BARBARA ARGENTO DENNIG

Bruschetta, 2016
Oil on Canvas, 33 x 50 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

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Hawaii's Abundant and Ignored Earth

How people and nature are intertwined on the islands

To visit Hana, a small, remote town on the island of Maui, most people wake at the crack of dawn, hop in convertible mustangs, and drive the forty-five miles from the regional airport, returning the same day. The highway sinews along the lip of the Pacific, clinging to a verdant cliff, as drivers white knuckle across fifty one-lane bridges. Maui's dry western and central regions morph into a lush wonderland, with vines dripping off mile markers, ginger flowers abloom along the mountains, albatross skirting the cliffs, and waterfalls gushing into crystal pools. Drivers new to the highway slow every few feet to snap photos of natural pools fed by springs, elongating a drive that could take about two hours to well over four. But for most visitors, the town itself is uninspiring. It sits in one of the poorest parts of Hawaii, where 59 percent of residents are unemployed, and the per capita annual income runs just over $16,000. But my experience was different.

My journey was the culmination of an interest in island sustainability that had begun some three months earlier in a hotel in Pebble Beach, California. Backed by the setting sun, a cool wind blowing through the lobby, Roy Yamaguchi, owner and head chef of Roy's Restaurants, smiled uncomfortably as he explained that if there were a disaster in Hawaii, the state might last just four or five days before goods would run out. "Eighty-five percent of our food is grown and produced elsewhere," he informed us as he waved to an elderly hunchbacked farmer leaving the luau. "Farmers," he added, "are our rock stars." But, sadly, "the average age of Hawaii's farmers is sixtyish." Yamaguchi built his restaurant empire by honoring the abundance of our fiftieth state. In his restaurants, he threw open the windows, let the sea breeze inside, served fish caught by local fishermen, and showcased the fruits and vegetables of the tropics.

Yamaguchi's desire to bring the farm back to Hawaii's tables was a novelty. Hawaii's food scene in the 1980s orbited plate lunch spots like Oahu's Rainbow Drive-In and fast food chains like Zippy's. Here eaters could score massive plates of roasted meats and gravy (imported from the mainland), two scoops of rice (imported from Asia), and macaroni salad (again, flown in).

Yamaguchi's desire to return to the land is not a concept new to Hawaii. Ancient Hawaiians constructed triangle-shaped growing regions called *ahupuaa*. These

stretched from the mountains to the sea and are still considered some of the most sustainable ways to grow food in the tropics. Aligned with Hawaiian spiritual practice, where people and nature are intertwined, the *ahupuaa* followed watersheds. In these wedge-shaped regions, farmers could fish, extract salt, farm taro, or grow koa trees for building material. The ancients also crafted rules about which fish people could hunt during certain seasons, which plants to grow during others. Each family lived and worked within these land units, exchanging, bartering, and trading items and services. The ancient Hawaiians were premiere permaculturists.

But then colonists brought goods from elsewhere, implanting a dependence on nonnative goods. Later, tourism, paired with the decline of farming and the loss of the pineapple and sugar industries, turned Hawaii into a dependent child, importing meat from the mainland, pineapples and sugar from other tropical locations, and even fruits that once had thrived on the archipelago.

Fast-forward to 2016 and according to a recent study by the University of Hawaii, the state imports 92 percent of its food, including livestock, produce, and dairy—a shocking number to those of us who imagine the state as a sort of Garden of Eden overflowing with fruit, teeming with tropical fish, with edible vines growing over street signs. Unfortunately, while Hawaii has developed into a playground for tourists sipping fruity mai tais and diving into heaping plates of tuna, the priority has not been to feed the people who serve those tourists. Instead, the culture seems to have taken on the mainland expectation of cheap imported food sold at Costco or Walmart, paired with a lemon pulled off the tree outside locals' doors.

Within the last few years there has been a push for Hawaii to return to sustainability. A handful of chefs trained in mainland kitchens like Chez Panisse and The French Laundry opened restaurants entirely dependent on the local bounty. And with an *if-you-build-it-they-will-come* mentality, organic farmers began to pop up around the state to provide for these innovative chefs. Spearheading the movement is the island of Maui, an interesting destination for innovation, especially considering the isle's namesake: Maui, the demigod, wanted to assist his mother, who was frustrated with the sun's rapid pace across the sky, because she could not construct her tapa cloth. So he lassoed the sun from the heights of Mount Haleakala and, instead of killing the orb, made a deal that the sun would pass along the sky more slowly.

It seems today farmers and chefs of Maui are attempting to lasso the earth into an agreement; only their charge is by reverting to ancient farming methods. In Kula, the isle's up-country region, executive chef James McDonald (from Pacific'O and I'O restaurants) teamed up with his investors to create O'o Farm. This hillside organic farm grows greens, veggies, tropical fruits, and coffee for their battalion of restaurants.

On a recent visit to Maui, I dropped by the farm. Wearing only flip-flops, I trudged through the muddy driveway to find a group of tourists bending down and picking produce out of the dirt, which the farmworkers then delivered to the farm's executive chef, JJ Johnson. While the tourists explored the coffee and cacao trees, Johnson whipped up a farm luncheon. He explained that most of the ingredients in our lunch—rosemary chicken, roasted farm veggies, greens, and espresso chocolate truffles—were grown right here where we sat.

The mainlanders, sipping espresso grown, roasted, and brewed steps from the table, oohed and aahed at the appropriate places in his speech. But I had the feeling that while it was a powerful lesson for mainlanders to learn about eating sustainably, what O'o really needed to do was speak to local people.

Later that year, the buzz about Oahu's Ma'o Organic Farms was getting louder. Michelle Obama had just used the farm's organic produce on the menu for the Asia-Pacific summit luncheon. And this small farm, occupying a slice of land on the western shore of Hawaii's most populous isle, that brought in low-income youth to learn farming and earn cash for schooling, was now unable to keep up with demand. This spoke to the state's need to expand farming programs, making sure to teach the youths how to grow their own food. The state responded in late 2014 by passing a constitutional amendment, which gives low-interest loans to small farmers. The jury is still out on whether locals will benefit more than outsiders on these loans, allowing native people to sow the fruits of their land and ultimately feed themselves.

Like most of the ironies of Hawaii, the rich visitors were eating well, but the locals, the people who could

barely afford to scrape by, relied on processed foods and apples grown in Peru. Across the state, low-income residents in one of the most abundant growing regions on the planet still struggled with feeding themselves. So I turned to the one place in the state that might just have the answer. This was Hana, the paradise at the end of the road, one of the poorest places in the state, also one of the most sustainable communities in Hawaii, and maybe the entire United States.

A mere century ago, there was but a footpath connecting the inhabitants of Hana with communities like Kahului and Lahaina. And when in 1910 the bridges were constructed, it was a horse and buggy trail. Until then, residents who worked the six sugar plantations had to travel by boat to access major medical services. This isolation forced residents to band together, especially when the sugar plantations shuttered in the early 1900s. With limited supplies, community members had to take care of their own. If a woman was sick and couldn't afford the trip to town, residents threw a barbecue to raise money to fund transport and medical services. When farmers had an excess of *ulu* (breadfruit), they would trade their crop for a chicken, or for someone to fix their roofs. Despite being far from the iconic starches of the Hawaiian diet—rice, macaroni, and bread, all imported—the people of Hana never went hungry.

Even today, I could see evidence of this culture along the highway as I got closer to Hana. Guys hawk scrumptious banana bread from the backs of their flatbed trucks, *tutus* (Hawaiian for "grandparents") sell their *kalua* pork in a window-less shack, a couple of men sling barbecue from a pit attached to their van. And now that the tourists arrive each day like clockwork around lunchtime, travelers can count on more international options—coconut-milk ice cream, wood-fired pizzas, and even, once you arrive in Hana, authentic Thai food served under a sweat-inducing tarp near the baseball diamond.

For most travelers, Hana as a destination pales in comparison to the journey to get there. There's one resort, the posh Travaasa Hana, which boasts two restaurants, a bar with live music and hula, a spa, and a gallery; a couple of low-key accommodations lie beyond the resort, maybe two other places to eat, a couple of beaches, and farmland, lots of it. Arriving in town is underwhelming to say the least, which is why most people drive there in the morning and back at night.

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I was not most travelers. I was there to figure out how a speck of a place, isolated from the rest of the island, the state, the country, managed to sustain itself. On my first morning, I tagged along on a fishing excursion with Travaasa Hana's unofficial cultural ambassador, Kepa. As we walked down to Hana's main beach, a cove punctuated by a ring of cliffs and dark matter on the sand, Kepa showed us how to wind the net around our arms, use the body to cast the net wide over the top of the sea, and let the thick rope settle, catching whatever fish had sailed in on the most recent waves. He cast his weight onto the sea and came back without any fish, saying they hear the sound of the net and scatter. "Learned behavior," he laughed, "like Hawaiians. You give a boy a fish, he eats that day; you teach him to fish, he eats forever." He explained that kids learn young how to throw-net fish, because in Hana there is never a reason for people to be hungry. The sea is abundant and always offers something of substance, including a chance to dive into the clear waters, which our group did after all but one failed to snag a fish to fry.

I'd finagled an invitation to judge the annual *ulu* cooking competition at the fall festival later that evening. It was a feast of local cuisine, hula, and flower arranging. The other judges were Hawaiian food writers, editors, a chef, and a farmer. We gathered under a tarp as the contestants delivered their creations. *Ulu*, it turned out, is considered by the Breadfruit Institute (located in Hana) to be one of the planet's most versatile foods. This starchy fruit can substitute for potatoes, taro, flour, cabbage, and even the sweet in desserts.

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One of the organizers, John Cadman, a chef specializing in *ulu* hummus and pies, placed name tags around the different dishes—kimchi, poi (a sticky Hawaiian staple from pounded taro), chili, enchiladas (*ulu* was the tortillas and the filling), even dessert truffles. Ian Cole, the director of the Breadfruit Institute, sidled over and laughed, "See, *ulu* can change the world." He added that if we could just get more people to think like the folks in Hana and use *ulu* as a substantial addition to their diets, fewer people on the planet would go hungry.

Creativity was a major ingredient in Hana residents' ability to be sustainable. An abundant fruit wasn't merely cast off, but toyed with to nurture its usefulness to alchemize it into a main course, a dessert, pet food. Cole led me over to meet Eileen Comeaux, the owner of Hana Herbs, who grows edible fern shoots, called *pohole*. As she fluttered around the competition area, she talked about how Hana residents have relied on foraged foods for centuries, and that with so much *ulu*, *pohole*, lemons, seafood, or even wild pigs wandering through the mountains, there was no need for them to ever go hungry. "You just have to eat what nature provides."

As we tasted the *ulu* enchiladas, I got to know my fellow judges. Dania, the owner of a prominent Hawaii food magazine, marveled at Hana's sustainability. She mentioned that while there were more people under the poverty level in Hana than in Wailuku or Kahului (the largest towns on Maui), people rarely went hungry. She attributed this to the resourcefulness of Hana's residents. "You see signs. 'Plumber willing to trade for babysitting.' Or, 'Have avocadoes, need mechanic.'" Plus, extended families live together on one property. "It's cultural to live with aunties and uncles, mom and *tutu*—cultural *and* economic."

The chef and owner of Simpli-Fresh, James Simpliciano, chimed in that the rest of Maui had a lot to learn from Hana, which still cultivated the canoe crops first brought by Tahitians. He said that when he used to be a chef at many posh resorts throughout the island, he was frustrated that the produce always came from off island. So he bought some farmland and, using traditional irrigation methods, started farming. His goal is to grow diverse crops, reforest the island with breadfruit and "indigenous Hawaiian canoe crops, like Maui cacao." He added that his farmworkers have constructed a bee sanctuary and diversified fruit and vegetable production. They hope to later add animal husbandry and to align with local schools to teach the youth how to farm and sustain their community. He was fulfilling Roy Yamaguchi's dream of making farming hip, and giving this skill to the youth.

A food writer asked if we'd heard about Hāna Fresh, the new venture at Hāna Health, a medical center that serves people on a sliding scale, never turning away patients for lack of funds. The tiny staff (one doctor and one nurse) started a farm on a vacant lot, hired a chef, and now serve lunch every day in the parking lot, under a big tent. Using vegetables from the garden, they feed their patients fresh fruit bowls, tuna paninis, smoothies. Recently they opened the stand to the public, so locals can purchase healthy food like *poke* bowls with brown rice, kebabs, and soba noodle salad with salmon, as well as produce.

James Simpliciano took a bite of *ulu* tamales and smiled, saying the people of Hana managed to inspire him yet again. He called over to the chef, a bubbly young mainland transplant in her twenties named Jasmine. "Hey, you ground that *ulu* into masa?"

She smiled proudly. "It was easy." Jasmine's boyfriend, Mikala Minn, is the volunteer coordinator of Mahele Farm, a community farm in Hana that invites volunteers to help grow, harvest, and once a week, eat the fruits of the labors during a potluck lunch, sourced primarily from the garden. They have partnered with Hana schools, notably the high school culinary teacher, to get students to cook from the source and learn about healthy food. Most importantly, the bounty of the harvest is always divided up among the volunteers, meaning no one in the community ever has to go hungry if they are willing to get a little dirty once or twice a week.

"They're growing *ulu* too." This was John Cadman. "Wherever it can be grown, breadfruit holds more potential to address food security and sustainability issues than any other food crop."

"And it tastes good," someone standing outside the tent said, and was applauded with laughing and cheers.

Once we crowned Jasmine that year's winner, locals lined up to sample the various dishes entered in the competition. I left as everyone was buzzing about the *ulu paiai*, a version of poi, a traditional Hawaiian dish made of pounding taro into a sort of paste, and wandered past the flower decorating competition, the hula dancers, and toward the other food tent. This one charged a nominal fee for a heaping plate of meat and rice. Local women and men sweated next to big steaming cauldrons. A kid would come by and a woman would hand him a plate of food at no cost. Someone brought food to an elderly woman seated on a folding chair. Suddenly there was a crack in the sky and a torrent of rain dropped on the festival. The workers at the food tent barricaded the pots of food and invited as many of us under the tarp as could fit. A man talked about when the baseball field where the tent was set up was the practice destination for the San Francisco Seals. Another woman talked about Auntie So-and-so's hurt foot. A woman smiled and said they'd need to do a fundraiser, someone laughed, another volunteered to make banana bread. In the distance kids danced in puddles. Teens played basketball. A group of guys sipped beer in their beach chairs, seemingly unaffected by the passing storm, as they soaked up the communal spirit that nurtured, satiated, and sustained a little speck of a community at the end of a storied road.

Michele Bigley is a Lowell Thomas Award–winning travel writer and author of more than forty guidebooks, including *Backroads and Byways of Hawaii* and *Explorer's Guide Northern California*. She frequently contributes to the *Los Angeles Times*, *KiaOra*, *Brides*, CNN, the *Boston Globe*, and dozens more. Her current project, *Eight Feet on the Ground*, explores how she is teaching her sons about the planet's ills through travel. She leads writing workshops at the University of California, Santa Cruz; University of California, Los Angeles Extension; Cabrillo College Extension; and California State University, Monterey Bay.