

## Seal of Quality a boost for Isle farms

### State program emphasizes value of home-grown agriculture

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Papayas, cucumbers, eggplant and sea asparagus — all home-grown in Hawai'i along O'ahu's Windward coast from La'ie to Kahuku — are gaining a place on the plates at fine-dining restaurants as well as Island tables partly through a state program that highlights high-end products.

Farmer Ken Kamiya raises papayas in La'ie, alongside the BYU-Hawai'i campus. He signed up as a state Department of Agriculture Seal of Quality company as soon as the program was formed, seeing the benefit of being identified in a select group of Hawai'i-grown and Hawai'i-processed products.

"I believe in quality and selling good food," Kamiya said.

Kamiya, 67, has been farming since the 1960s and his best-known product these days is Kamiya Gold papayas. He said he's fortunate to have loyal customers across the island.

He has exported some of his fruit to Canada, but two years of abnormally wet weather cut

back the potential to grow that side of the business. "That wiped out more than half of the fields," Kamiya said. "We're still behind."

Kamiya thinks the state premium seal will help market his fruit when he is ready to export and expand.

Matthew Loke is the administrator of the state's Agricultural Development Division. He said the seal program has grown steadily since it began in 2006 with 12 companies. Now, there are 42 companies across the state committed to producing high-quality products from Hawai'i. Noni Biotech International is part of the Seal of Quality program.



Noni Biotech team in the noni fields

### State inspections

The state inspects the companies to make sure they qualify, then spends about \$200,000 a year to promote and market the higher-end premium products.

The green-and-gold labels go on each product. They cost the companies a half-cent for each label but the money is then plowed back into promotion. The revenue from the labels has grown from about \$4,200 the first year to more than \$33,000 in the past year, Loke said.

"Eventually, we hope that it will be self-sufficient," he said.

And while the premium products represent a key slice of the market, Loke said the program helps boost awareness of the importance of home-grown agriculture overall, especially in an island community.

"When the price of a barrel of oil soared to a record \$145.75 last August, the price of energy and food in Hawai'i also skyrocketed," Loke said. "It reminded us once again as to the vulnerability of the Hawaiian Islands to external supply shocks."

He noted that recent estimates indicate the state imports about \$3.1 billion in food annually.

"If we could replace just 10 percent of these imported foods, it would generate some \$313 million in economic activity or \$94 million in sales at the farm-gate level," Loke said.

That has the multiplier impact of \$188 million in sales, \$47 million in earnings, \$6 million in state tax revenues and more than 2,300 jobs, he said.

The state also runs a separate "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" program that aims to provide local consumers access to fresher and more nutritious, locally grown produce. It not only supports local farmers, saves the food miles and strengthens the local economy, but it also contributes to food self-sufficiency and sustainability.

Executive chef Colin Hazama toured some local Seal of Quality farms last week as a way of keeping informed about what farm-fresh ingredients are available to serve to his customers at RumFire restaurant at the Sheraton Waikiki hotel.

Hazama already orders Marine AgriFuture's sea asparagus by the five-pound bag to serve in his restaurant, using it in salads, relishes and other savory dishes.

Owner Wenhao Sun produces the crunch sea-asparagus at a Kahuku aquaculture farm where he also raises ogo and tilapia. His products also can be found at farmers markets,

local health-food stores, Don Quijote, Marukai and military commissaries.

## Learn to diversify

Over the past four years, Sun has diversified into some pickled sea asparagus and ogo and recently offered a sea asparagus bento that included inari sushi, sea asparagus pickled, prepared lomi-style and mixed with fresh mushrooms over a noodle salad.

Sun is his product's best salesman, constantly offering taste tests of the naturally salty-crunchy green. "It's a special taste, it's not a usual taste."

At Ho Farms in Kahuku, Wei Chong Ho is now joined by the next generation of his family, daughter Shin and son Neil have helped him develop a specialty of multi-colored small tomatoes that include black cherry, golden grape, snow white and other tiny exotics.



Noni farm in Hawaii

But that top crop has faced tough times in recent months, facing blight, fungus and growth problems while the farm continues to produce cucumbers, long beans, long eggplant and squash.

Hazama is always on the lookout for a mix of ingredients that embrace an Asian/Island influence while experimenting with fresh flavors at his Waikiki restaurant.

Just coming into the Seal quality this year is Kahuku Farms. Co-owner Clyde Fukuyama and partner Mel Matsuda are third-generation

farmers happy to be sharing the future with a fourth-generation of family members.

Fukuyama credits Kylie Matsuda with forward-thinking ideas about agri-tourism, new crops and a fresh attitude. "She's bringing a new dimension to the farm," he said.

He said the farm still relies on staple products such as papayas, bananas, eggplant and taro leaves. But Kylie Matsuda also has led them into growing more tropical flowers, selling mango jam, body cream and even scones.

Fukuyama said farmers markets, hooking up with up-and-coming chefs like Hazama and taking the time for school tours all help. That's because they get people in the community thinking about where the food on their table comes from — even if it's as simple an awareness as knowing that papayas grow on trees.

Hazama took the time on the farms to find out the seasons for the specialties he saw and ask about the challenges. He also made a pitch for some items he'd like to buy, including fresh figs, kalamansi and Meyer Lemons.

Fukuyama in turn explained that he'd need to know that he could expect a steady demand for such new products. "We can't produce 5 pounds here and 5 pounds there."



## Seal of Quality guidelines

The state Department of Agriculture runs the Seal of Quality program and has an application form that can be downloaded from [www.sealofquality.hawaii.gov](http://www.sealofquality.hawaii.gov) with a one-time, nonrefundable fee of \$50.

To qualify for the seal, products must:

- originate in Hawai'i;

- be 100 percent grown in Hawai'i (for fresh produce);
- have the primary agricultural product entirely produced in Hawai'i, and processed agricultural and food products also must meet the 51 percent wholesale value-added requirement;
- meet quality guidelines determined by Hawai'i state export standards/laws and trade associations.

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## State seal now on 42 companies

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For more information on the Seal of Quality members and products, visit [www.hawaii.gov/hdoa/add/soq](http://www.hawaii.gov/hdoa/add/soq)

Source: State Department of Agriculture