

Poi Pounders | West Hawaii Today

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BY FIONA MCDONOUGH | SPECIAL TO WEST HAWAII TODAY

Native Hawaiians have pounded kalo, or taro, into poi by hand for centuries. This tradition is something community members and organizations hope to restore through public instruction on the technique and value of hand pounding.

Hand-pounded poi is often the product of community education programs, whereas commercial poi is generally machine-made.

Hua O Ke Ao's after-school program students recently made their own poi at Amy B.H. Greenwell Ethnobotanical Garden and quickly discovered their manual labor created a better tasting poi than the commercial machine-made poi.

"I make mine a certain way," said 10-year-old Bronson Leslie, who likes his poi the best, claiming he makes it especially smooth, which he says is the biggest challenge.

Traditionally, those pounding poi had to eat their entire first batch to learn from their own experience what adjustments should be made in the process called *kuiai*, the literal meaning of which is to pound food.

Historically, families divided the work involved in *kuiai*. Boiled kalo, which could be yellow, pink, white, or light gray to dark gray depending upon the variety, was scraped of its skin by the younger children and placed in the shallow depression of a wooden board. The older children then set to work removing the imperfections on the kalo with *opih*i shells.

The adults took charge of the stone poi pounder, angling it on edge to cut the kalo into smaller pieces, the first stage in pounding, called *naha*. They would then decrease the angle of the pounder so the rounded bottom, or the *mole*, further diminished the size of the chunks of kalo taking it to the *mokumoku* stage. The *mole* then was used to press the small bits of kalo against the board, adding water sparingly, forming the *pili* stage, where the kalo began to stick, and then working it further to the thickest form of poi, *paiai*.



Paiai was thick enough to wrap in *ti* leaves to transport and could withstand spoiling without refrigeration for a month if left water-covered in a bowl, said 61-year-old Manuel Rego, head educator at the Greenwell Ethnobotanical Garden. Rego has been growing kalo on the site for 27 years and was taught the pounding process by Jerry Konanui, a Big Island Hawaiian educator.

Kupuna teach that *kuiai*, the poi-making process, begins with clean hands, tools and mind, Rego said. To keep the



mind clean requires presence with the task at hand and positivity.

"I think of things that make me happy, or concentrate on what I am doing," said Ragan Leslie, 11.



School children crave hands-on projects, said Kanu o Ka Aina language arts teacher Stephanie David-Chapman, 26.

"Hawaiians believe that in anything you make, you transfer your energy. In pounding poi, the tools feed you with energy," she said.

By experiencing both kuiai and machine-made poi, children learn through practice there are valuable traditional and modern ways of doing something, and they

can experience both worlds, David-Chapman said. This can foster a healthy balance between new and old in other aspects of life, such as language and jobs.

Though traditionally a job for men -- and women only when men were away at war -- today anyone may practice kuiai, said Kamuela Naihe, garden educator at the ethnobotanical garden. Kalo was brought to Hawaii by the first Polynesians to arrive here and production eventually grew to the highest productivity in all of Polynesia, Naihe said.

Kalo varieties were cultivated to grow in vastly different climates and soils and resist disease, so there would always be food. Though some varieties have become extinct, there were once hundreds of different types of kalo. Rego has cultivated 70 varieties at the garden, which on its several acres has imitated the ahupuaa, the ancient form of land division running from mauka to makai with lowland, midland and highland plants in sections as the property slopes up. The land division was delineated to provide everything necessary to support life.

The students from Hua O Ke Ao planted their own kalo, which takes about nine months to mature.

Though changes to traditional kuiai have been introduced, such as sitting on benches rather than a lauhala mat, and a bodywork spatula instead of hands to scoop up the kalo as it is pounded, the sound of kuiai resonates to an ancient past.

"Thump, pop, slap ... that's the pohaku (pounder) dropping into the mixture, popping out as it's removed and a slap to the mole to raise it," Rego said.

"It's musical," said Jared David-Chapman, 26, of Waimea, who learned to pound poi a few years ago on Oahu, as he describes the process.

Whether fresh or fermented (called sour poi), the nutrients and hypo-allergenic qualities of poi make it healthy in addition to being a valued and enjoyed part of Hawaiian culture. Store-bought poi is \$25 per 3.5 pound bag, with scarcity driving up prices.

"It's better when you make it instead of buying it," said 9-year-old Lilinoe Losalia. "You know what's in it and you are doing what your ancestors used to do."