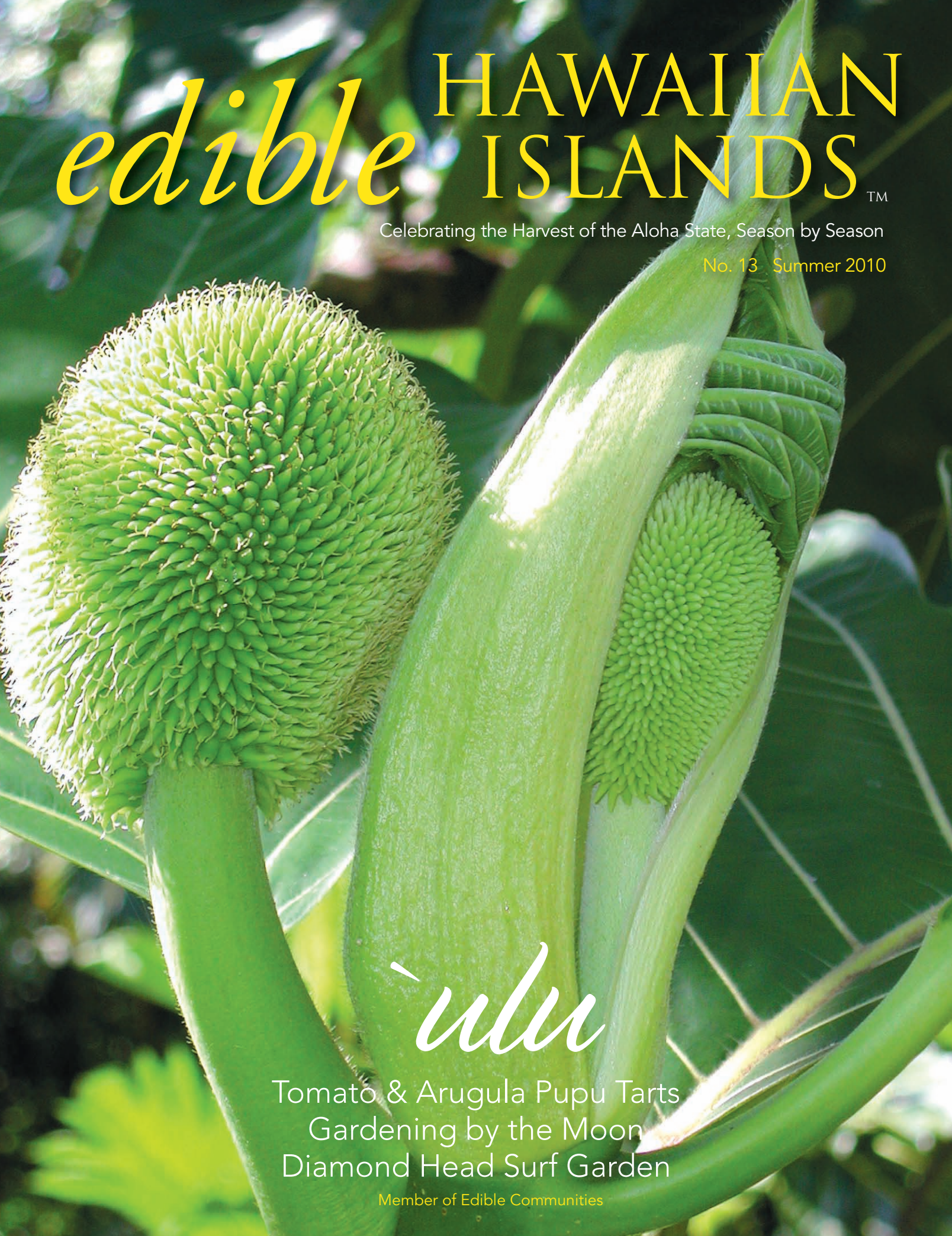

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Celebrating the Harvest of the Aloha State, Season by Season

No. 13 Summer 2010

ʻulu

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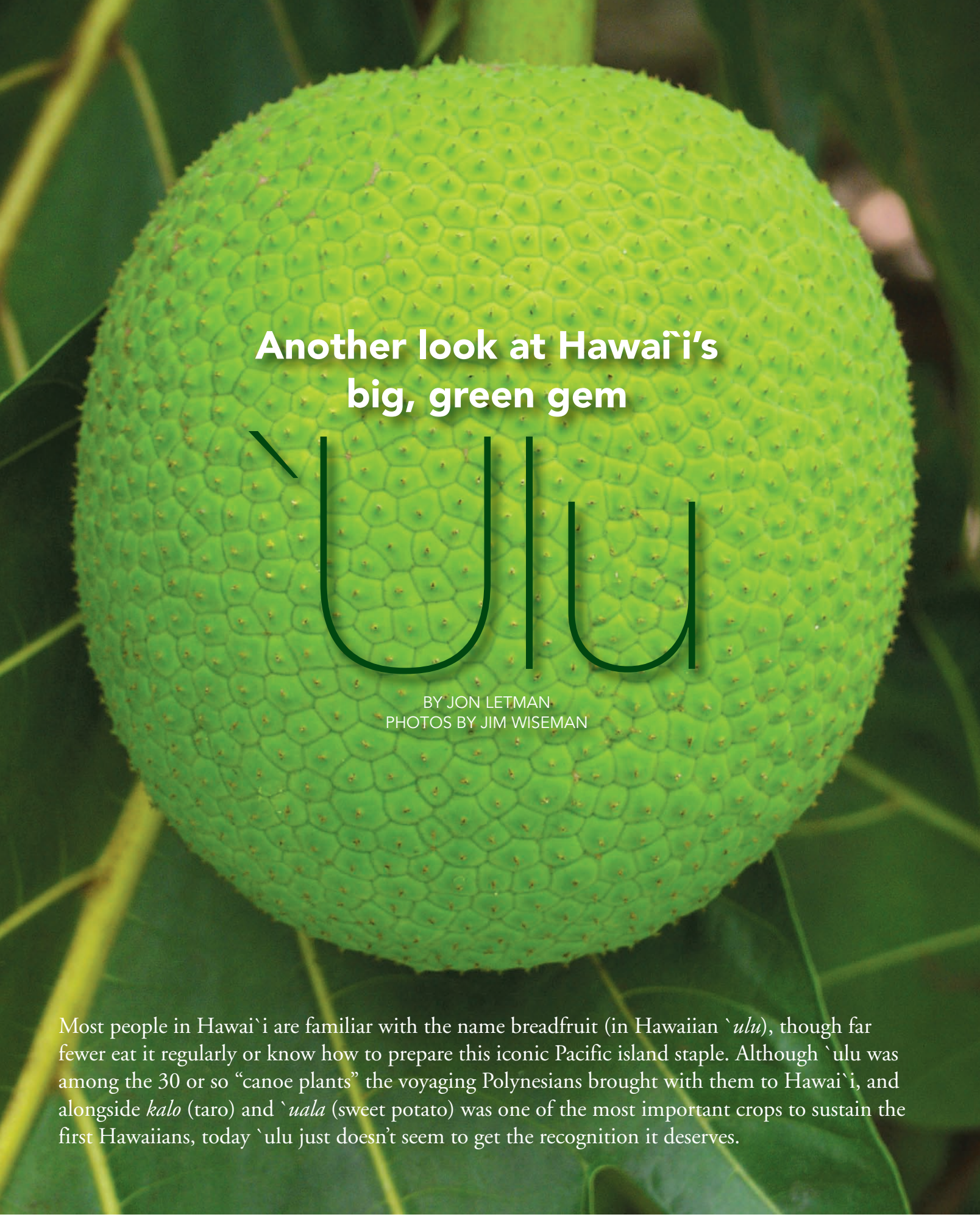


Another look at Hawai`i's big, green gem

`ULU

BY JON LETMAN
PHOTOS BY JIM WISEMAN

Most people in Hawai`i are familiar with the name breadfruit (in Hawaiian `*ulu*), though far fewer eat it regularly or know how to prepare this iconic Pacific island staple. Although `ulu was among the 30 or so "canoe plants" the voyaging Polynesians brought with them to Hawai`i, and alongside *kalo* (taro) and `*uala* (sweet potato) was one of the most important crops to sustain the first Hawaiians, today `ulu just doesn't seem to get the recognition it deserves.

*`Ulu has a long, colorful history.* According to the National Tropical Botanical Garden (NTBG)'s Breadfruit Institute on Kaua`i, `ulu cultivation originated in New Guinea more than 3,000 years ago. Over time, it was spread across the Pacific.

History buffs will recall that the HMS Bounty was transporting `ulu from Tahiti when Captain Bligh's crew, upset with conditions on the ship and unhappy about playing second fiddle to the 1,015 plants that crowded the vessel, staged the famous mutiny. Less well-known is that Bligh was commissioned to collect `ulu a second time and successfully introduced almost 700 trees to the West Indies in 1793.

Today `ulu remains a favorite staple across the Pacific and is regularly enjoyed in nearly 90 tropical nations. It is Hawai`i, however, that houses the world's largest collection of breadfruit, at Kahanu Garden, just outside of Hana, Maui.

Breadfruit Institute director Diane Ragone has been working with `ulu for more than a quarter of a century, ever since she began researching *Artocarpus altilis* (the botanical name for `ulu) in the mid-1980s. Over numerous collecting and research trips in the Pacific, Ragone forged ties to NTBG; she now works at its headquarters in Kalāheo, Kaua`i.

Ragone explains that in addition to what is loosely referred to as "the Hawaiian variety" of `ulu, there are two Samoan varieties—*puou* and *ma`afala*—that were introduced to Hawai`i at least a century ago. In Samoa, over 40 named varieties of `ulu have been documented, but puou and ma`afala are by far the most common.

Building on a collection started in the 1970s at Kahanu Garden, Ragone collected `ulu from Tahiti, Tokelau, the Solomon Islands, Samoa, Micronesia and elsewhere to expand what has become the world's greatest repository for breadfruit. Today 265 trees from 34 Pacific islands, the Philippines, Indonesia and the Seychelles including at least 120 varieties of breadfruit make up the collection.

With the goals of conservation and the promotion of breadfruit for food and reforestation, the Breadfruit Institute works with non-government organizations like Sustainable Harvest International and the Trees That Feed Foundation. Ragone sees `ulu playing a major role in reducing hunger in a world with one billion malnourished people, 80 percent of them in the tropics. She says `ulu's potential to be more widely grown and eaten in Hawai`i is tremendous and is partnering with Global Breadfruit, a horticultural company, to make varieties from its collection available.

"Traditionally `ulu was much more important than people give it credit for today," she says. "It was planted around Hawaiian homes and villages and extensively in groves, especially around Kona on Hawai`i Island." Ragone points out that besides producing large volumes of delicious, nutritious food for people and animals, `ulu provides far more useful material than the labor it requires.

Caring for the `ulu collection on Maui is Kahanu Garden director Kamaui Aiona. Like others who grow the tree, he praises it as low-maintenance, generally insect- and disease-free tree and because it can feed so many, so well. Aiona says Kahanu Garden staff spend just a few days each month managing undergrowth. Relative to other crops like taro or rice that might yield the same amount of food, `ulu requires far less work.

Each October, during Festivals of Aloha in Hana, Kahanu Garden hosts the `Ulu Cook-off where up to 40 dishes demonstrate the incredible diversity and deliciousness of `ulu. The Breadfruit Bounty, a similar event held on Kaua`i last year, drew exciting dishes like `ulu hummus and falafel, `ulu seafood chowder, and `ulu chips and wontons. (Recipes are available at http://ntbg.org/breadfruit/resources/display/cat/7/).

In the cool, green backcountry of Kapa`a Homesteads on Kaua`i, Fae Hirayama grows a single `ulu tree propagated by a root sucker from her grandparents' tree. She recalls eating `ulu with her tūtū on the family's homestead land. "My grandmother would take ripe, funny-looking brown `ulu, pull the top out, shove half a stick of butter in, a few tablespoons of brown sugar and say, 'maybe no mo 'nuff butter,' then put in the whole block."

Hirayama remembers cooking `ulu in piles of burning lychee leaves or hibachi coals. "Nine times out of 10 we would forget the `ulu and pull it out in the morning! It was like a sticky, sweet caramel or pudding."

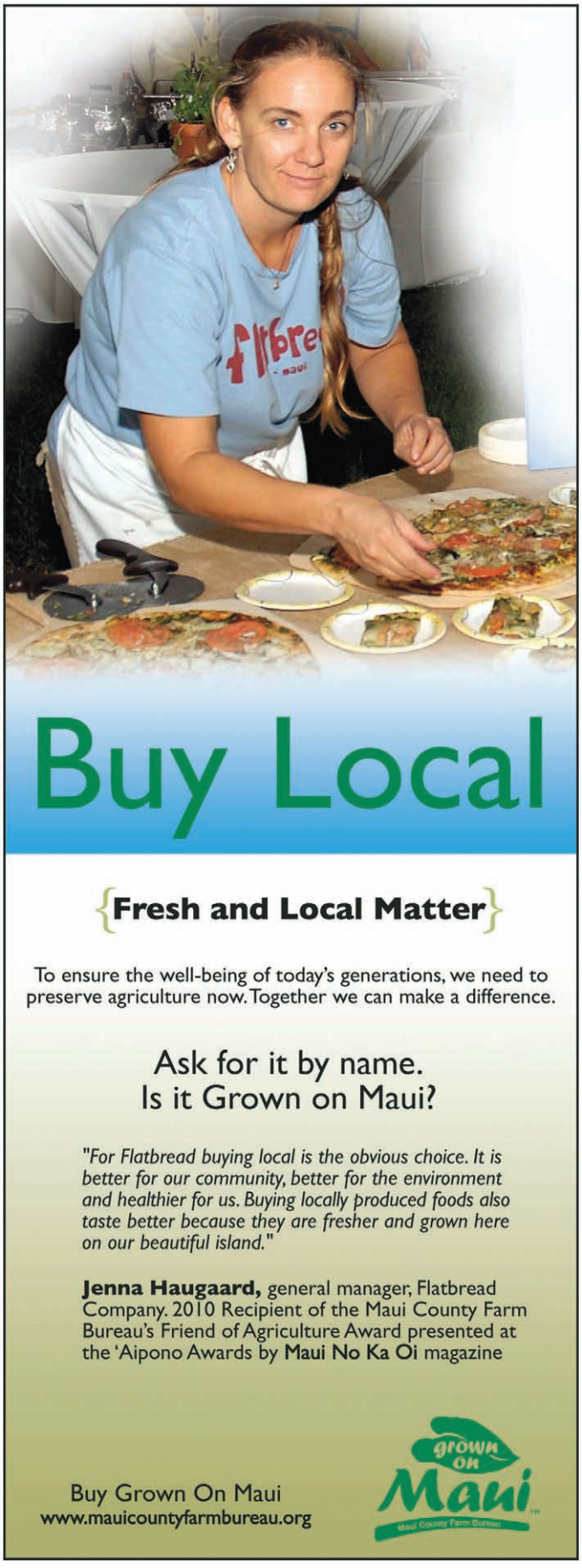
As an adult Hirayama's fondness for `ulu only grew. Once her tree started to produce, she would give the fruit away until finally she started an annual `ulu dinner for friends. Each year the meal got bigger and bigger, giving her the chance to try many of the recipes she started compiling as Christmas gifts. Eventually, the 115 different ways to cook `ulu became Hirayama's *The Breadfruit Cook Book,* published in 2002.

Recipes include Portuguese-style (boiled in salt water with garlic and one chili pepper), pumpkin crunch, custard pie and lumpia filling. She says `ulu also makes a good, stable thickener and can be eaten like an artichoke with a dip of mayonnaise, olive oil and lemon.

So if `ulu is so versatile and nutritious, why isn't it more widely eaten in Hawai`i?

"I don't think people know how to prepare it," Hirayama says. "People don't realize how adaptable it is, but I always thought it was something special and magical."

Hirayama's neighbor, another `ulu enthusiast, is Jerry Ornellas, a farmer and research technician with the College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources (CTAHR) at the Kaua`i Agricultural Research Center.



"I grew up eating this stuff. We harvested it mature green and boiled it, made it into mash or cakes. I still like it just boiled with salt because you get the real flavor," Ornellas says.

He calls `ulu a "sleeper crop" for its untapped potential and says the whole mystique surrounding breadfruit dovetails nicely into tourism. "If you travel halfway around the world, you want to eat something different, right?"

Ornellas grows around 20 trees on homestead land. Pointing to the physical beauty of `ulu, he says, "I love trees, but *these* are gorgeous, beautiful trees." He encourages people to consider growing `ulu on their own property but cautions, "I don't believe in using food plants as landscaping because they can become a source of disease."

His concern is that, unlike farmers who are accustomed to closely watching and managing plant disease, a casual "ornamental" grower may not recognize disease or be less inclined to treat it quickly and, even unintentionally contribute to a pool of disease.

"If you are going to plant a food plant," Ornellas says, "respect it as a food plant. Treat it as such, take care of it properly and keep an eye out for disease." He says fallen fruit should be picked up before it fosters a fruit fly infestation or, better still, made good use of before it falls. "It breaks my heart to see backyard fruit trees loaded with fruit falling on the ground as people go to the grocery store to buy oranges from Florida."

"Juice it, freeze it or give it away, but if you're not going to take care of it, don't plant it."

Another farmer who has successfully grown `ulu on his windward O`ahu family farm for three decades is Charlie Reppun. He feeds his family `ulu, selling the rest at a weekly farmers' market.

"Mostly Pacific Islanders buy it—Micronesians, Samoans, Tongans. They know `ulu and know it well." Reppun says people unfamiliar

What's in it for you?

`Ulu isn't just another stodgy starch. Far from it, `ulu is easy to grow, easy to care for, versatile and edible at every stage of development for sweet and savory dishes. Think of `ulu as the potato of the Pacific, but with more flavor and nutrition. High in carbohydrates, low in fat and gluten-free, `ulu provides dietary fiber, calcium, copper, magnesium, potassium, thiamin and vitamins A and C. It's simple to cook with, freezes well and lends itself to almost any kitchen or cooking style.

Besides the superior fruits, the tree's trunk, leaves, flowers and sap provide timber, medicine, fiber, shade, caulking, glue, mosquito repellant, sandpaper and wood for furnishings, surfboards and canoes.

with `ulu are less likely to buy it, but "once I tell them what to do with it they are way more interested."

Some of Hawai`i's top chefs certainly recognize `ulu as a uniquely local ingredient and serve it up when seasonally available (often late summer through fall). Chef Ronnie Sanchez of Red Salt in Po`ipū uses `ulu for croquettes; Chef Alan Wong serves warm `ulu salad and steamed and puréed `ulu, served like tamale and pastele. Jim Moffat, owner of Bar Acuda in Hanalei, occasionally slow bakes `ulu until blackened, then skins and cubes the interior to sauté in nutty browned butter.

Hawai`i Island private chef Ōlelo pa`a Faith Ogawa isn't your average garden variety breadfruit enthusiast. "I *love* breadfruit!" she declares in not-so-hushed tones. Speaking from her Waikoloa kitchen, Ogawa says she is too busy to talk, but when her favorite food is mentioned, she melts like, well, butter on hot `ulu.

Just as she says the public had to be educated about eating the fish ono (wahoo) in the 1970s, so too must they be taught how to enjoy `ulu, saying the time is ripe to raise awareness and understanding. With the ongoing recession, growing concerns about food security and the ubiquitous buzzword "sustainability," she believes people may be more receptive than ever to expanding their own local food repertoire.

She compares differences in `ulu to those of a fine wine or coffee bean. She suggests using `ulu in beef stew, salads, steamed, roasted and served simply with fresh lemon and a sprinkle of sea salt. On the topic of `ulu, Ogawa just can't help but gush. "It has a feminine quality and reminds me of a new beginning. I wish people ate it more."

Learn more about `ulu at www.breadfruit.org.

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