

Raising the bar for food excellence

By Joan Namkoong



The food world is an exciting place to be these days, a place where the horizons of farmers, chefs and diners are expanding and changing in a heartbeat. Just a few decades ago, a steak, baked potato, peas and carrots were considered a good meal. Today it's a kiawe grilled Wagyu rib eye, Yukon gold and parsnip gratin, and sweet baby peas with baby carrots drizzled with handcrafted sage butter.

The pantry of ingredients available to chefs has grown, thanks to forward-looking farmers linking themselves to restaurant niche markets. Chefs with finely honed skills and techniques, transform these foods into tasty morsels so that diners go “wow!”

The advent of a television network dedicated to food and the emergence of the celebrity chef has made the culinary world exhilarating. Becoming a star chef that can make people swoon with delight has great appeal to many a starry eyed young adult.

There are two key paths to becoming a chef: learning on the job and going to culinary school. Many a fine chef has acquired basic skills and beyond just working in a kitchen alongside a well-trained cadre of cooks – washing dishes, peeling potatoes and chopping onions for days, hours, months and years before getting near *(continued on next page)*



Chef George Mavrothalassitis, Chef Mavro restaurant, Honolulu, is an HCEF board member and frequent presenter to culinary students.

a hot stove. This was the traditional way many esteemed French chefs learned their craft – a rigorous apprenticeship at a young age that taught all the techniques and skills for haute cuisine.

Hands-on training is hard to beat, say most restaurant chefs who have to train their staffs to their unique style. But culinary schools provide the basic skills training needed for a professional kitchen today.

In Hawai'i, community colleges provide six campuses — Kapiolani, Leeward, Kauai, Maui, Hawai'i (Hilo) and West Hawai'i — for aspiring culinary professionals to learn their craft. A two-year program teaches the basics like knife cutting skills, cooking methods, sanitation, food sourcing and costing, ethnic cuisines, baking and pastry techniques, running a restaurant and more. Classroom and practical experience are at the core of the two-year community college programs in Hawai'i.

But today's dynamic culinary scene witnesses quickly developing trends occurring throughout the world that often don't reach island shores in a timely fashion. And exposure to a wide array of ingredients, cooking styles and techniques are somewhat limited in Hawai'i just by the sheer size of our agriculture and restaurant community. Enter the Hawai'i Culinary Education Foundation (HCEF).

HCEF's mission is to provide culinary students and professionals access to cutting edge knowledge, techniques and experiences through educational programs featuring culinary professionals.

It started out with an informal group of people interested in the culinary world: master sommelier Chuck Furuya, former Honolulu magazine publisher John Alves, former American Express executive Tom Mullen and others. Starting in 1998 the group became known as Hale 'Aina Ohana, incorporating in 2007 as



Bruce Aidells and Ryan Farr demonstrated the breaking down of a grass fed beef carcass to students at Hawai'i Community College, one of HCEF's Center of the Plate events. Aidells was the founder of Aidells sausages and is the author of "The Great Meat Cookbook." Farr, a chef and butcher, is the owner of 4505 Meats in San Francisco.

a 501c3 non profit. In 2011 the name was changed to Hawai'i Culinary Education Foundation to better reflect its purpose and activities.

At the core of HCEF programs is guest chef cooking demonstrations, presented each semester at each of the six community college culinary campuses. Island chefs are called on to donate their time and expertise and the list of island chefs who participate in HCEF programs reads like a who's who of Hawai'i chefs. Restaurant Reality is one of the local programs

where students work in a restaurant kitchen for a day then dine in the restaurant. Center of the Plate programs focus on proteins like island fish and grass fed beef.

Twice a year, a nationally renowned chef is brought to Hawai'i to conduct classes for students. Some of the luminaries that HCEF has brought to Hawai'i: Tom Douglas, chef and restaurateur of several Seattle restaurants; Charles Phan, The Slanted Door, San Francisco; *(continued on next page)*

Hands-on learning provided by the Hawai'i Culinary Education Foundation



Brooks Takenaka, United Fishing Agency Ahi



Cal Oshiro



Students baking bread



Chef Tom Douglas and salmon



the hands-on experience

Nancy Oakes, Boulevard and Prospect, San Francisco; Lynne Rosetto Kaspar of Public Radio's Splendid Table; Jonathan Benno, formerly of Per Se now of Lincoln, New York; Cathy Whims, Nostrana, Portland; Joanne Chang, Flour, Boston; Eric Tucker, Millenium, San Francisco; cookbook authors Bruce Aidells, Shirley Corriher, Rachel Laudan and Elizabeth Andoh.

Additionally, HCEF provides classes for those working in the field to advance their knowledge of techniques and skills and occasionally programs are open to the general public.

In the past school year, HCEF established a high school mentoring program that pairs a chef with a high school culinary teacher and classroom. Cooking demonstrations, career path presentations, food-related excursions and other activities are planned for students with the chef and teacher working together. Twenty-four high schools participated in

this ongoing program.

In the 2013-2014 academic year, HCEF programs reached nearly 4000 culinary students, professionals and members of the general public. Fifty-two chef instructors taught classes on four islands.

HCEF provides all student programs at no cost to the students or schools; professional and public programs are fee based. All travel expenses and food costs are borne by HCEF; chefs never charge a fee for their time. Funding comes from an annual industry golf tournament held on Oahu in April each year, a few grants and some private donations.

HCEF contracts with Hayley Matson-Mathes to run the organization and execute all the programs. A six-member board of directors headed by Tom Mullen, now Chief Administrative Officer of the Los Angeles Visitors and Convention Program, provide program and fundraising guidance and tackle various tasks during quarterly board meetings.

Support also comes from a 20-member advisory committee of culinary professionals and instructors and members of the restaurant and visitor industry. HCEF is a one-of-a-kind foundation in the U.S.

More than anything HCEF programs are intended to broaden the horizons of culinary student in terms of ingredients and skills and how they combine on a plate. Visiting chefs often bring unique specialty ingredients with them. Sometimes HCEF contacts a farmer to grow an item needed for a chef demonstration. HCEF also seeks out purveyors of specialty food items like caviar, foie gras, oysters, wild salmon, wines or other ingredients so that students can get a taste of foods they may read or hear about. The more students experience, the greater their knowledge of their gastronomic sphere—this is the premise upon which HCEF works.

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Hard work, perseverance and attitude – key to success in the culinary world – are often the topic of presentations by culinary professionals who share their stories of their road to success. That road is often rocky and chef presenters tell it like it is, impressing on chef wanna-bes that the culinary world is not as glittery as it may seem.

Student evaluations glow with praise for programs presented. Perhaps it's because of a few hours away from the normal curriculum. But no doubt it's also because of the new ingredients, techniques, tastes, ideas, creativity and personalities that present themselves. Students also get involved in the preparation of the dishes being demonstrated, prepping tasting samples alongside the visiting chef before the actual demonstration.

The overriding takeaway from almost every student presentation is the passion a chef has for his craft. It's a personal trait that great chefs possess, one that isn't taught in any school or kitchen. It's this same passion that also drives the HCEF board and advisory group to continue its mission of sharing culinary expertise to Hawai'i's students to help raise the bar for delicious food in Hawai'i. ■



www.hawaiiculinaryfoundation.org

Editor's Note: Joan Namkoong, the author of this piece, has been an HCEF board member since its inception and, in her words, "presents a factual though somewhat biased view of the organization." We'll grant her that. HCEF is a terrific program.



Bank of Hawai'i Foundation Announces 2014 Monty Richards Hawai'i Island Community Awards

Bank of Hawai'i Foundation announced the recipients of the 2014 Bank of Hawai'i Monty Richards Hawai'i Island Community Awards. Named in honor of a legendary Kohala rancher equally known for his community service, the grants recognize exemplary leadership in the nonprofit sector. This year, the awards were given to Hawai'i Island Adult Care, Inc., Ka'u Hospital Charitable Foundation, and the Kona Historical Society. Each organization received \$10,000.

Hawai'i Island Adult Care will use the funds to subsidize tuition for low-income seniors and challenged adults participating in its community-based care, helping kupuna to live in their homes as long as possible. Ka'u Hospital Charitable Foundation will purchase equipment to enable patients to receive physical and occupational therapy on-site. Kona Historical Society will use its grant to support school field trip excursions.



ABOUT HERBERT M. "MONTY" RICHARDS — Monty Richards served as a board director at Bank of Hawaii from 1989 to 2000. He was a regent at the University of Hawaii for 16 years, a past board member of the Hawaii Com-mission on Water Resource Management and today serves on the board of The Nature Conservancy of Hawai'i.

A fifth-generation kama'aina, Richards serves as chairman and trustee of Kahua Ranch, where he has worked since 1953. Long recognized as an innovator for his strides in bringing alternative renewable energy to the ranch, he was the first Hawaii Island rancher to use rapid rotational grazing and experiment with hydroponic (soil-less) farming. He also integrated sheep into his herd, resulting in one of the largest flocks in the state.

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