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uku
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Growers see breadfruit as a way
to build Hawaii's food security

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A shrimp dish that satisfies



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By **Joleen Oshiro**
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KONA >> In one sense, breadfruit, or ulu, can be considered a dream crop. Its virtues are multifold: Nutritious, delicious and extremely versatile, the fruit can be eaten at all stages of ripeness.

Baby ulu are ideal as pickles, while potato-like mature ulu make for delicious mash, hash, chips and more. Ripe ulu develop a sweetness perfect for pancakes and desserts. All those possibilities, and it's a canoe plant, to boot.

In another sense, though, ulu is an almost impossible crop.

The challenge is its feast-or-famine nature. Ulu can have multiple short seasons, usually about a month or two long, when trees bear fruit like gangbusters. There can be such a flood of fruit that farmers struggle to pick and sell everything. Then, once a consumer has the fruit in hand, it can overripen in just a day or two.

Yet farmers on the Big Island think that for all of its challenges, ulu can be one piece of the puzzle that addresses local food security, and they've organized themselves to be able to turn it into a viable year-round food source and a dietary staple for Hawaii.

Some 55 farmers — from backyard growers with one tree to larger-scale farms with 800 — united in 2016 to form the Hawai'i 'Ulu Producers Cooperative, led by manager Dana Shapiro.

"We believe we can replace imported starches with ulu. In the category of starches, virtually zero is grown locally. We import 43 million pounds of potatoes alone," she said.

The co-op purchases members' crops, and its staff of six to eight (12 during peak season) processes the ulu at the state's Honalo Processing and Marshalling Facility in South Kona. The co-op recently signed a 25-year lease to use the facility.

There, they wash, slice, steam, package, box and freeze mature ulu in 10-pound boxes for sale to restaurants and food-

ulu

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The versatile breadfruit is on its way to becoming Hawaii's new staple crop



service establishments such as schools and hospitals, to be used throughout the year. Next year, the co-op is slated to launch 1-pound bags of ulu for retail sale.

In its first year, Shapiro said, the co-op processed 18,000 pounds from nine member farms. In its second, volume grew to 40,000 pounds, and membership to 27.

"This third year, with 55 members, we'll process a projected 60,000 pounds," she said.

In total, co-op members are tending about 4,500 trees, with only 500 bearing fruit.

"Over the next four years, 2,000 trees will start bearing fruit. We expect to reach full productivity in year eight to 10, and ulu trees are productive for 50 to 60 years," she said. "It's a very sustainable outlook."

That means that while the co-op is currently dependent on start-up grants, it will eventually become self-sustaining.

Kohala farmer and co-op member Lani Eubanks grows a variety of fruit, including 12,000 to 15,000 pounds of ulu a year.

"If we can encourage people with enough supply for a daily taste of ulu, we will assist with food security," she said.

The co-op has turned down requests to ship its product out of state, preferring to keep the ulu in Hawaii.

A STROKE of serendipity brought the co-op's ulu to Kaiser Permanente Moanalua Medical Center. When its previous chef Vikrant Bhasin relocated to Honolulu four years ago, he moved to Shapiro's neighborhood (she commutes to the Big Island). She introduced him to ulu, and after a bit of research, he put it on the Kaiser menu.

It's been a year since the medical center began serving beef stew made with ulu instead of potatoes on its patient and cafete-



Processed ulu comes in quarters, slices, cubes and cut into fries, sold mainly to restaurants by the Hawai'i 'Ulu Producers Cooperative.

Bringing breadfruit home

Though the Hawai'i 'Ulu Producers Cooperative sells most of its steamed and sliced ulu and its value-added products to food-service establishments, anyone can buy the products. Go to eatbreadfruit.com for a price list and to fill out a customer application form. Products are shipped to Oahu via FedEx for about \$15.

They include:

>> 10-pound boxes of steamed, sliced ulu that comes quartered; other cuts, available to the public when there's a surplus, include diced ulu, fries, slices, mashed ulu and a ripe mash (for baking)

>> Traditional and inamona-macadamia nut hummus (sold under the 'Ulu La label)

>> Chocolate mousse, made with organic, fair-trade 72 percent dark chocolate, pure coconut milk and local honey (sold under the 'Ulu La label)

ria menus, as well as an ulu-potato mash in the cafeteria. "People have been very appreciative," he said. "It sells out."

In a previous position in California, Bhasin worked with family farms, and it transformed his mindset.

"I learned that fresh products are great from the start. There's no need to do a lot to them," he said. "At the hospital, so many ingredients are from other states. There's shipping costs and the carbon footprint. This is a way to decrease that and help farmers."

The center has used about 100 pounds of

ulu a month. This has been possible because of the co-op.

"It's easy to access, and (the hospital) has a constant supply year-round," he said. "It's processed and steamed, and the quality is perfect. This works well for a commercial kitchen feeding hundreds of people."

But providing ulu for hundreds is just scratching the surface for the co-op. This fall, it sold 11,000 pounds of ulu to a behemoth of Hawaii food accounts, the Department of Education. And thanks to a plan that maps future growth, the co-op is slated to become a regular supplier for public-school meals.

"When an agriculture organization can plan ahead — I think the projected growth is something like 250,000 pounds in five years — we can go with that," said Dexter Kishida, farm-to-school specialist at the DOE's School Food Services Branch, which has been instrumental in developing the farm-to-school initiative 'Aina Pono.

"Maybe in three years we can serve ulu two times a year; in four years, maybe every six weeks. We can grow with the industry that way."

Kishida said that in the 2016-17 school year, the DOE spent \$1 million on locally produced food; in 2017-18, \$3 million. The goal at 'Aina Pono is to eventually purchase 40 percent of the food served in public schools from local sources.

HISTORICALLY, agricultural co-ops have not met with much success, but done right they have power to take local ag in the right direction, said Noa Lincoln, a professor specializing in indigenous crops and cropping systems at the University of Hawaii's College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources.

"Members can have different visions,

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Ripe Ulu Mochi Recipe

This recipe calls for ulu ripened beyond the mature stage to become sweet and fragrant. Ripe ulu is ideal for desserts and baked goods or as a substitute for uala (sweet potato) or pumpkin in savory recipes.

Courtesy Hawai'i 'Ulu Producers Cooperative

2 cups mochiko (sweet rice flour)

1/2 cup brown sugar

1/2 cup granulated sugar

1 teaspoon baking powder

1 teaspoon cinnamon

1/2 pound steamed ripe ulu, mashed with a fork (find ulu at farmers markets and some supermarkets, or from the co-op)

3/4 cup coconut milk

3 eggs

1/4 cup (half a stick) butter, melted

1 teaspoon vanilla

3 tablespoons black sesame seeds (optional)

Powdered sugar, for dusting

Heat oven to 350 degrees. Butter 8-by-8-inch baking pan.

In medium bowl, whisk mochiko, sugars, baking powder and cinnamon.

In separate bowl, beat ulu, coconut milk, eggs, butter and vanilla until smooth (a stand or hand mixer is helpful, but a blender can work as well).

Slowly mix dry ingredients into wet and beat vigorously until completely smooth. Fold in sesame seeds if using, and pour batter into prepared pan.

Bake 75 minutes, until mochi is set and bounces back when touched. Cool 10 minutes; cut into squares and dust with powdered sugar. Makes 16 pieces.

Approximate nutritional information, per piece (not including optional sesame seeds or powdered sugar): 220 calories, 7 g fat, 4.5 g saturated fat, 45 mg cholesterol, 75 mg sodium, 38 g carbohydrate, 1 g fiber, 15 g sugar, 3 g protein

Nutritional analysis by Joannie Dobbs, Ph.D., C.N.S.



Breadfruit abounds at John "Ginger John" Caverly's Big Island farm in Papaikou, facing page. Caverly is a founding member of the Hawai'i 'Ulu Producers Cooperative, where ulu is processed and frozen. Ulu is a versatile product that can be whipped up into a hummus, far left, baked or fried to make chips, mixed with cocoa for a creamy mousse, or treated as a potato in a stir-fry. Find recipes at the co-op's website, eatbreadfruit.com.

PHOTOS COURTESY HAWAII 'ULU PRODUCERS COOPERATIVE

Quick-working crews kept busy with breadfruit bounty

During a busy shift in late August at a processing facility in Honalo, manager Anissa Lucero and her crew of five efficiently tackled a seemingly endless supply of freshly picked ulu. Workers can get through 1,800 pounds of fresh fruit a day.

The process starts with pressure washing the fruit to remove latex sap and debris from the field. Next, in the kitchen the ulu is peeled, sliced and steamed. Cooked ulu is weighed and packed by hand in 10-pound boxes and frozen.

“We accept mature ulu that’s pretty much like a potato,” said Lucero. “Skin on and fully cooked, it’s good to thaw and make a potato salad or stir-fry.”

Peeled and sliced raw fruit soak in lemon water at every stage of processing to prevent oxidation, which would mar their pristine beige flesh.

Though the fruit that day were small in size, and smaller fruit isn’t usually peeled, the crew was working to fill an order from the co-op’s biggest client, the state Department of Education, which requested 11,000 pounds of peeled product. The ulu has been used this month to serve ulu beef stew in every public school in the state, about 300.

“We prefer processing the ulu the same day it comes in, or the day after,” Lucero said. “It can sit in the fridge up to six days and doesn’t ripen much if it’s in the right temperature. The best temperature is 55 degrees.”

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different objectives, different perspectives. Old-timers have seen co-ops come and go and fail,” he said. “But I do think they’re essential to move the food system forward.”

Lincoln is married to Shapiro, and their farm, with 150 ulu trees, is a member of the co-op.

He said when plantations began to decline in Hawaii, parcels of land, usually 5 to 20 acres in size, were leased or sold to small farmers. But one of the underlying challenges of small farms is producing anything on a large enough scale to afford the infrastructure that promotes growth.

“It’s hard for a 5-acre farmer to justify the cost of building a food-safety facility that large accounts, the DOE, for example, would require,” he said. “That’s how the co-op comes in. It’s a model that allows small-scale producers to start thinking bigger. Investing in processing equipment starts to make sense when costs are shared among 50 people.”

Lincoln said the keys to a resilient co-op are shared values, a purpose that is clearly stated, a common sense of direction and “really passionate, dedicated leadership.”

That, he said, the ulu co-op has in Shapiro, who not just studied and built a career on co-op development, but has the proper temperament for the job: “Selfless, extremely trustworthy, personable, has a genuine interest in the bigger mission. I think there are a lot of people like that in the state.”



1. During ulu season, dozens of bins of ulu are processed daily.

2. Ulu skin is nutritious, so small ulu, which don’t fit in the peeling machine, aren’t usually peeled. When they are, the task must be done manually.



PHOTOS BY **RONIT FAHL** / SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER
STEAMING PHOTO COURTESY HAWAII ‘ULU PRODUCERS COOPERATIVE



3. After peeling, the ulu is cut into pieces. The most popular cut sold is quartered fruit.



4. Throughout processing, raw ulu soaks in lemon water, preserving the creamy hue of its flesh.



5. Sliced ulu are placed in trays of a commercial steamer that cooks 75 pounds of fruit at once.



6. Steamed ulu is weighed and packed by hand into bags, which are then boxed and frozen.