

Island flavors: Maui for foodies

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The Hawaiian regional cuisine movement started with 12 chefs interested in focusing on using the freshest local ingredients.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- The best place to do your coffee shopping is on a coffee estate, such as Kupa'a Farms
- Farmers' markets have become more than a regular shopping opportunity for locals
- Sustainable food on Maui isn't just about produce, but also island-grazed beef

(Lonely Planet) -- From the steep slopes of volcanic Haleakala to the wealth of surf spots, Maui beckons lovers of sun, sand and surf. But venture just beyond the hotel buffet and discover what a foodie destination the Valley Island has become.

Maui's culinary landscape is heavily influenced by fresh, local and 'ono (delicious) flavors. Chefs, farmers, ranchers and fishermen work together toward a sustainable future where island ingredients are the featured attraction on daily menus and reflect the agriculture and people of Maui.

The Hawaiian Regional Cuisine movement started in 1991, with 12 founding chefs interested in focusing on using the freshest local ingredients to achieve the diverse flavors of island dishes.

Three of those original chefs head restaurants in Maui: Mark Ellman of Mala Ocean Tavern, Beverly Gannon of Hali'imaile General Store and Peter Merriman of Merriman's Kapalua.

Those and some of the founding chefs' more recent ventures -- including Ellman's newest, Honu, in Lahaina, Gannon's eponymous Gannon's and Merriman's Monkeypod Kitchen in Wailea -- are among the best places to get a sample of Maui flavor, straight from the farm to the table.

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Just like the wealth and diversity of fresh local ingredients, their availability spans beyond large restaurants to smaller establishments. Get a taste of guri-guri, a treat crossed between ice cream and sherbet, at Tasaka Guri Guri.

Another sweet option is the island-style ice cream at Roselani

Tropics Ice Cream, featuring local flavors such as vanilla, mango, pineapple and coffee. Home Maid Bakery's crispy manju has luscious fillings from azuki beans to coconut.

Take some island style home in a bag of Maui coffee. The best place to do your shopping is on a coffee estate, where you can get a look at where your morning beverage comes from, such as MauiGrown Coffee or Kupa'a Farms.

Farmers' markets and farm stands have become more than a regular shopping opportunity for locals -- they're now a common stop on a visitor's itinerary as well. Markets are an easy way to showcase Maui's farms and ranches and the food they produce.

Even big-name hotels are helping lead the way in supporting local farmers by including their products in sustainable and organic menus. The stand at Kula Country Farms, as well as farmers' markets in Makawao, Kahului and other locations throughout Maui are ideal opportunities to see the variety of locally raised products and produce on the island -- and buy some to taste.

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A visit to one of Maui's farms can be both fun and educational, especially when it's in Kula. In Upcountry Maui on the slopes of Mount Haleakala, the Kula area takes advantage of its rich volcanic soil and cool climate, and has been central to the island's culinary resurgence.

Much of the produce you'll find on the tables of Maui's best restaurants focusing on Hawaiian Regional Cuisine is grown in and around Kula, including the sweet Maui onion.

Start with a gourmet lunch tour and real farm-to-table experience at O'o Farm, an 8.5-acre natural farm operated by the Pacific'O and I'O restaurants. Milk a goat at the Surfing Goat Dairy, then see the cheese-making process before you sample some for yourself.

Get an exotic walking tour through the sweet-smelling fields of Ali'i Kula Lavender, or wander the grounds of Maui's Winery at Ulupalakua Ranch -- before you wander right into the tasting room.

Sustainable food on Maui isn't just about produce -- it also includes island-grazed beef and grass-fed lamb. Island ranching dates back to the 19th century, and is a large part of the local paniolo culture. The Maui Cattle Company produces meats from six ranch partners throughout the island, from Hana to the slopes of Haleakala.

While every day is a celebration with island cuisine options, Maui food festivals offer an opportunity to get immersed in a particular food item, like the Maui Onion Festival or the East Maui Taro Festival.

Others, like the 30-year-old Kapalua Wine & Food Festival, are multi-day culinary extravaganzas.

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