

CRAVE

COOK • EAT • DRINK

WEEDS FOR ALL

Those unwelcome plants in your garden could become a delicious, nutritious addition to your plate



Bernice Musrasrik, right, and Gaye Chan prepare banana tree trunks to be used as plates.

Roots Cafe and Cultural Food Hub
>> **Where:** 2229 N. King St., in Kokua Kalihi Valley's Harry & Jeanette Weinberg Wellness Center
>> **Hours:** 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays
>> **Info:** Call 791-9400, go to nomoola.com/weeds or visit the Roots Cafe page on Facebook.

If you find that your garden just won't behave — the bok choy is succumbing to slugs and bugs while weeds are flourishing all around — take the hint, for goodness' sake. Weed stir-fry beckons. Bon appetit!

That was just one of the messages delivered at an Eat Your Weeds dinner last week at the Roots Cafe and Cultural Food Hub in Kalihi. In fact, inasmuch as many weed-incorporated foods pleased the palate, the meal was equally focused on food for thought — about the definition of weeds, invasive species, food sustainability, even capitalism.

"There are no 'weeds' in nature," said Gaye Chan of Eating in Public, one of the groups that presented the dinner. "Weeds are a human concept. They are whatever the collective 'we' don't want to grow in a place we're cultivating."

Chan said weeds aren't necessarily wild things; rather, they often thrive in places of human activity such as sidewalks or farms, where other, more familiar edibles might not even be able to grow because of soil quality. And they can be nutritious.

"They would feed a lot of people if people would learn about them," she said. In fact, in some cultures some of the "weeds" profiled already have a place on dinner plates.

They included amaranth, pohe kula (also known as gotu kola), laukahi (broad plantain), palula (sweet potato leaf), honohono grass, mugwort, gorilla ogo and ivy gourd, presented in everything from salads, iced tea and jelly to hush puppies and ice cream, plus more. Feral pig and Molokai venison rounded out the offerings. The meal was served on pieces of banana trunk that made great plates; they would later be fed to hogs.

KASHA HO, community food systems coordinator for Kokua Kalihi Valley's Roots program, the other organization involved, created the menu. The process started with all the planners walking through Ho'oulu 'Aina, a 100-acre nature preserve in Kalihi Valley that is the land base for the organization, where they would source the weeds.

It took Ho about three days of research — online and through a series of books about uses for weeds published by Windward Community College.

The honohono grass ice cream, served with a mugwort brownie, for instance, was inspired by a recipe in one of those books.

"There was a honohono sorbet in there, but I thought it would make for a good ice cream," she said. "I juiced the grass and

Let them eat



Story by Joleen Oshiro
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mixed it into standard vanilla ice cream.”

The pig also came from Ho’oulu ‘Aina, where the animals encroach on the land and are occasionally hunted for food. It was cooked in an imu along with the deer, another invasive animal. A mugwort jelly was used to season the meats, based on a British preparation that mixed jelly with fatty protein such as duck.

Ho says that at the valley the process of removing invasive plants or animals includes trying to repurpose them.

“The albizia trees are sucking up all the groundwater, so we cut them down and built canoes and furniture,” said Ho, noting that to date they have carved at least three canoes. “If we’re removing honohono grass anyway, I figured we could use it in our ice cream.”

Meanwhile, rolls made of a combination of kiawe and wheat flours were sprinkled with laukahi seeds that took several hours to carefully remove by hand from the plant.

“We didn’t want to lose any,” said Lisa Asagi, who was chopping vegetables before the event.

“A lot of love has gone into the food,” said Sharon Kaiulani Odom, recalling the meticulous process.

Odom runs the Roots program, a land-to-table initiative that intertwines land stewardship with healthful eating. The program extends from a community garden at Ho’oulu ‘Aina to the cafe, which hosts a monthly dinner series, “Decolonizing Our Diets,” focused on examining issues surrounding food and diet. Past dinners have centered on such foods as kalo, honey and a homemade Spam.

“This dinner, for us, is really what the Roots program is all about — building health and community with food, growing and sharing food, and by extension, sharing food that’s growing all around us,” Odom said.

Learning to forage for one’s own weeds usually starts at home. It entails not just learning to identify the weeds there, but connecting with others nearby who have some in their yards.

“It forces us to talk to our neighbors and say we’d like to eat that weed, and ask if they sprayed it (with pesticides),” said Bun-

dit Kanisthakhon of Eating in Public, who brought a food cart to the event to prepare weed omelet appetizers on the spot. “In the areas Gaye and I foraged, we asked people not to spray the weeds so they could grow and we could pick them to eat.”

That’s one way to spread the concept without lecturing anyone, he said. His live cooking is another way.

“I like to stir-fry my weeds so I can taste them, but an omelet is a good way to ease people into it,” he said.

Chan said such quick and easy preparations encourage people to take up the practice.

“I want people to immediately apply it,” she said. “I’m really interested in direct action.”

AFTER DINNER CAME discourse for the mind to digest.

Chan and Nandit Sharma shared the significance of weeds for Eating in Public, which challenges the concept of capitalism and seeks to re-establish the commons, “land used by everyone but not owned by anyone, a place that all people have access to through their labor rather than status or membership,” explained Chan.

History lesson: In 18th-century England,

when capitalism took hold, the commons were taken over by wealthy landowners who erected enclosures to claim common spaces used for growing and hunting food, pushing out small farmers.

“Weeds are still out of the market. It’s the perfect anti-capitalist thing,” Sharma said.

Theirs were just some of many voices, including those of guests who listened earnestly and talked story about their own perspectives.

Bobby Nihipali of Liliha attended with her husband, Walter, because they were intrigued about eating weeds. But for Bobby it wasn’t a completely foreign idea. Her father began steeping a weed for tea after hearing from a friend that it eased gout.

Justin Reinhart said it was his first time eating weeds.

“I didn’t know what to expect. It was awesome,” he said, noting that his favorite dish was the raw weeds, served in a simple tossed salad. “I liked having the opportunity to taste them for what they were.”

His takeaway: “People who prepared the meal had taken the time to explore, investigate, discover. I’ve walked by some of these plants and hadn’t discovered them. They provided a bridge for plants and concepts I wouldn’t otherwise have thought of.”



Turn the page for tips on weed foraging and a recipe featuring sweet potato greens.

weeds



At top, honohono grass ice cream sits on a mugwort brownie. Above, an amaranth omelet.

Weed Foraging 101

It's imperative to get educated before tossing weeds into a pan for dinner. Remember: Some plants can be toxic. Here are some tips, courtesy Eating in Public:

- >> Learn to properly identify weeds. Do online research, talk with plant experts and take an urban foraging tour to familiarize yourself with weeds you might source for food. Start by visiting nomoola.com/weeds, for illustrations of the nine weeds served at the Eat Your Weeds dinner.
- >> Find out whether a weed has been sprayed with pesticides. One way to make an educated guess is by observing the plants around it. If everything else is brown or has died, it likely has been sprayed. Ask people responsible for the space to stop spraying so you can pick the weeds for consumption.
- >> When foraging, don't take it all. Leave some behind so the plant continues to grow.
- >> Wash weeds thoroughly before eating.
- >> Some weeds might be available for purchase at farmers markets.



JAMM AQUINO / JAQUINO@STARADVERTISER.COM

Christen Oliviera dresses the dining tables with laukahi stalks during a dinner featuring foraged edible weeds at Roots Cafe.

Pickled Palula (sweet potato greens)

Sweet potato leaves can inundate a garden, but there are many ways to consume them: Younger leaves are great for stir-frys. Add leaves to soups and stews. Or pickle them, using the recipe below.

Courtesy Eating in Public

5 peppercorns

1 teaspoon pickling salt

1/2 teaspoon mustard seed

1 garlic clove

4 cups water

5 cups cider or rice vinegar

6 cups sweet potato shoots (called kamote in the Philippines, available in Asian markets)

In pot, combine spices, garlic, water and vinegar, and bring to a boil.

Pack sweet potato shoots into sterilized jars (if canning) and pour hot vinegar mixture over them. Cover and can, or refrigerate.

Nutritional information unavailable.