

## **A recipe for food sustainability** **By Casey Halpern**

As the Executive Chef of Café Pesto Hilo for the last 17 years, my entire adult life revolves around the making of food. Three years ago I joined the East Hawai'i leadership team for Blue Zones and subsequently the Hawai'i Island Food Alliance. Both groups along with Slow Food Hawai'i and my experiences as a chef have left me concerned about the precarious condition of Hawai'i Island's food supply.

Our island is the second most populated island in the state, and there are approximately 191,000 people on the Big Island at any given time. That's a lot of people to feed, and we are currently importing 80-90% of the food we eat. A disturbance to incoming shipments such as an eruption, hurricane, earthquake, or tidal wave could be catastrophic. Food security can be achieved if we preserve agricultural land and replace retiring farmers to keep food costs affordable. Hawai'i at one time was completely self-sufficient, feeding around 1,000,000 residents. Over 2,000,000 pounds of fish per year was sustainably produced in the state's 360 fishponds.

Protecting agricultural land starts with incentives for large private land holders. Large landowners can be incentivized into keeping land agricultural with tax breaks and low interest loans tied to production of food instead of the typical "gentleman farms." Protecting ag land not only supports food production it also helps us to keep development to a manageable level.

Increased/inappropriate developments leave us prone to flooding and other problems such as traffic. Sometimes zoning is not appropriate as we saw in Ookala with the failed dairy operation. Did you know that the dairy invested and lost close to \$15,000,000? We share their loss with higher milk prices.

Do we have our next generation of farmers? The average age of a farmer in Hawai'i is 65. How can we encourage and support younger people to become farmers? Is there a way to transfer farms between generations whether family or not?

Supporting current school farming/culinary programs is an easy solution. Schools growing food for the cafeteria or making meal kits in the culinary programs can be sold to teachers, students, and the community at large. KTA Superstores offers SNAP users Double Up Food Bucks where a registered EBT card doubles the purchasing power of low-income households when they purchase locally grown fruits and vegetables on certain barcoded items. So, \$10 of benefits would be worth \$20 of local produce. This is a triple win for Hawai'i's families, farmers and the local economy. For more information see [www.DoubleUpHawaii.org](http://www.DoubleUpHawaii.org). By tying agriculture to financial success, we inspire the next generation to make it a career.

Producing foods locally is extremely important as a large portion of our state is considered low income. We know shipping charges make all food in Hawai'i extra expensive as well as inputs like fertilizer and grain. Promoting home and community gardens should be supported.

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Importing foods from afar requires more chemicals and preservatives. Are the high rates of diabetes and hypertension seen in Hawai'i affected by our reliance on imports? A more traditional Hawaiian diet using our canoe crops like kalo and ulu will be affordable to produce and better for our health.

Here's a recipe for Taro Fries:

1. Using homegrown or locally grown taro, steam taro for two hours.
2. Make sure to check the water level in the last hour, and add water if needed.
3. Let taro cool and peel.
4. Slice into French fry sized pieces and pan fry in olive or coconut oil until the outside is crispy.
5. Season with Hawaiian salt and pepper.

It was not that long ago that the lands of Hawai'i fed a multitude of people. Hawaiian land management practices provide a clear path to follow. Procrastination is dangerous for every one of us. We must reduce our reliance on imported food one bite at a time!

*This column was prepared by Community First, a nonprofit organization led by KTA's Barry Taniguchi and supported by a volunteer board of community leaders.*

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