

CRUISE SHIP BUSINESSES

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Devon Clarke, a sous chef aboard Norwegian Cruise Line's Pride of Aloha, holds a garden burger that has Hawaii-grown taro in it. The cruise line has become Hawaii Taro Co.'s largest single customer.

Rising tide

Business generated aboard cruise ships is raising boats for many Hawaii companies

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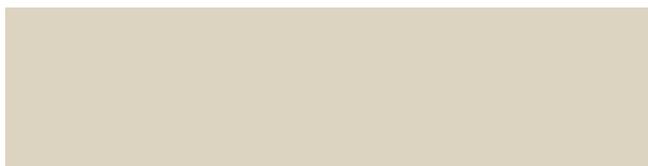
CRUISE-SHIP passengers make a valuable market for most of Hawaii's visitor industry, but some isle companies and artisans have found even more value in going on board themselves.

Seeking fresh local produce and other foods for its shipboard food service operations, Norwegian Cruise Line has contracts with Roselani Ice Cream, Hawaii Taro Co. and the Maui Farmers' Cooperative Exchange, among others.

"Not only have they helped us in our production volume, they have been an ambassador for Roselani," said Cathy Nobriga-Kim, Roselani vice president.

To further its commitment to buy local, NCL has created a shore-based position -- manager of purchasing and logistics -- to negotiate contracts for goods and services. The company is recruiting to fill the job in Honolulu.

"We're really committed to providing our passengers with a little bit of Hawaii that showcases our culture -- and we're also committed to the community and the local businesses here," said Denise Hayashi, director of community relations for NCL America. "I think we've made significant impact, stimulating growth for them."



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Justine Slaughter scoops some Hawaii-made Roselani ice cream aboard NCL's Pride of Aloha. Many passengers who taste the specialty flavors on the ship end up ordering more online later.

The Hawaii companies and artisans with which NCL does business have enjoyed increased revenue from their presence aboard the Pride of Aloha and the Pride of America -- and they look forward to even greater returns when the Pride of Hawaii enters service in June.

"We will have 8,000 passengers a week ... with four ships here," including the Norwegian Wind, Hayashi said.

In addition to the Roselani Ice Cream served by NCL's galleys, 15 flavors of the Hawaii-made frozen confection are served from the Mr. Sprinkle's scooping station aboard the Pride of Aloha, an arrangement that began late last year.

NCL buys 250 to 600 gallons of ice cream and sherbets per ship per week from Roselani, Hayashi said.

Nobriga-Kim said the contract has Roselani producing more ice cream and sherbets than ever before, "and our everyday cost of operation, like water, and electricity, is spread out over more gallons."

The company purchased an additional freezer to help with the demand, hired an additional production person and it is looking to hire yet another worker.

The 15 flavors served by NCL include Hawaii-identified flavors, such as haupia, guava, lilikoi and lychee as well as traditional classics such as vanilla, chocolate and rocky road.

Evidently some cruisers were also flabbergasted by the haupia ice cream, as Roselani received three online requests earlier this week for shipments of ice cream to the mainland.

"Four half-gallons will cost \$36 and the freight will cost \$120 to \$160 depending on the destination," she said. Nevertheless, the orders have been paid for and will be shipped.

NCL welcomed Roselani aboard, Nobriga-Kim said, "because I have a very persistent brand manager" in Diane Lee. She took the bold step of calling the cruise line to explore the opportunity, which led to a meeting at the county building on Maui where the NCL contact was loaded up with ice cream to the point he couldn't walk away without saying 'yes,' Nobriga-Kim laughed.

"NCL is an instrumental part of our business and we're very honored to be part of their business," said Nobriga-Kim.

The wealth gets spread to many Hawaii businesses, familiar and not so well-known.

Brands in NCL shipboard gift shops include Hilo Hattie, Maui Divers, the Tea Chest, LeMana Perles, Malie Kai Chocolates and Dwen Hawaii, maker of tropical-themed hair accessories.

The Maui Farmers' Cooperative Exchange helps bring together farmers who individually can't produce the quantities NCL's ships need, Hayashi said.

Hawaii Taro Co. President and founder Robert Mitnick agrees that the opportunity to do business with NCL "has been pretty golden."

Hawaii Taro Co. makes a vegan alternative to the traditional vegetarian burger patty, and is branded as "the Original Maui Taro Burger," which is served in the ships' restaurants as well as in Nieman Marcus' Mariposa restaurant, among others.

"I love the relationship," Mitnick said. "We worked on it for quite awhile," and now NCL is Hawaii Taro's largest single

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Some Hawaii-made products are displayed in the Galleria aboard NCL's Pride of Aloha docked at Honolulu Harbor. The cruise line uses lots of Hawaii produce and products aboard the ship.

He would not disclose the volume of product sold to NCL, but said its purchases are in the same bracket as the food distribution companies with which it also does business.

The NCL deal has contributed to an increase in production at Hawaii Taro, as well as a new hire. With the addition of Pride of Hawaii, "they could possibly outstrip everybody," in order volume. As it is, NCL is one of the top 10 purchasers in the state, Mitnick said.

Providing Maui Taro Burgers to the cruise business will boost production as well.

"Everybody with us is part time ... but this is probably going to carry us through to a full-time crew," said Mitnick.

Many of Hawaii Taro's taro providers were hard hit by recent storms and floods, but the company still has other producers and "plenty of taro," Mitnick said. The company has a long way to go before it maxes out its production capacity. "We can do a lot more than we're doing," he said.

NCL recently took operation of its shipboard gift shops in-house, which is another venue that provides exposure and sales for local companies, such as Kilauea Gifts Co.

Its tropical fruit butters and pepper jellies are made in Volcano Village and Honokaa on the Big Island.

The family business' products are distributed primarily by sister company Kilauea Trading Co., which also distributes Hula Girl brand pancake mixes from Maui.

The original lilikoi fruit butter flavor, developed by Audrey Kaneshiro in 1990, as well as the company's other products, have been sold in the NCL gift shops for the past six months. The products' presence have spiked repeat sales via the Kilauea Gifts Web site by about 25 percent, said Jonathan Shotwell, Kaneshiro's son and president of Kilauea Trading.

"The reordering comes immediately after the people get home (from their cruises)," Shotwell said. His sister and brother-in-law, Kathy and Ola Tripp, now run the food product manufacturing business and are soon to open a Hilo store to cater to retail customers, many of whom will be shuttled from NCL ships.

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