



Big Island Food Festival Gives Consumers A Taste of the Hawaiian Range



Americans love their beef, and this has been proven for 13 years at the Big Island of Hawaii's premier food festival.

Story & photos by **Kim Holt**

Mealani's "A Taste of the Hawaiian Range" is a celebration of Hawaiian Regional Cuisine, intertwined with the Big Island of Hawaii's rich paniolo (cowboy) culture and agricultural heritage. It is rated by food writers as one of the state's best food venues and is known as one of Hawaii's premier ag-tourism events.

Each fall, food producers, preparers and consumers come together to taste, sample and learn about the bounty of locally grown food products, featuring forage-raised beef.

It was in the heart of Big Island ranch country that The Taste actually originated in 1996, as a companion event to the Cooperative Extension Services' Mealani Forage Field Day in Waimea (Kamuela). The Mealani Research Station is part of the College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources (CTAHR), the land-grant college of the University of Hawaii (UH). One of its specialties is tropical forages and forage-based beef production systems, including grass-finished beef.

Hawaii's beef industry came to an

economic crossroads in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when ranchers began shipping calves to the mainland for growing and finishing. Mealani researchers were looking at how they could shift the paradigm for forage-finished beef, coupled with new research findings about the healthfulness of the product, in order to assist those producers who were interested in growing and finishing cattle on tropical grasses for local markets.

Education and awareness

Mealani's goal in establishing "The Taste" with its Forage Field Day was to educate ranchers about the pastoral production of quality grass-fed beef and then the chefs about the quality of this beef product.

During its 13 years, The Taste has grown considerably from an audience of some 200 in its beginnings to 1,400 participants and volunteers this past year. Its purpose is to provide an educational venue to encourage and support local production of agricultural products.

Hawaii's cattle producers have been partners in The Taste since its inception. Kahua Ranch's Tim Richards, a veterinarian and vice chairman of the Hawaii Cattlemen's Council, comments, "What The Taste does is showcase local product. It highlights the fact the beef industry is here, it's very vital and is actually available for them."

Considerable growth

As The Taste has grown, it's moved from its roots in Waimea's town hall and preparatory academy to its present site at the Hilton Waikoloa Village on the Kohala Coast, where the food festival has really taken hold.

The hotel's grand ballroom and outside lagoon area are filled with booths represented by restaurants and resorts, farm-direct and specialty product vendors and agricultural and food education. This past year 30 local celebrity, resort and restaurant chefs and their foodservice staff, including culinary students, offered meaty food samples of world-class quality and presentation to more than 1,000 guests during the event's two-hour time frame.

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► Executive Chef Brett Villarmia of the Hapuna Beach Prince Hotel entered the entrée, "Big-Island Grass-Fed Top Round Carpaccio," with pickled Hamakua Springs Country Farms sweet tomatoes, Kahuku sea asparagus and Palm Island black lava salt.



► The Taste of the Hawaiian Range annually features a Ranch Round-up Cook-off. Six ranch cooks competed this year. Roy Mattos best answered "What do cowboys eat when they are rounding up the cattle?" with his family recipe for vinha d'alhos – Portuguese pot roast. Roy's wife, Jill, is the general manager of Hawaii Big Island Beef near Paaui.

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Each chef is assigned a cut of meat — including beef, lamb, mutton, pork and even goat — from which to create and use locally grown produce to complement their culinary creations.

The event is beef-hearty, and creations include everything from the norm of ground beef, tri-tip, brisket and chuck roll to the more challenging tripe, tongue, oxtail, shank and even mountain oysters.

“This is definitely a meat event,” confirms Lorie Farrell, the executive director of Big Island Farm Bureau, a major sponsor and partner of The Taste. “Part of the event is education, but it’s also to grow a consumer market for the grass-fed beef product we’re raising here.” A handout given out at this past year’s event listed some 75 Big Island locations where local grass-fed beef products can be purchased or enjoyed while dining out.

Farrell has helped plan all 13 events, and remarks, “If anybody who comes to the event goes away hungry, it’s because they didn’t go and get food. I don’t know how it would be possible to walk through there and not just eat too much.”

A Big Island newspaper reporter made similar comments about the 2008 The Taste: “Choosing favorites had everything to do with where one started and ended up stuffed. Few had room to give every recipe on the lengthy menu a fair tasting, and it seemed that once people found something they liked, one plate wasn’t enough.”

Committed participants, volunteers

A food festival of this magnitude takes a year to plan, and is funded through ticket

sales and grants. Farmers and ranchers donate the produce and usually all of the grass-fed animals, while The Taste pays for the processing.

Farrell says The Taste has longtime supporters. “Everybody is very committed to and passionate about the event. Even our

local attendees come year after year. It’s not really an event you want to miss if you live here.”

Chefs and foodservice staffers volunteer their time. “We have chefs who have participated for more than 10 years,” Farrell says, and those who participate 10

years in the event are recognized. Chefs even come from other islands to participate. “We already have 20-some chef commitments for next year,” she adds.

Farrell believes that good food and word of mouth has helped make The Taste successful. “It’s an interesting event in the sense we have people come from all over the world, but we have a tremendous amount of the local community standing there, which is unusual for a foodie kind of event. You don’t a lot of times have those kinds of demographics — a lot of time you’ll have the foodie crowd but not, say, the local producers.”

New to the event this past year was a food show where chefs, retail and wholesale buyers and media could come and visit with farm-direct businesses showcasing their locally grown products.

A new cooking demonstration featured Chef Peter Merriman demonstrating how to cook more unconventional cuts of grass-fed beef. Farrell says that Merriman, an award-winning chef, is certainly at the forefront of utilizing and cooking this product.

“He was the definite leader in chefs readily accepting grass-fed beef and local products. He advertised that he bought directly from the farmers and ranchers, and this is what he served in his restaurants.”

Merriman’s flagship restaurant in Waimea is the recent winner of the beef checkoff’s National Beef Backer “Innovator of the Year” award (May 2009 *Angus Journal*, page 74). Merriman says his restaurant has been involved in The Taste from the festival’s very start in Waimea.

“I think it’s really fun. I like the way people are assigned products they have to cook — that makes it really interesting. It really raises people’s awareness to the different things that are available to consumers.”

Richards adds, “If you’re looking for the rank-and-file restaurant that just uses boxed meat, that’s not the kind of person who’s going to get benefit out of ‘Taste of the Range.’ It’s the Peter Merriman-type of people who are innovative and looking for something different.”

The future

Planners of The Taste, such as Farrell, look to the future with optimism. Their goal is to continue sharing the story of the Hawaiian range with consumers through forage-finished beef, local meats, talented chefs and great food. They also want to share this celebration with even more visitors to Hawaii.

In doing so, Farrell says they’re looking at partnering with ag tourism projects, such as Big Island Farm Bureau’s farm tours, to provide a unique community-based visitor experience, which showcases the fresh and local of Hawaiian Regional Cuisine and the rich heritage of Big Island farming and ranching. **AJ**

“This is definitely a meat event.”
— Lorie Farrell



► Grass-fed beef is a niche market in Hawaii and one that producers can promote as locally raised.



► Strawberries on the ‘Kamuela-Grown’ display of flowers and produce catch this youngster’s eye.