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A taste of Hawai'i for the military shopper

By Dan Nakaso
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KO OLINA — Diane Lee held a sample of her company's Maui-based ice cream in one hand and a confusing list of military acronyms in the other yesterday as she tried to figure out how to get a bigger taste of O'ahu's military retail industry.

Roselani Ice Cream's haupia, Hawaiian vanilla bean and chocolate macadamia nut flavors began selling in Air Force minimarts and the Navy Exchange last year, generating a 150 percent increase in revenue, said Lee, the company's brand manager. Yesterday, Lee hoped Department of Defense officials would be so impressed with the Kona mud pie, mango and cream, and vanilla mac flavors she served up that they would carry them as well in the military's five O'ahu commissaries and on aircraft carriers, submarines and bases in the Far East.

"This is great for helping understand how to do business with the military because it is very complicated," Lee said. "My basic message is: 'What paper do I need to fill out for you?'"

For the ninth year in a row, the Hawai'i chapter of the American Logistics Association organized members and nonmembers at a trade show of sorts yesterday designed to bring together Hawai'i companies and the Department of Defense officials who decide what items to stock on their shelves.

Previous trade shows have helped generate more business opportunities for companies like Hawaiian Host Chocolates and Hawaii Coffee Co. that began their military relationships slowly on O'ahu, said Pat Nixon, chief executive of the DOD's Defense Commissary Agency Headquarters in Fort Lee, Va.

61 VENDORS AT SHOW

This year a record 61 vendors turned out at the Ihilani Resort and 10 more had to be turned away, said one of the coordinators, Sharon Zambo-Fan.

Hawai'i has more small-business food companies than any other major market, said Richard Page, director of the DOD's commissary agency for the Western region. And O'ahu's five military commissaries carry more individual local products — 2,472 — than any other commissaries in the DOD's global system, Page said.

Until this year, the annual trade show was the only one of its kind in the world but it has since been used as a template for a similar show in South Korea in March, Page said.

DECISIVE NEWS TODAY

Today, the individual companies will learn whether they will get their first shot of business in the military system on O'ahu, or have to try again next year.

Others, such as Roselani Ice Cream, also will find out if they can expand into other military operations.

On Thursday, DOD officials met with individual businesses to go over their business plans, distribution plans and marketing plans — before sampling the goods yesterday.

Businesses that don't get a contract to fill military shelf space this year will get feedback today on what they need to do to be ready for next year's trade show, Nixon said.

"It can be a daunting task," Nixon said. "How do you do business with a worldwide military organization? But we don't want anybody to walk away with a bad feeling about the process."

SERVING O'AHU FIRST

Every company that gets an open-ended contract will start out on O'ahu before possibly expanding to the Department of Defense's other operations, which include 268 commissaries in 14 countries.



At the trade show, vendor representative Diane Lee introduces the exotic flavors of Roselani brand ice cream to Defense Commissary Agency executives, from left, Daniel Sclater, Richard Page and Patrick Nixon. The agency picks local products to sell on military bases.

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Debra Hopkins, the owner of Deb's Ribs and Soul Food, was optimistic about her chances of expanding her military business, in part because of Page's comment that "If you can't sell with enthusiasm, the lack thereof will be infectious."

Hopkins served up generous portions of barbecued meatball sandwiches, hush puppies and desserts yesterday that included sweet potato pie, peach cobbler, pure butter pound cake and banana pudding with vanilla wafers — and greeted each person who stopped by her booth as if they were family.

Hopkins closed her Kailua restaurant in May to focus on her retail business selling her bottles of barbecue sauce and packaged hush puppy mix, which are now carried at Sam's Club, the Marine Corps minimart and the Navy Exchange as well as at Fort Shafter.

Now Hopkins hopes that Department of Defense will include her products in the much more lucrative commissaries where military families shop for groceries.

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