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LOCAL NEWS

Posted on: Sunday, April 13, 2008

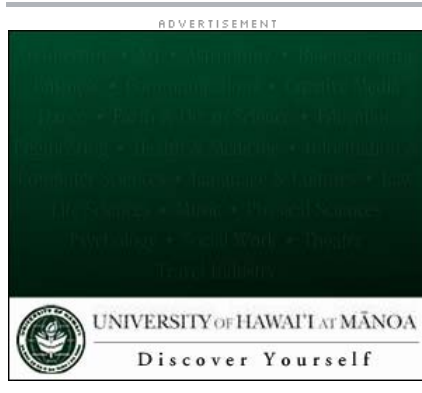
Digesting a locally-grown future

Kauai event examines ways island and state can 'feed ourselves'

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By Diana Leone Advertiser Kaua'i Bureau

PUHI, Kaua'i — The many benefits of eating locally grown food was a big enough issue at the second annual Kaua'i Conservation Conference that more than 300 people attending didn't just talk about it — they did it.



An "All-Kaua'i Meal" was a tasty demonstration that growing more food on-island would be well-received, according to satisfied diners at the Friday lunch that included crispy fresh vegetarian fare as well as Kaua'i-raised beef, pork and fish.

Like the state as a whole, as much as 95 percent of Kaua'i's food arrives on airplanes or ships from far away, several speakers said.

"It was very nutritious and delicious," said Sierra Club member Judy Dalton after finishing a plate of two preparations of Garden Isle greens, purple sweet potatoes with cilantro-aioli sauce, fresh-caught ono and special maki rolls filled with grilled green papaya, mung beans and brown rice.

"It was very well prepared, and filling. I'm not even going to have dinner," Dalton said. "I think it proved the point that we have the ability to feed ourselves on this island."

The organic and local buffet line was spread under a tent at Kaua'i Community College, where activists and environmentalists attended a series of panel discussions on topics such as: sustainability; environmental education; community-based marine management; land preservation; biofuels; and preserving the land, the people and the culture of the island.

Most attendees were from Kaua'i, but some came from other islands.

WEALTH OF BENEFITS

The free, two-day event concluded yesterday with service projects to clear irrigation ditches at kalo lo'i (taro patches) in Waipa and clean a beach area at Lawa'i Kai, followed by hula, music and a talk by National Geographic Society explorer, author and photographer Wade Davis.

Growing more food locally was touted by event participants as being better for one's health, supportive of the local economy and the smart thing to do as oil prices for food transportation continue to climb. With the closure of all but one sugar plantation on the island, there's plenty of quality agricultural land around — if the tide of subdividing it into residential plots is slowed, many participants agreed.

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THE MENU

The "All-Kaua'i Meal" menu for lunch Friday at the Kaua'i Conservation Conference:

- Coconut-kaffir lime brown rice*
• Hanalei poi
• Kale with balsamic vinegar and brown mustard vinaigrette**
• Fresh salad greens, with grated carrots and beets, clover sprouts and fresh papaya-seed dressing
• Maki rolls filled with grilled green papaya, mung bean sprouts, brown rice and vegetarian mayonnaise (nori wrapper imported)
• Baked purple sweet potatoes*** with cilantro-aioli sauce
• Kaua'i-raised beef
• Fresh-caught local ono
• Kaua'i-raised kalua pig

Vegetable items on the menu were prepared by Blossoming Lotus Restaurant chefs and provided by Kaua'i Farmers' Cooperative, Uhane 'Aina Farm and Hanalei Poi. Meat and fish items were provided by Princeville Ranch, Fish Express, and Kaneshiro Hog Farm, with preparation by Keoki's Takeout and Fish Express.

*Rice not now grown on Kaua'i, but has been in the past and could be again.

**Vinegar not made on Kaua'i.

***Purple sweet potatoes from Moloka'i.

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"When I was growing up here, almost every home grew vegetables in the back yard," said Chipper Wichman, director of the National Tropical Botanical Gardens, which has three of its five gardens on Kaua'i.

"We can actually feed our community from produce grown on our land," Wichman said during his keynote address titled "Facing Future — Conservation on Kaua'i in the 21st Century."

"Why do we have to eat beef grown in Iowa?" he asked.

Serving locally grown food is always a priority for the Blossoming Lotus Restaurant, which did the preparation of the vegetable dishes, said co-owner Gabe Zingaro. The "vegan world fusion cuisine" restaurant in Kapa'a is changing its menu soon, to incorporate more Kaua'i-grown foods, he said.

Two major food items were imported — rice from the Mainland and purple sweet potatoes from Moloka'i. They were included because they could be grown on Kaua'i, organizers said. Some condiment ingredients, such as vinegar and oil for dressings, weren't locally made either.

Still, the event yesterday may have been the largest group to consume an all-Kaua'i meal in modern times, many said.

Marie Mauger, whose Uhane 'Aina Farm provided produce for the event, urged conference attendees to commit to eating one Kaua'i meal per week, then increasing it to two a week and so on.

Speaker Adam Asquith, a University of Hawai'i Sea Grant extension specialist, pointed out the difficulty of "eating locally" when he asked the very pro-local crowd if they had eaten an "all-Kaua'i meal" the day before and got only a small show of hands.

'PATHETIC' USE OF LAND

Kaua'i Farm Bureau Vice President Jerry Ornellas bemoaned Kaua'i's "pathetic" showing in the number of acres in food crops during a panel discussion that attempted to answer the question "Can Kaua'i Feed Itself?"

Of Kaua'i's 30,000 acres of prime agricultural land, just 11,000 acres are being harvested — and 7,000 of those are in sugar cane, with many other acres in seed corn, according to the latest agricultural statistics available, Ornellas said.

Just 200 acres are in vegetables and melons and 800 acres in fruit trees, said Ornellas, who has farmed for 42 years and raised cattle, horses, truck crops, bananas and tropical fruits. "No other island in the state has so little acreage in farming."

"Can Kaua'i feed itself? In all honesty I don't know. As little as 2 1/2 years ago, I'd have said, 'Yes, I don't see why we couldn't,' " Ornellas said.

But since then, land has continued to be moved into other uses, water has become more problematic in the wake of the Kaloko Dam disaster and people needed to work the land can't afford to live on Kaua'i, he said.

Grove Farm spokesman Neil Tagawa said his company has committed to putting 1,000 of the 40,000 acres it owns into food crop production. The move fits with the land-rich company's concept of doing things that are good for the community and the environment, as well as financially feasible, he said.

"I was told by a hotel that 80 percent of their food costs are for transportation," Tagawa said. "If we can get 1,000 acres growing productively, it would kind of insulate Kaua'i from fuel costs going up."

The Grove Farm project in Maha'ulepū Valley, on the island's south side, will begin with 300 acres of taro production, he said.

Some UH studies have projected that the whole state could be fed on just 14,000 acres of land, Tagawa said.

Farmer Jillian Seal, who helped start the Kaua'i Farmers Cooperative, said she was confident plenty of food could be grown on 1,000 acres.

"In the last three months, we've pulled two tons of produce from 12,000 square feet of land," she said.

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