

Farm to Table

Recipe: Serving up Mark Oyama's
Korean Style 'Ulu Poke

The Value of Venison

How Maui Nui Venison is restoring
Maui's delicate ecosystems

Strawberries in Hawai'i

Hawai'i conditions allow for
year-round growth

HAWAI'I
FARM & FOOD

Green Again

Mahi Pono brings diversified agriculture to central Maui



←
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PLANT**

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FALL 2020

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Aloha Farmers and Friends,

DESPITE THE DISCONCERTING LIMBO EACH OF US IS IN DURING THIS COVID-19 pandemic, I am so impressed and gratified that Hawai'i farmers and ranchers are still working hard for our communities and still farming. Practically overnight, many local producers went from the consistent sales they had built up over many years, to a strictly survival mode. They've been forced to adapt to a new standard in which most island visitors are not around, and residents have changed how and where they eat and shop, turning the markets upside down. Previously, at least 50% of food was eaten away from home, at restaurants or cafeterias, many of which have since closed or greatly reduced availability. Although so much has changed, farmers continue to adjust to meet the needs of the community. The realities of the pandemic have been a stark reminder not to take farmers and food for granted. Check out the Hawai'i Farm Bureau (HFB) website for details about programs developed to provide relief to support local ag at <https://hfbf.org/>.

2020 State Legislative Wrap-up

Each year, HFB monitors and participates in the legislative process to ensure that farmer's needs are considered as new laws are created and state funds are allocated. This year, our initiatives to transfer leasable state ag land to the Hawai'i Department of Agriculture (HDOA), to make it easier for farmers to qualify for state ag leases, to fund new UH CTAHR ag research and extension agent positions, to authorize an Agriculture Enterprise Program, to fund feral pig control, and others, were each getting good support, until the pandemic struck. Disappointingly, these bills were not agreed to by the deadline.

Ultimately, funding *was* allocated to several of the state's irrigation systems, ag parks, and for harbor improvements, but it was an understandably disappointing session. We will continue to pursue state legislation and funding to support farmers and ranchers once legislators reconvene. Thank you for your participation and support.

Please consider joining HFB to help support the Hawai'i agricultural community. For over 70 years, Hawai'i Farm Bureau members have come together to become the Voice of Agriculture in the islands. Our legacy includes leadership and advocacy, public service and outreach, ag literacy, and initiatives that protect the environment and preserve its productive beauty for the next generation to use and enjoy. We continue to evolve to serve the needs of members and their families.

Mahalo,



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Our Mission:

The Hawai'i Farm Bureau Federation, serving as Hawai'i's voice of agriculture, protects, advocates, advances the social, economic and educational interest of our diverse agricultural community.



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Mahi Pono's vast potato field in central Maui.

Photographer: Zach Villanueva

Green Again

MAHI PONO BRINGS DIVERSIFIED AGRICULTURE TO CENTRAL MAUI

BY ALEXANDER DEEDY // PHOTOS BY ZACH VILLANUEVA



I**N LATE AUGUST 2019, COMMUNITY LEADERS,** farmers and elected officials gathered under a tent on the edge of a plot of fallow soil in central Maui. With sparse clouds overhead and wind gently blowing, guest speakers stood and spoke of bringing local food production back to the Valley Isle. A prayer—asking for the land to be blessed, for the bad to be banished, for the cultivators of the land to be safe, for the community to be healed—was offered up. Then in ceremonial fashion, a small group picked up hoes, dug shallow holes in the earth and planted potatoes.

Those potatoes were the first crop planted by Mahi Pono, the company overseeing 41,000 acres of agricultural land on Maui.

“Today marks Mahi Pono’s first major step in returning the land to active agriculture production, increasing local food production and helping to achieve food security for Maui and our state,” said Shan Tsutsui, former Hawai‘i lieutenant governor and senior vice president of operations at Mahi Pono, in a statement at the time.

When Hawai‘i Commercial & Sugar ceased operations in 2016, it left behind an area twice the size of Manhattan that had, for more than a century, been dominated by sugar. The sweet crop had a considerable influence in shaping what Maui—and Hawai‘i—became. Into this giant void stepped Mahi Pono.

Mahi Pono formed as a joint venture between Pomona Farming LLC, a California-based agriculture group, and PSP Investments, one of Canada’s largest pension investment managers. Near the end of 2018, the company purchased the cane land on Maui for \$262 million. When it purchased the land, Mahi Pono also hired many employees still on the payroll for the former sugar company, including Darren Strand.

Strand now serves as vice president of agriculture outreach and business development for the company. As workers cleared the old cane lands, Strand and others set about determining what should take sugar’s place. They asked local farmers what they were already growing and asked retailers what they needed. Then they worked with agriculture extension agents to determine where the best land was for each crop.



Darren Strand, Mahi Pono's vice president of agriculture outreach and business development, and Justin Texiera, land development and cultural manager, holding freshly harvested potatoes from the fields.

When it came to potatoes, Mahi Pono sought counsel from potato growers in Idaho, California, Washington and Canada. The farm team went in search of fields with sandy loam soil, a roughly neutral pH and plenty of available water. Once the optimal land was identified, equipment was purchased, a processing facility built and the first round of potatoes planted.

Mahi Pono is focusing on red, white and gold potatoes that are in high demand but not grown on a commercial scale in Hawai'i. "A significant amount of potatoes are imported to Maui and Hawai'i throughout the whole year," Strand says. "It's something we knew grew well here—around World War II people were growing potatoes commercially on Maui—and we knew we could take a shot at substituting that importation."

Mahi Pono decided to donate its first potato harvest, rather than attempting to get everything right on the first try and take the harvest to market. In January a harvest totaling nearly 30,000 pounds of potatoes was donated to food banks on O'ahu and Kaua'i.

Teri Luna, director of product resourcing at Hawai'i Foodbank, says the foodbank almost never receives potato donations, so the large batch from Mahi Pono was a tremendous help.

"Previously, we would order potatoes from the Pacific Northwest every three to six months depending on the amount of local produce that's donated," she says. "Now, with a local grower that will be growing potatoes, we may not have to order anymore or as much."

Strand says Mahi Pono plans to continue supporting the Hawai'i Foodbank and other organizations by sharing what it grows on Maui.

The farm team is continuing to run trials to see which potato varieties perform best in Central Maui. Currently, Mahi Pono has approximately 100 acres planted of white, red and gold potatoes. As of August 2019, Mahi Pono had over 175 employees, with 23 employees dedicated to potato production alone. Eight work in the field and 15 in the processing facility. Those workers and the land they cultivate are estimated to produce around 50,000 pounds of potatoes each week.

The goal is to offer a steady, year-round supply of locally grown potatoes to the Hawai'i market. Mahi Pono has already sent potato samples to distributors and restaurants on Maui and the Neighbor Islands, including the venerable Mama's Fish House in Pā'ia. The initial focus being to meet the supply needs of Maui before expanding and distributing potatoes to other islands, one of the company's primary goals. With crops in the ground, Mahi Pono executives have been working with the school foodservice providers on how to support the Farm to School effort. Already, Strand said the company donated potatoes to chefs so they could experiment with new school menus with that source in mind. To that point, even before the first crops were planted, Mahi Pono helped facilitate getting *'ulu*, *kalo*, *poi* and other local produce into school lunches.

Consumers in Hawai'i are used to eating potatoes that, just like other produce, have been harvested from farms across the ocean and endure long transit times before reaching dinner plates in Hawai'i. "The potatoes we're growing and harvesting are making it into the marketplace in two or three weeks from harvest," Strand says. "It makes a big difference in the quality of product."





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—DARREN STRAND



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Most potatoes in the U.S. are harvested in September and October and exported throughout the year, explains Jayson Watts, project manager at Mahi Pono. “So in most cases, you are eating potatoes that are three to six months or older. If you eat a Maui-grown potato, you are eating the freshest potato available in the country.”

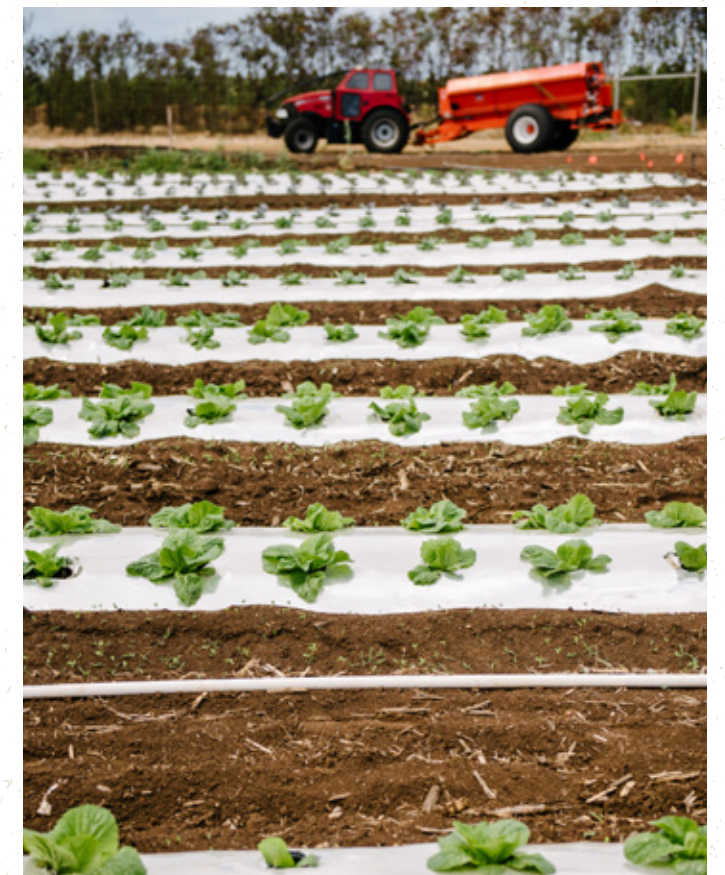
The big picture is about much more than just potatoes. Mahi Pono’s direction from the beginning has been toward a model of diversified agriculture. After the first crop of potatoes, Mahi Pono went on to plant hundreds of thousands of lime, lemon, mandarin orange, papaya and macadamia nut trees and onions. Through 2020 the company plans to plant about 700,000 more coffee, ‘ulu, and citrus trees.

Though the potatoes went from seed to market in a matter of months, other crops will take years to develop.

In 2019, Mahi Pono also acquired a majority position in Maui Cattle Co. and operation of 5,000 acres of grass-fed cattle. A slaughterhouse allowing for local meat processing went operational in early 2020. The facility opened with the ability to process about 25 heads of cattle each day, and plans are in place to expand that capacity—all in the name of getting more local beef to the market. The processing facility includes a composting system that Mahi Pono hopes will reduce waste, increase soil production and get nutrients back into the land. Compost from the facility will be used in the orchards, on grazing land and for community farm plots.

One of the largest hurdles for farmers is access to land and water. In an effort to provide those resources to the community, Mahi Pono is offering leases on plots of land that are set up for use by resident Maui producers. It’s basically a plug-and-play system. Mahi Pono divided a plot of land into 2-, 5- or 10-acre parcels that come equipped with irrigation, windbreaks and surrounding ungulate fencing. Individuals and small businesses applied to use the land at a low lease rate to grow crops for sale or subsistence use. Mahi Pono received more than 100 applications last year for the first round of available lots, with the first set of community farm selectees starting operations in August.

Having been around less than two years and still early in development, Mahi Pono says it’s very open to community suggestions and figuring out how to best grow and expand. As Mahi Pono grows, the former cane lands, brown and fallow after HC&S closed, will transform into orchards, fields and pastureland. Once drab and dusty, the land of central Maui is turning green again. 🌱



Top: Papaya tree parcel almost ready for harvest. Bottom: Chinese cabbage and red and green kale on 2-acre parcel on Mahi Pono land.