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WEDNESDAY 1/13/21

# CRAVE

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*Sakura Terrace  
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**nyt kitchen**  
*A restorative menu  
for January*



## A FARMER'S *soul* Tales of food, culture and rebuilding lives

## this week's **menu**

### Famers in the Kitchen

**6** Immigrant farmers tell their stories and share recipes through a video series that celebrates their cultures.

**On the cover:** Ikani Naulu spreads his arms in greeting to the crops on his Kunia farmland. Photography by Jamm Aquino.





PHOTOS BY JAMM AQUINO / JAQUINO@STARADVERTISER.COM

*A video series profiles immigrants learning to become farm owners, and the foods of their cultures*

**By Joleen Oshiro**  
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Health is not just a matter of tending to the body. "Health is also about feeding the soul," said Amanda Corby Noguchi.

In partnership with Pacific Gateway Center, Noguchi's Chef Hui organization has been nurturing both body and soul of Hawaii's underserved communities via a new, grant-funded program: Farmers in the Kitchen, a five-part series profiling immigrant farmers, the crops they grow and the traditional foods they cook.

Those familiar dishes — cultural soul food — are then shared with the communities they represent.

Through videos and articles posted on Chef Hui's website, the program spotlights the stories and cultures of five farmers — from Thailand, Laos, the Philippines, Vietnam and Tonga — who work land in Kunia leased from the center. More than 200 acres have been dispersed to about 80 people learning to build careers in farming.

The first installment features Ikani and Mele Naulu of the 5-acre Foursquare Farms, who grow Tongan crops such as taro, sweet potato, cassava, breadfruit, banana and Tongan spinach. The Naulus shared a recipe of lu pulu, a traditional baked Tongan dish of taro leaves, corned beef, onions and coconut milk wrapped

**Ikani Naulu harvests dry-land taro cultivated on Foursquare Farms in Kunia. After watching his father farm in Tonga as a youngster, he dreamed of working the land himself. Through a program at Pacific Gateway Center, he can do just that.**

in foil packets, and talo loloi, taro simmered in coconut milk.

Their recipes were scaled up by Chef Hui's Paul Matsumoto, who cooked some 200 meals to distribute to Polynesian communities across Oahu. Ingredients were purchased from Foursquare and neighboring farms.

"Through the years of working in the industry, I've liked to cook other peoples' food," said Matsumoto. "It's like an unspoken language. It can evoke emotion without speaking their language, and people are thinking, 'It tastes like my grandma used to make.'"

IKANI NAULU, owner of Foursquare Masonry Contractor, grew up watching his father farm in Tonga. It was something he longed to do as well.

"My husband has always had a passion for



Among items grown on the Naulus' farmland are ube, left, and Thai bananas. Other crops include taro, cassava, Tongan spinach and breadfruit.

farming, but it was difficult to get land," said Mele Naulu, his wife.

Mele's family moved to the U.S. from Tonga in 1969, when she was a child; Ikani came to Hawaii in 1987. A little more than a year ago, a Pacific Gateway farmer told the Naulus about the center's farming program.

"That sparked a flame," said Mele. "I told him, 'Oh my goodness. This can happen.'"

The couple started with a 1-acre plot; before long, they picked up another 4-acre plot.

The Naulus are committed to making the most of their opportunities. Ikani tends to his farm after workdays with his construction company, and the family works at the farm all day Saturdays. They take workshops on everything from growing taro to soil health, and Mele attends business classes. She said the center connects them to the courses.

"We do as much as we can take in. We feel blessed."

Among the center's resources, she said, is its dedicated staff. "They went out of their way to see what we needed to go about making our dreams come true. Right now, we're learning a lot. But our goal at some point is to teach others who want to farm and grow traditional foods from Tonga. And we want to teach others about our cultural dishes."

THAT GOAL of independence and giving back is exactly what the center hopes to instill in those it serves, said Hao Nguyen, Pacific Gateway's interim executive director.

Its farming program is just one of a number designed to help clients rebuild their lives. Most are low-income and refugee immigrants, and hu-



**“Right now, we’re learning a lot. But our goal at some point is to teach others who want to farm and grow traditional foods from Tonga.”**

**Mele Naulu**  
*Foursquare Farms*

man trafficking survivors.

"We began in 1973 in response to refugees coming to Hawaii during the Vietnam War," said Nguyen. "We started with the kind of social services people need when moving to another country. Then we realized we need to help them thrive, help them integrate into Hawaii and American society, while preserving their cultural heritage."

The center provides farmers with five-year leases on up to 5 acres of land. Equally important, it connects them with state and federal resources that provide education on land conservation, crop selection, health and safety issues, business education, technical assistance and more.

"They gradually learn to become farm business owners," said Nguyen.

When funds are available, the center purchases produce from its farmers and redistributes it throughout the community. It also connects farmers with organizations such as Aloha Harvest, Farm Link and the Hawaii Farm Bureau, which help move farm produce.

Other food-related programs include a culinary business incubator, with 11 commercial kitchens at the center's Kalihi site. During the pandemic, partners Chef Hui and Aloha Harvest have used the facilities to prep and store food that they redistributed through CARES Act funding. Pacific Gateway's program site for seniors, Na Kupuna Makamae Center in Kakaako, has pivoted to food distribution.

Farmers in the Kitchen, Nguyen said, allows displaced immigrants a unique chance to speak out. This empowers both the farmers and their businesses.

"This is a way they can represent themselves to society. If someone feels powerless, they tend to stay only in their own community," he said. "I tell clients, 'Share your story and why this food means something to you. Share where you come from. Customers pay for that experience, not just for the goods itself. It's a good marketing strategy.'"

FOR NOGUCHI, Farmers in the Kitchen hits all the marks of the Chef Hui mission — to connect people to their food and the individuals who grow, produce and cook it — plus more. In particular, it reaches out to ethnic communities censured several months ago for promoting the spread of the coronavirus.

"During the pandemic, we want to say to the communities reprimanded for not following protocol, 'We see you. We see you trying. These community meals honor your culture, honor your food.'"

"We see the happiness of the farmers to share their cultures, and this makes them the stars. Chefs are usually the stars, but they're nothing without good products."

For the larger audience, there are the compelling stories of the farmers, and a cooking video that offers them a chance to prepare a new dish.

"This program has more than one goal," said Noguchi. "And the end result is always a meal."

*Go to for stories of the farmers and how-to videos on making their dishes.*

**KEEP READING:** Turn the page for the Naulu family's recipe for a cassava dessert.

# Cassava, coconut meet in Tongan treat

**By Joleen Oshiro**  
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Ikani and Mele Naulu came together with several extended family members last week to make faikakai, a classic Tongan dessert. The family's version, manioke faikakai, uses grated cassava supplied by the Naulus' Foursquare Farms, resulting in mochi-like morsels that are topped with a luscious coconut caramel sauce called lolo.

Faikakai in their hands is done traditionally, requiring lots of manpower — and about half a day — to make. The process starts with grating cassava root by hand, an hours-long process. The grated cassava is squeezed to release excess liquid, then mixed with tapioca starch, coconut cream and sugar to create a dough that is baked. (The cassava liquid is reserved and, left to settle for a day, separates. The thin liquid is discarded. What's left is thick tapioca starch used for baking other dishes.)

Lolo calls for just two ingredients — sugar and coconut milk — cooked on the stove. But the process is a long one, requiring about two hours over low heat and regular stirring.

Authentic manioke faikakai reflects the hard work it takes to produce. Delicate cassava bites paired with silky caramel sauce deliver a dessert that is both refined in taste and satisfyingly hearty.

Other versions of faikakai are made with taro, ulu (breadfruit), sweet potato, banana, and even Tongan spinach or taro leaves.

While the Naulus cooked in traditional fashion, they provided a simpler, modern version of the recipe that calls for frozen grated cassava, available at Asian and Polynesian markets.

There's no getting around tending to the lolo, though. But if you take the time, you will be rewarded with an excellent topping that can boost endless desserts. Mele Naulu said the sauce is shelf stable for at least a week and can be kept refrigerated for an extended period. Because of the labor involved, her family makes it in bulk and stores it in Mason jars.



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**Poese Vatikani grates cassava, the first step in making the traditional Tongan dessert above, Manioke Faikakai.**

COURTESY MELE NAULU

## Manioke Faikakai

- 2 (16-ounce) packages frozen grated cassava
- 1 (14-ounce) bag tapioca starch
- 1 (19-ounce) can coconut cream
- 1/2 cup sugar

### >> Coconut caramel sauce (lolo):

- 2 cups sugar
- 1 (13-ounce) can coconut milk

Heat oven to 350 degrees.

In mixing bowl, combine cassava and tapioca starch. Incorporate coconut cream and sugar. Pour into a baking pan and bake 45 minutes.

Make sauce: In pot over high heat, melt sugar while stirring constantly. When sugar is melted, turn down heat to low until all lumps are gone. Stir in coconut milk gradually. Keep close and stir mixture regularly, until sauce turns golden brown, about 1-1/2 to 2 hours.

Cool baked cassava at least 30 minutes, then cut into bite-sized cubes. Cover with sauce. Serves 6 to 8.

Nutritional information unavailable.