People, Place, Promise

Food and Nutrition

July 2016 marked the beginning of my term as interim dean of CTAHR, and so it’s appropriate that this quarter’s Impact Report deals with food, nutrition, and the food system, my own research interests.

These stories show how students and faculty in the college are helping to make growing, buying, preparing, and eating food in the Islands safer, healthier, and more sustainable. An inviting and interactive website offers hard-to-find nutrition information about a range of foods in our unique local diet, providing recipes, nutrient analysis, and publications promoting foods that are nutritious as well as tasty. In conjunction with the UN’s Year of the Legume, a researcher is running trials on a new and nutrient-rich crop with great potential for Hawai‘i’s climate and a ready market among the state’s producers.

The college is also working to address serious issues in the local food supply. Two researchers show just how much food is thrown away in the Islands and where in the supply chain the waste is happening. Students tackle the problem from the other side, collecting food that’s been prepared but not served at a university cafeteria and donating it to homeless shelters. The Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) team is helping growers and producers to reduce risk with workshops and guidelines on subjects ranging from proper pesticide use to guarding against bacterial contamination.

I’m pleased to work with you to lead CTAHR forward as we continue to provide important education, outreach, and research on this vital subject—and so many others.

Aloha,

Rachel Novotny, Ph.D.
Interim Dean and Director for Research and Cooperative Extension
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College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources
People, Place, Promise

IMPACT REPORT
Q2 SECOND QUARTER

Eat “Local”

The Hawai‘i Foods website’s tagline is “Nutrition with Aloha.” This might be more succinct and inclusive than “One of the few places to learn how much calcium is in tree fern shoots,” but they’re equally true. And that’s only the start of what’s available: the site is even more satisfying than a three-choice plate lunch—and contains more nutritional content as well.

The project aims to improve Hawai‘i’s health through diet, offering the nutrition information to help people make wholesome choices. The website covers all manner of local foods—including those, like musu and mountain apple, rarely found elsewhere. Hungry searchers can find information and recipes for Hawaiian, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, and other foods, from lu‘au and lomi salmon to a hula ginger beard. There are videos and downloadable publications, some designed for particular cultural groups, like tips on reducing salt in Asian cooking. Mainland and international users also access Hawai‘i Foods, and its materials have been disseminated at health fairs locally and in other states.

For those worried about their diets after discovering the calorie and fat content of that last plate of Portuguese sausage and kimchi fried rice, Hawai‘i Foods offers “My Diet,” an interactive portal where users can enter what they’ve eaten and get a personalized analysis of their food intake. UH dietetic interns help to develop nutrition fact sheets on topics identified by a survey of site users, with expert guidance from Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (RDNs) from the Hawai‘i Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Like local cuisine, the site is a product of a variety of influences. Cyndy Kahalewai of the Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences Department (HNFAS), who was honored by the Hawai‘i Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics in 2013 with the Outstanding Dietitian of the Year Award, launched it in 2007 and now is senior nutrition project coordinator. Former interim Dean Sylvia Yuen received the grant to begin it, and faculty and staff contributed to the initial conceptual framework, including present interim Dean Rachel Novotny; Joannie Dobbs, Alvin Huang, Naomi Kamehiro, and Steven Spielman (all HNFAS); and webmaster Kathy Lu. Along with the interns and RDNs, the project partners with UH’s Cancer Center, Kapi‘olani Community College, and CTAHR’s Children’s Healthy Living project. And like local cuisine, it’s colorful and appetizing—with something for every taste.

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Cyndy Kahalewai aims to improve Island diets with the interactive website. 
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“People, Place, Promise”
Peas on Earth

What does a chickpea want? Not much, according to Ahmad Ahmad. That’s why the UN has declared 2016 the International Year of Pulses. Legumes are able to grow—and provide helpful nutrition to humans and animals—with relatively few inputs. They’re drought tolerant, and thanks to nitrogen-fixing rhizobia, they need little fertilizer. Dr. Ahmad, in the department of Tropical Plant and Soil Sciences, is well positioned to speak on what chickpeas, or called garbanzo beans, require. He studied them in his native Iraq, and now, with funding support from the Hawaii Department of Agriculture, he’s trialing ten varieties in six locations on five islands here.

He was originally motivated to investigate garbanzos because introducing new crops is important for agricultural diversity and self-sufficiency in Hawaii. “My most important question was, can we grow chickpeas here?” he explains. “The answer to that is yes.” Now he’s asking more questions. Sustainability, he notes, involves three factors: people, planet, and profit. Can we grow food in ways that will nourish those who eat it, that will help and not harm the earth in which we grow it, and do so in ways that provide a living wage for the growers and processors? Two of these three are settled; profitability is being worked out. Harvesting by hand is labor intensive and cuts into profit, so now he’s investigating mechanical harvesting possibilities.

Sales won’t be a problem. So far Dr. Ahmad is the only one planting chickpeas here, but the market is waiting for growers to embrace the crop. The popularity of the garbanzo-based spread hummus spreading exponentially, and he’s partnering with a Maui company that makes a variety of chickpea snacks—including surprisingly tasty brownies!—that has long been searching for an Island-based grower of the legumes. He’s confident the market will continue to expand, considering the many potential uses for the nutty round beans.

Ahmad Ahmad’s chickpeas are flourishing in diverse areas of the state. Dr. Ahmad Ahmad (left) helps a local banana producer to mitigate pests only.

Food Wasted, Food Saved

Food waste—and what to do about it—is big news. Research by ag economists Matthew Loke and Pingfon Leung, in the department of Natural Resources and Environmental Management, has shown that Hawaii’s residents waste a quarter of all food in the state—3968 pounds per person—totaling $21.9 million pounds and more than $1.6 billion a year! While this is less waste, in terms of quantity, than in other states, the monetary value is greater because of high food costs in Hawaii.

The numbers are all the more disturbing in light of the continuing focus on increasing food sustainability and local production—a state that imports up to 80% of its food cannot afford to bring it to the islands only to throw it away. But as Dr. Loke, who’s also an administrator in the Department of Agriculture, and Dr. Leung explain, while it’s important to remember that some waste is inevitable, knowing how and where it occurs is crucial to figuring out how to lessen it.

Cutting down on food waste is the focus of the Food Recovery Network (FRN), which offers prepared but unused food to those less fortunate in the community. Dietetics students Victoria Sugano, and Jensen Uyeda (left to right) The group educates farmers, producers, and food handlers to produce the best and safest product possible. Whether they’re just learning the GAP basics or need in-depth information, the team has it covered. Fact sheets, videos, checklists, and workshops offer information on growing, harvesting, washing, sorting, packing, and transporting raw fruits and vegetables based on GAP to reduce microbial risks in produce. Using these practices can also help growers meet the expectations of the Food Safety Modernization Act Produce Rule and audit requirements.

Recommendations are specifically designed for Hawaii’s farms, distinctive in their predominately small size, the different range of crops, and the diverse ethnic composition of the agricultural workforce. They include pest-management strategies for rodents, birds, pigs, and slugs; appropriate and legal usage of crop-protection chemicals, fertilizers, and composts; and following the EPA Worker Protection Standard rules. Workers must practice proper hand-washing procedures before harvesting and handling produce, make sure food-contact surfaces are clean, and use water of appropriate quality for irrigation and crop rinsing. Harvesting baskets, refrigerators, and trucks must be cleaned and well maintained so they don’t become sources of contamination. Just as importantly, each unit sold must be labeled with some sort of information and the appropriate field and harvest information, to allow trace back to a specific field in the event a product becomes contaminated. Just as importantly, each unit sold must be labeled with some sort of information and the appropriate field and harvest information, to allow trace back to a specific field in the event a product becomes contaminated.

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Peas on Earth

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He was originally motivated to investigate garbanzos because introducing new crops is important for agricultural diversity and self-sufficiency in Hawai’i. “My most important question was, can we grow chickpeas here?” he explains. “The answer to that is yes!” Now he’s asking more questions. Sustainability, he notes, involves three factors: people, planet, and profit. Can we grow food in ways that nourish those who eat it, that will help and not harm the earth in which we grow it, and do so in ways that provide a living wage for the growers and processors? Two of these three are settled; profitability is being worked out. Harvesting by hand is labor intensive and cuts into profit, so now he’s investigating mechanical harvesting possibilities.

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Food waste—and what to do about it—is big news. Researchers by ag economists Matthew Luke and PingSun Leung, in the department of Natural Resources and Environmental Management, has shown that Hawai‘i’s residents waste a quarter of all food in the state—156 pounds per person—totaling $2.3 million pounds and more than $40 million a year! While this is less waste, in terms of quantity, than in other states, the monetary value is greater because of high food costs here.

The numbers are all the more disturbing in light of the continuing focus on increasing food sustainability and local production: a state that imports up to 90% of its food cannot afford to bring it to the Islands only to throw it away. But as Dr. Luke, who’s also an administrator in the Department of Agriculture, and Dr. Leung explain, while it’s important to remember that some waste is inevitable, knowing how and where it occurs is crucial to figuring out how to lessen it.

Cutting down on food waste is the focus of the Food Recovery Network (FRN), which offers prepared but unused food to those less fortunate in the community. Dieticians students Victoria Deusches, Joey Nagahiro-Twu, Heather Fucini, and Mariah Martin, along with students from the UH Mānoa chapter of the FRN, partnering with Sodexo’s UH Mānoa general manager—and CTAHR alumna—Donna Ojiri. They began by giving meals every Friday to the Institute for Human Services (IHS), which then distributes the food to homeless shelters on O‘ahu. They’ve already given over half a ton of food since the program started seven months ago.

Recent media coverage of the initiative inspired more students to get involved with the food recovery program and more organizations to request UH surpluses food. The group has banded together with the EPA Worker Protection Standard rules. Workers must practice proper hand-washing procedures before harvesting and handling produce, make sure food-contact surfaces are clean, and use water of appropriate quality for irrigation and crop rinsing. Harvesting baskets, refrigerators, and trucks must be cleaned and well maintained so they don’t become sources of contamination. Just as importantly, each unit sold must be labeled with certain control information and the appropriate field and harvest information, to allow trace-back to a specific field in the event a product

Mind the GAP!

Food brings people together: it’s essential to family and cultural traditions and can be an important way to connect with the ‘āina. It nourishes bodies and spirits. But there’s one thing it shouldn’t do—make us sick. The FDA estimates some 48 million cases of foodborne illness affect the US every year, caused by bacteria and other microorganisms in milk, meat, and produce. That’s where food safety and Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) come in.

The CTAHR Farm Food Safety Outreach team is headed by Lynn Nakamura-Tinga, second from right, with statewide support from Kirsten Akahoshi, Sharon (Motomura) Wages, Jari Sagnes, and Jensen Uyeda (left to right). The group educates farmers, producers, and food handlers to produce the best and safest product possible. Whether they’re just learning the GAP basics or need in-depth information, the team has it covered. Fact sheets, videos, checklists, and workshops offer information on growing, harvesting, washing, sorting, packing, and transporting raw fruits and vegetables based on GAP to reduce microbial risks in produce. Using these practices can also help growers meet governments expectations for the Food Safety Modernization Act Produce Rule and audit requirements.

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While only food that has been prepared but not sold can be donated for human consumption, Mr. Ojiri explains that UH food that’s already been served and discarded also gets repurposed—it’s distributed to Island pig farms. Win-win!

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