**Cultivating a Big Island Diet** Word Count: 1,471 w/o sidebar

by Dena Smith Ellis

*“Learn to love the food that loves to grow on the land.”*

That quote was posted at an ecovillage that I stayed at on my first visit to the Big Island of Hawaii ten years ago and it made a lasting impression on me. Of all the information on nutrition and the local foods movement that I’ve studied over the years, I believe that this quote condenses it all into one sentence.

Hawaii Island is known as a haven for people seeking a sustainable and self-sufficient lifestyle. This is illustrated best in the Puna district, particularly in the Kapoho region, which some call the “fruit basket” of Hawaii, due to its ideal growing conditions and dense food forest jungles.

With lifestyles and personalities as colorful as the fruit that grows there, many residents of Puna makai report that the climate and abundance of local foods is what originally drew them to the area. Puna is also known for its transient population, as initial expectations of life in paradise can wear off quickly when the harsh reality of jungle living eventually sets in. However, there is a solid core of kanaka maoli (native to Hawaii either by birth or blood) and relocated transplants that embrace the joys and challenges of living sustainably and are deeply devoted to the ‘aina (land).

As part of a 2018 Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education (SARE) grant research project, a “Big Island Diet” survey was sent out to a list of 25 Hawaii Island residents who were suspected to source at least 50% of what they eat from local foods. Of the thirteen respondents, all but one reported that this was the case. In fact, eight stated that local foods comprise 80% or more of their diet. The actual dietary theories that they reportedly adhere to are greatly varied (primal, instinctive, opportunistic, plant-based, animal-based, raw, cooked, etc); however, the common thread was that the food they eat is a whole food (not processed) that is grown or raised and harvested on the Big Island.

One such resident immigrated to Hawaii from England over 30 years ago when he bought land in Kapoho, still barren with lava from the 1960 flow. However, Clive Cheetham was not discouraged by the rough terrain; rather, he saw this blank slate as an opportunity to create a self-sufficient homestead. As he planted trees and gardens and built his house, Clive networked with his neighbors and eventually leased a plot of nearby land spared from the lava flow where he was able to plant taro and other crops, which now supplies local grocery stores such as Island Naturals in Pahoa and Hilo.

Clive claims that since moving to Hawaii, 95% of his diet has been comprised of foods locally sourced from the Big Island. That is a stark contrast to statistics according to One Island, a rural education and economic development organization based in Kohala, who states that 85% of the food consumed in Hawaii is imported. With an ideal growing climate, Hawaii has the capacity to grow 90% of its food locally, as reported by the One Island website.

New Big Island residents, Markus Fahrenberger and Laura Markham, are hoping to be the change they wish to see in the world. As Americorps members serving on projects for One Island, they are passionate about local food initiatives. In fact, they have created their own. On their soon-to-launch website entitled “EarthlingsUnited.org,” this vegan couple list one of their goals as encouraging all Big Island eateries (including college and hospital cafeterias) to replace all imported fruits, vegetables, and spices with locally grown equivalents.

According to Governor Ige’s “Sustainable Hawaii Initiative,” a major goal of his administration is to double local food production by 2020. The 2015 Agriculture Land Use Baseline study to identify key lands and water resources was established and released on February 12, 2016. It also outlined that the State will develop and support “Buy Local” campaigns to promote and increase demand for locally grown agricultural commodities.

And although this Buy Local initiative ended in 2014, its success is reflected throughout the Big Island with grocery stores, restaurants, and farmers markets all promoting locally sourced foods. Cherub Silverstein, owner of the Sweet Cane Cafe restaurants in Hilo, reports that she feels healthier eating local foods. What once started as a small fresh cane juice stand is now a wildly popular destination for those seeking fresh, local, organic foods. According to their website, Sweet Cane Cafe sources most of their ingredients from the cafe’s family farm or from its network of dedicated local farmers.

In his book, “Going Local: Creating Self-Reliant Communities in a Global Age,” author Michael H. Shuman states that “the great struggle of the twenty-first century will be between those who believe in cheap goods and those who believe in place.” Shuman writes that our deepest yearnings are linked to a sense of place and that a self-reliant community simply should seek to increase control over its own economy as far as is practicable.

An example of an innovative business that embraces this self-sufficient economic philosophy is The Locavore Store, situated on the Hilo bayfront just down from the newest location of Sweet Cane Cafe. What started as a small produce stand called the “Koa’e Community Co-op” at the S.P.A.C.E. Farmers Market in Seaview Estates in 2010, eventually evolved into a storefront market with custom designer labels on their products. This progressive “all local grocer” retains the values established at the S.P.A.C.E. Market of only selling produce and products that are sourced from Hawaii Island.

According to the dictionary, a “locavore” is defined as “a person whose diet consists only or principally of locally grown or produced food.” Bioversity International, an international research center for development in agricultural and tree biodiversity, defines “sustainable diets” as “impacts which contribute to food and nutrition security and to healthy life for present and future generations.”

It appears that Clive Cheetham exemplifies both of these terms as he also promotes “regenerative agriculture,” a holistic farming system that builds soil health, crop resilience, and nutrient density. With topsoil a scarcity in the Puna district, this form of land management has the potential to boost the health and capacity of farms in the area. Clive’s diet of fresh organic, unprocessed foods includes home-pounded poi from kalo (taro) grown on his farm, as well as daily helpings of coconuts, papayas, and bananas harvested off of his land. In addition, he eats homegrown ginger, olena (turmeric), kalo leaves, amaranth greens, plantains, and many varieties of tree fruits, as well as wild harvested fish and pigs.

Another longtime local foods devotee resides in the quaint paniolo (cowboy) town of Waimea. Best known as an elite real estate producer in excess of $300 million dollars in career sales on the Big Island, Richard (“Ric”) Rocker prefers to live a simple, modest life that is centered around food. Delicious, local, organic, and preferably homegrown food to be exact. According to Ric, the primary food plants eaten by nearly all South Pacific islanders are five main carbohydrate rich starches: Ulu (breadfruit), Kassava (tapioca), Uhi (mountain yam), Kalo (taro) and U’ala (sweet potatoes). Also known as “canoe crops,” Ric refers to them by the acronym “UKUKU.”

Ric considers ulu as the world’s greatest food plant. Its fruit is not usually eaten raw, but rather harvested when it is hard and cooked like a potato before it ripens. A Polynesian tradition is to plant ulu trees when a child is born as the families believe that the trees will feed the child for its entire life. Ric reports that ulu trees can grow to a height of eighty feet and can annually produce between 100-400 two to four-pound fruits. Unlike the rest of UKUKU, as well as potatoes, rice, corn, beans, and all the other grains in colder climates, ulu is the only starch that does not have to be planted annually.

Most who practice a Big Island Diet do not actually think of it as a diet, but rather as a lifestyle choice. One that values the principles of supporting local foods, organic farming, sustainable agriculture, a connection to the land, and defining a culture through food. Big Island Diet proponents report feeling happier and healthier when they eat a high percentage of locally sourced foods. They are living examples of learning to love the food that loves to grow on the land.

With Big Island food initiatives such as Hawaii Green Growth, Farm to School, Blue Zones Project, Hawaii Island Food Alliance, Same Canoe’s Local Foods Challenge, and One Island’s Think Local — Buy Local campaign, the message promoting the benefits of consuming local foods is gaining momentum and cultivating change.

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*One Island; http://www.oneisland.org/hawaii/green-resources/support-local-agriculture*

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*Sustainable Hawai’i Initiative. https://governor.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Sustainable-Hawai27i-Initiative-Brochure.pdf (2017)*

Potential Call to Action Sidebar

Suggested Ways You Can Support the Local Foods Movement:

1. Aspire to eat a diet consisting of a high percentage of Big Island-grown and produced foods.
2. Buy locally sourced and crafted products, whenever possible.
3. Grow your own! Start a garden, even if it’s just a tiny container garden growing culinary herbs.
4. Start your own produce stand if you are overly abundant with your own harvest.
5. Create a weekly neighborhood “crop swap” that can be a fun social event by including a local foods potluck and recipe share.
6. Start a gleaning effort in your area to retrieve unused fruit and clean under fruit trees. A mutually beneficial service, especially for seniors.
7. Support local farmers markets to build our local economy and reduce dependence on imports.
8. Get to know local farmers and encourage subscription farming (otherwise known as Consumer Supported Agriculture, or CSA).
9. Start a food buying club (also known as a cooperative or “coop”).
10. Encourage your local and state representatives to create or support legislation that promote local foods and commerce.

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