

## Dinner has roots in 17th-century movement

**A University of Hawaii professor challenges potluck diners to access ingredients without using money**

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University of Hawaii art professor Gaye Chan tests an audio artwork by Peter Chamberlain that will be used at the dinner on Thursday

How will you plan and make a dish for the next family potluck? If you're like most of us, you'll thumb through a well-worn cookbook or research some ideas online, make a grocery list and hit the supermarket. Deliver something delicious and it's mission accomplished.

But this is not how it's done when attending one of Gaye Chan's dinners. In fact, the University of Hawaii art professor and creator of the Eating in Public project puts a challenging spin on the traditional potluck with the Diggers Dinner. The public event will be held Thursday at the UH Art Department Commons Gallery.

"A Diggers Dinner is a potluck, but the food is made with ingredients that people have gotten without using money," she said.

Though the upcoming event is Chan's first public dinner, she's held several private dinners in the past. For those gatherings, guests have hunted, fished and been given meat that they brought to the table. One guest gathered edible weeds; another dug through a friend's freezer. Someone else picked a breadfruit from a branch that hung into his property. Everyone at the table shared how they obtained the food for their dishes, a vital aspect of the dinner.

Bundit Kanisthakhon, a regular guest at Chan's dinners, barter with his labor.

"I work at a Thai restaurant to be able to bring food to the dinners. Two days of work for a pot of curry," he said. "It works out because I'm also helping a friend who is ill and can't work."

The Diggers Dinner is one of the activities that germinated from Eating in Public, which "sets up systems of

### DIGGERS DINER

**When:** 6 to 9 p.m.

Thursday

**Where:** Commons Gallery, Art Department, University of Hawaii at Manoa

**Admission:** A potluck dish

**Info:** [www.nomoola.com/dinner](http://www.nomoola.com/dinner)

Related how-to events:

10 a.m.-noon: chopstick production;

noon-2 p.m.: fish cleaning and scaling;

4-6 p.m.: meatballs and ti-leaf plates



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Chef Bob McGee's meatball demonstration Thursday precedes the Diggers Dinner.

The term "Diggers" refers to a 17th-century movement in England that advocated the end of privately owned land in favor of the kind of communal agrarian society that existed before feudalism took hold in the wake of the Norman conquest of the 11th century. In those older times, people relied on "the commons" to graze their animals, fish, collect firewood and otherwise use the resources of the area to sustain their families.

"This allowed people to survive on their own," Chan said. "But they didn't just take from the land; they took care of it."

The concept has been revived throughout history. In the 1960s in San Francisco, a Diggers group regularly made loaves of bread and passed them out in parks.

Kanisthakhon is owner of Tadpole Studios, a design firm that re-purposes found and donated material. For Thursday's gathering, Kanisthakhon was charged with creating a long dinner table that runs from inside the Commons Gallery to the outside. As with much of his design work, Kanisthakhon enlisted the help of welder Bill Reardon, owner of Heavy Metal Inc., and Thorben Wuttke, a woodworker and owner of Honolulu Furniture Co.

Kanisthakhon and Reardon also designed a cooking cart for the dinner, which Kanisthakhon said was inspired by "the manapua man," a person who brought food into neighborhoods. The cart was crafted from reclaimed wood and an abandoned baking rack Reardon found on the side of the street. Its heat source comes from a portable gas burner loaned by friend Lindsey Ozawa, chef at Prima in Kailua. It is the embodiment of the resourceful, creative and collaborative approach behind Tadpole Studios and Eating in Public.

That same set of values led to a friendship between Kanisthakhon and chef Robert McGee, another participant in the dinner. McGee will do a cooking demonstration prior to the dinner using Kanisthakhon's cart.

McGee says the Diggers Dinner is a natural fit for him. In the restaurant industry, he says, a lot of services are exchanged.

"What we do here on this island is ask, 'Can you do a gig for me? I can do a gig for you,'" he said.

The chef has been extremely busy of late readying for his latest venture: a meatball restaurant on Kapahulu Avenue in the old La Bamba restaurant space, set to open this month. He says his concept aims for zero waste: Meatballs allow him to use all parts of the animal because the meat is ground, and since the eatery will allow diners to select their meatball variety, accompanying sauce and starch, "I hope not to be scraping many plates," he said.

His food of choice for the demonstration? Meatballs, of course, made with donated meat.

Kanisthakhon will be cooking at the cart as well for folks who want to bring raw ingredients for a collaborative dish.

Besides the Diggers Dinner, Eating in Public instigates various other food-related systems such as seed shares, "guerrilla gardens" and free stores.

Seed shares involve bins at sites with lots of foot traffic to make free seed packets accessible to whomever wants them or wants to leave seeds for others. Guerrilla gardeners plant seeds in public and private spaces as a way to spotlight the concept of the commons. Free stores are sites where people can drop off items they no longer want and take whatever is there.

Chan says whether the projects are sustained depend on whether they're useful to anyone and maintained by participants. They're egalitarian projects that anyone can take part in. In fact, she calls them "shamelessly unoriginal."

"These are ideas I've borrowed from people who came before me, and I welcome people to take my ideas and go. The works keep going -- there's no real author. There is a history of knowledge, and no one can own an idea."

One highly successful free store is at the UH art building. Chan says there's a constant movement of items and a number of people who voluntarily keep the area tidy.

For a time, frozen chicken would regularly and mysteriously make an appearance at the store. It turned out to be from a homeless man who received the chicken along with other grocery items at a soup kitchen. Since he could not cook the chicken himself, he left it at the store.

His participation illustrates Kanisthakhon's belief that it's imperative to engage the community.

"For me it's just fun to share. If you can engage people, then they will understand: Don't just be a consumer; be a part of the process. Exchange is a relationship of giving and taking unconditionally," he said.

In terms of the Diggers Dinner, "whoever comes shares -- homeless with wealthy, the bourgeois, whoever," Chan said. "Everyone has the same challenge."

"A dish is the admission ticket to the commons. A person enters through their labor, not their wealth."