos has been using locally produced fruits and vegetables for years, and is constantly looking for new ways to crease his use He and Merriman will coordinate the preparation of the Hawaii-grown lunch for the workshop sessions.

The concept for a chef/farmer strategic alliance had its roots in last year's "Farming with Nature in Hawaii" conference on sustainable agriculture for which Fleming was the conference chair, and Merriman a speaker on the marketing panel.

"We're trying to think of strategies to make agriculture more sustainable for Hawaii's farmers," Fleming says. As an economist, he recognizes that unless farming is profitable, farmers will not continue operations in the long run.

"Obviously, the only people who will be able to meet the demand for Hawaiian-grown food are Hawaii's farmers. If they can come up with a product that no one else in the world can duplicate and that meets the exact needs of Hawaii's better restaurants, our relatively small farms won't need to compete in the world market solely on price." Fleming points out that Hawaii's smaller farmers will "never win if they compete in a market characterized by large-scale, highly mechanized, capital-intensive mass production, based on cheaper fuel and farm labor." While a strategy based solely on price competition will fail, Hawaii's farmers can "compete in a market that rewards higher quality, better service, greater variety and innovation."

Thus, a growing demand by consumers for local food products will also act to further increase the sustainability of Hawaii's farmers. "The more that customers ask for local products, the more chefs and farmers will work to supply them," Fleming said.

The success of a chef/farmer strategic alliance for the marketing of local products demands on "Hawaii produce being the highest quality in the world," according to Fleming. "If it's for local consumption, our farmers can grow the highest quality varieties -- those that usually don't ship well." Fleming points out that big producers are geared toward the export market and have a least cost strategy. For this reason, Dole grows yellow pineapples and Williams bananas because they yield well, ship well, cost relatively little to produce, and are satisfactory for the Mainland consumer who has no other choice.

"We're looking for 'impact' items," says Merriman. "White pineapple is the best ever, so don't try to compete with Dole. For great quality and service, I'll pay more.

If I can get Waimea strawberries for \$22 a case and California strawberries for just \$18, why would I go with Waimea? Because the quality is better, and I can get instant service."

Farmers also need to learn to take advantage of marketing tactics. "Baby asparagus doesn't need peeling. The 'salad sparkle' produced by a local farmer requires no labor in my kitchen," says Merriman. "As a chef and restaurant owner, that means something to me."

Yet Merriman considers a farmer's ultimate customer to be not the chef but the customers. "While the chef is the final link in the food chain, the consumer is actually the diner in the restaurant. It is the diner you have to keep happy."

The all-day workshop on developing the farmer/chef strategic alliance will be repeated three times on the Big Island: in Kona, Waimea, and Hilo on September 28, 29, and 30 respectively. The workshops will emphasize practical information shared between chefs and farmers, including chefs and farmers' needs, marketing strategies, business tips, and real information about what is working for farmers and chefs, what could work, and what won't work. Local chefs will prepare lunch from local produce.

There will be ample time for interaction between all participants and presents. The workshop will be an opportunity for networking between farmers and chefs, whether they are new to the Hawaii-grown idea or have had a great deal of experience with it. The University will organize this information and publish a workbook to be distributed to participants and made available to other interested persons after the workshops. Further workshops may be scheduled for Oahu, Maui, and Kauai.

Joining Fleming, Merriman, and Arlos to plan the workshops are Dr. John Halloran, UH-Manoa extension marketing economist, Ellen Methos of Hawaii Agriculture Commodities Service, and John Kitchen of John Kitchen and Co., a public relations firm in Kona. A number of vegetable, orchard and livestock producers have also provided valuable input. Workshop speakers will include a wide range of farmers, chefs, and marketing specialists. One speaker, tomato-grower Erin Lee, will talk about how her business developed a close alliance with Merriman's restaurant. Ric Habein of Habein Livestock Company will talk about his vision for prime grass-fed lamb and beef in the restaurants. Richard Emergy of Kona Mountain Coffee Farm will confront the controversial issue of why the only pure Kona coffee to be found in West Hawaii's better restaurants is that served at the Aloha Cafe in Kainaliu.

The Hawaii-grown workshop to develop this critical alliance has broad-based support including sponsorship by UH-Manoa's College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources (CTAHR), the Hawaii Island Economic Development Board, the Count of Hawaii's Office of Research and Development, the Hawaii Farm Bureau, the Governor's Agriculture Coordinating Committee (GACC), the American Culinary Federation, and the Hawaii Regional Cuisine group.

"One of the things we say in Hawaii Regional Cuisine is," according to Merriman, "that when you get something grown here, it tastes better than the same product grown elsewhere."

Ask for Hawaii-grown!

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