

Big Island Weekly

Holistic Approach

By Diane Koerner

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Back to school not only means more reading, writing and arithmetic for Big Island kids, but also a chance to incorporate these academic requirements into exciting learning projects about sustainability and good health. For instance, Kua O Ka La (KOKL) Public Charter School students create amazingly creative and healthy lunches, while integrating math concepts to measure ingredients, entirely from the bounty of their school garden and other local sources. The students learn about healthy living and nutrition in a real down-to-earth way that plants seeds for a healthier life for themselves, their families and their community.



This all takes place in Kumu Mariposa Blanco's Aina Life Culinary Arts class. According to Blanco, in the class "Students learn to enjoy meals made with fresh, locally grown whole foods." This includes greens, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, kalo, beets, and fruit from the school garden, plus an array of produce from Puna area farms. This year, there will also be unrefined, solar-evaporated sea salt from the clean ocean waters off the shores of their schoolyard, a dried spice mix of basil, rosemary and leeks from the garden, dried fruit, and coconut oil – thanks to the school's newly operational solar-powered dehydrator.

On Wednesdays, the culinary arts class of seventh and eighth graders cooks and serves a 100 percent locally grown lunch at the school and also provides a healthy, organic snack to the elementary school students. "It makes them conscious and curious about what they're eating," said director Susie Osborne. "They're all learning from each other, eating together, being of service as a family, as a community."



This year, KOKL and four other island schools will be aided by a FoodCorps service member, part of a new program reaching Hawaii through The Kohala Center. The FoodCorps program hopes to assist in offering a thriving environment for kids to have access to, and education about, healthy food.

FoodCorps co-founder Cecily Upton said the impetus behind the FoodCorps program is to address childhood obesity and food insecurity in a holistic, fun and engaging way, while allowing young service members to get some professional development in the process. At KOKL, they are excited that the new supporting person in their "Ike Aina: From the Seed to the Table" program will be Leina 'Ala Kealoha, a graduate of their school who has a deep, intimate knowledge of Hawaiian culture, plus healthy eating and cooking.

KOKL hopes to share that, by staying grounded in local culture, the communities of the Big Island can literally grow their food security. Entrepreneurship also comes into play as students learn how to make value-added products for market, like gluten-free ulu (breadfruit) flour. KOKL is now the largest distributor of ulu trees in Hawaii, currently growing over 150 of the tree starts in their greenhouse. Osborne's next goal is to raise enough funds to build a certified community kitchen to provide healthy meals.

One student shared her passion, saying, "I take home the recipes and cook for my family and it's healthier for them than eating fast food. I make sure they have green leafy veggies at least three times a week."

The KOKL staff and students have also written a cookbook of their recipes in English and Hawaiian. What are the student's favorite recipes? In addition to the zesty tamales which won them a prize at the first Ulu Festival on the island, they said they relish steamed ulu in salads dressed with local coconut or macnut oil and shoyu, ulu stewed with grass-fed beef or freshly-caught mahi mahi, and a sweetly nutritious pudding combining ulu with pineapple, cinnamon, nutmeg and coconut milk.

"I loved to learn how to make ice cream with the vanilla bean," added one eighth grader. "I had never seen a vanilla bean before this class. I had never cut a pineapple before this class either. I like going home and telling my mom how to cut or how to cook certain food and how to wash them too. I think learning how to cook with organic (food) is really important. I think more schools should encourage it. This class has been very good and fun!"

FoodCorps hopes to enable programs such as these to reach more and more school children and their families every year with the ingredients needed for healthy eating: 1) knowledge about food and nutrition, 2) school gardens which give kids the skills to grow and cook good food, and 3) sourcing food for school lunches from local farmers.

FoodCorps leaders, who dedicate a year of their lives to public service in limited-resource communities, can go on to become public health leaders, teachers, farmers, and all-around innovators in the food system, helping to create a healthy, fair, affordable food system, explained Upton.

Let's all learn from the kids – learning to enjoy food made with fresh, whole ingredients grown or gathered on our island.

Look for Kua O Ka La staff and students' recipes, quotes, and gardening notes in their cookbook, 'Ike 'Āina, available at Island Naturals and Basically Books, and through the school at (808) 965-5098 or www.kuaokala.org.

For more info on the FoodCorps Program in Hawaii, contact The Kohala Center FoodCorps Team at 808-887-6411 or nredfeather@kohalacenter.org.

