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Macadamia market tough to crack

• [Hawai'i restaurants put macadamias to good use](#)

By [Wanda A. Adams](#)
Advertiser Food Editor

Chef Keith Endo of Sansei Seafood Restaurant and Sushi Bar in Kapalua, Maui, likes the aroma of macadamia nuts roasting in the oven and appreciates the nut's versatility.

"It's interesting to note that mac nuts have very similar properties to peanuts in terms of cooking — same consistency and almost the same oil content," he said.

During this month's Macadamia Madness promotion at Sansei and other island restaurants, chefs are using Hawai'i-grown macadamia nuts in a wide variety of ways. Endo made a mac nut curry dipping sauce for Indonesian-style saté and dusted a fish special with a flour made from finely ground mac nuts. He used them in a rich lobster cake served on a salad with nuts as garnish (this recipe is in the Taste section). The nuts have even appeared in sushi at Sansei, no doubt a shock to purists.

Endo specifies Hawai'i-grown nuts in recipes because he finds the buttery taste and crisp texture superior to less expensive nuts from elsewhere.

The point of the monthlong promotion by the Hawaii Macadamia Nut Association is to persuade everyone to think as Endo does. The industry, which once produced 97 percent of the world's macadamia crop, has lost so much ground to competitors that Hawai'i now accounts for only 36 percent of the world's production. Australia is the world's No. 1 producer, despite the industry being relatively new compared to Hawai'i, which began in the 1940s and grew in the 1960s. Africa and South America also are in the market.

Macadamia nut growers can't prove their nuts are better by any tangible measure, although Mike Purdy of Island Princess Hawaii, a macadamia nut grower and processor and manufacturer of macadamia nut products, said research is under way to determine whether nuts grown here differ in some concrete way from those of other growing regions — in oil content or nutrients, for example.

Purdy does know that in blind taste tests conducted by his company with tasters from outside the industry, the Hawai'i nuts always are rated best.

A big part of a macadamia nut's quality is in how it's handled, said Richard Schnitzler of Hamakua Sunrise Macadamia Plantation, with 1,500 acres of orchards in the Hilo-Hamakua area and a processing plant in Kawaihae on the Big Island.

Schnitzler says growers interested in high-quality nuts have learned through trial and error what works best. It starts in the orchard. Let the nuts, still in their green casings, fall to the ground; using mechanical shakers to harvest the nuts can mean less-ripe nuts get into the mix and affect the flavor.

Pick the nuts from the ground before they've begun to germinate or rot. His workers rotate around the orchard in such a way as to harvest under every tree every four weeks during the ripening season from July to March.

Remove the husks and get the nuts, still in their shells, into the dryer to remove as much moisture as possible (1.5 percent is the standard, but Schnitzler likes to dry the nuts to a toasty 1 percent or less, giving the kernels a longer shelf life).

Then get those dried nuts shelled and into vacuum-sealed foil pouches or foil-lined boxes as quickly as possible and into a cool storage environment. Handled this way, the nuts can be stored for months and emerge fresh-tasting and buttery. Purdy said ganache



Macadamia-nut tips

From chef Keith Endo of Sansei restaurant:

Store nuts in airtight container in a cool place. Because of the high oil content, they spoil easily.

To toast nuts: Spread in pan or rimmed cookie sheet, toast in preheated 275- to 300-degree oven. No hotter. They can burn easily, again because of the high oil content.

Use macadamia nuts wherever you would use peanuts; they have a similar consistency and almost the same oil content.

If you buy a large quantity of mac nuts, portion them into appropriate sizes for your accustomed use, place them in zippered freezer bags, press out the air and freeze them.

For more information on Hawai'i-grown macadamia nuts, see: hawaiimacadamianutassociation.org.

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on chocolate-coated mac nuts helps keep them fresh-tasting.

Islanders have heard lots of talk about the desirability of diversified agriculture to replace the lost commodity crops of sugar and pineapple. Macadamia nuts are Hawai'i's No. 1 diversified agriculture crop, bigger than coffee, Purdy said, but farmers are suffering, unable to make a profit despite the fact that macadamia is a high-price product.

Macadamia nut prices have just begun to creep up again after a sharp drop in price in the late 1990s. The world market is glutted because of massive new plantings elsewhere, and low labor costs in those locations (as little as 50 cents a day in South Africa, for example), meaning that Hawai'i nuts can't compete based on price, Schnitzler said.

Hawai'i-grown whole, shelled nuts are selling wholesale for about \$5.75 a pound; overseas nuts go for \$3.75-\$4 a pound, Purdy said. He has an indelible memory of the day wholesale kernels dropped to \$2 a pound: it was the very day four years ago that he signed a lease for a 1,100-acre macadamia nut orchard in Kea'au on the Big Island.

But both Purdy, a former dentist and part-time Oregon winemaker who got into the business in the 1980s, and Schnitzler, who has been involved with macadamias for 25 years, are optimistic.

First, the fact that macadamia nuts are among the world's most desirable is reason for hope. People consider macadamias a sophisticated indulgence. Second, there is the positive image of the Hawai'i nut — "edible aloha" — which the Macadamia Nut Association's efforts are aimed at furthering. "Hawai'i is a marketable image," Schnitzler said. "Australia or South Africa isn't."

Purdy believes the growth of the wine industry in the Pacific Northwest, where he operates a winery, and the branding of Kona coffee here both offer models for how the macadamia nut industry can educate potential customers and build on its image.

One factor is having a story to tell, a story that visitors can take back to their homes about the farmer they met, or the woman who makes the best mac nut pies. For this reason, the association has put together "The Great Hawaiian Mac Nut Trail," a self-guided tour that identifies farms, processing plants, candy shops, a pie factory, even bed and breakfasts that are on mac nut farms.

Another is to develop a "100 percent Hawai'i-grown" labeling program, and get some muscle behind it, as Kona coffee has done with the labeling laws that require blends be at least 10 percent Kona-grown coffee.



A third encouraging thing is research conducted at the University of Hawai'i School of Medicine that shows mac nuts are a healthy food, one that can have positive effects on blood cholesterol levels. The fat the nuts contain is mostly monounsaturated (80 percent, as compared to 74 percent for olive oil), and the nuts additionally contain palmitoleic acids, which may actually aid in fat metabolism, possibly reducing stored body fat. Macadamia nuts offer flavonoids (antioxidants), desirable for their disease-fighting properties, vitamins E and A, riboflavin, niacin and iron. Purdy jokes that he's thinking of taking a mac nut every morning with his vitamins.

Schnitzler says the farmers could use some help in the form of low-interest loans to help them get through the seven years it takes for a tree to reach fruiting age, and in research and development as well. He notes that the extension agent system operated through UH has been steadily cut back; agents were often the means of spreading important information from farm to farm or identifying common problems and suggesting solutions.

Macadamia nut farming and processing is a relatively clean industry (it even recycles the shells to fire the dryers in processing plants) that allows rural people to remain on their family land; it can dovetail with coffee growing, with the two crops interplanted, at least until the mac nuts overshadow the coffee trees; and it fits with the tourism's industry's vision of Hawai'i as a green, beautiful, tranquil and delicious place, Schnitzler said.

"The image of Kona coffee is is fantastic," Purdy said. "You don't buy your way into that. It comes with a lot of work."

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Hawai'i restaurants put macadamias to good use

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Six Hawai'i restaurants are featuring menu items with macadamia nuts during August, which was officially declared Macadamia Month by Gov. Ben Cayetano.

The restaurants are Sansei Seafood Restaurant & Sushi Bar (O'ahu and Maui), 3660 on the Rise, Chai's Island



Bistro, Singha Thai Cuisine, Prince Court at the Hawaii Prince Hotel and Pacific'O (Maui).



Chef Goren Streng of the Hawaii Prince Hotel created the following rich-but-easy fried-rice recipe employing the crunch of mac nuts.

This dish goes together quickly: Just steam jasmine, basmati or long grain rice and separately boil a little wild rice (optional if you don't have any on hand).

Meanwhile, chop the vegetables (note that you need 1 cup total, not a cup of each). While the rice is still hot, quickly sauté the vegetables and flavoring ingredients.

The hot bean paste called for is an Asian flavoring made from fermented soybeans and crushed chilies.

You can lightly toast the macadamia nuts to release the flavor.

This recipe is in a booklet called "Winner with Hawaiian Island Chefs Nuts about Macadamias!" developed by the Hawaii Macadamia Nut Association. It is available from the association's office at (808) 965-5444; www.hawaiimacadamianutassociation.org.

Macadamia Nut Rice

- 1/4 cup roasted, diced macadamia nuts
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1/4 cup cooked wild rice
- 2 cups cooked long grain rice
- 1 cup TOTAL of equal parts of diced shiitake, diced garlic, diced onions, diced red bell pepper, diced yellow bell pepper, diced carrot, diced long (Japanese) eggplant
- 1 teaspoon finely chopped garlic
- 1 teaspoon diced garlic
- 1 tablespoon mirin
- 1/2 tablespoons hot bean paste
- 3 tablespoons mixture of fresh thyme and parsley
- 1 ounce butter

Sauté onions, carrots, eggplant and ginger in olive oil until lightly brown. Add other vegetables and wild rice and sauté until heated through. Mix in hot basmati rice, macadamia nuts, mirin, hot bean paste and herbs. Taste and adjust seasonings. Fold in butter.

The three Sansei Seafood Restaurant & Sushi Bar locations (Restaurant Row on O'ahu; Kapalua and Kihei on Maui) are offering macadamia nut specials in all menu categories — sushi to dessert — this month. Chef Keith Endo of the Kapalua restaurant offers this elegant preparation of lobster cakes on an arugula salad.

"This salad recipe is a cool one because we get to use the mac nuts in two ways — as a crust and as a garnish. And even though it isn't Heirloom Tomato Month, this recipe is a good excuse to try some of those odd-looking tomatoes in all the markets right now."

You can substitute shrimp, crab or imitation crab for the lobster .

Mac Nut-Crust Lobster Cake Salad

For the lobster cakes:

- 1/2 cup Maui onions, diced
- 1/2 cup green onions, chopped
- 1/2 cup red bell peppers, diced
- 1 cup panko (Japanese-style crumb coating)
- 1/2 cup asiago or parmesan cheese, grated
- 1/3 cup mayonnaise
- 1/4 cup dijon mustard
- 2 eggs

- Juice of 2 lemons (about 3 tablespoons)
- 1 pound cooked lobster meat (or shrimp, crab or surimi)

For the crust:

- 3 cups flour
- 5 eggs, lightly beaten for egg wash
- 3 cups panko
- 3 cups macadamia nuts, chopped fine

For the vinaigrette:

- 1 cup rice wine vinegar
- 2 tablespoons dijon mustard
- 1/8 cup fresh tarragon, chopped
- 1 teaspoon shallots, chopped
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 2 cups canola or vegetable oil
- Salt and pepper to taste

For the salad:

- 1 pound baby arugula
- 3 local oranges, peeled and divided into segments
- 4 heirloom tomatoes, sliced thin (You may substitute any good, ripe tomatoes but wouldn't it be fun to try the heirlooms?)
- 1 cup toasted macadamias, chopped

To prepare the lobster cakes: In a small sauté pan with one tablespoon of olive oil, sauté the onions and bell peppers for about three to five minutes over high heat. Remove from heat and allow to cool. Combine all the rest of the cake ingredients. Add the cooled onions and peppers and mix well. Shape into eight to 12 cakes.

Lightly dust the cakes in flour. Dip the cakes in the egg wash, then in the panko, then in the mac nuts. Set aside until needed. To cook, pan fry in olive oil over medium high heat until golden brown on both sides. Drain on paper towels to remove excess oil.

To make the vinaigrette: Put all ingredients except the oil in a blender and blend slowly. Slowly add the oil until the dressing thickens. Season to taste.

To assemble the dish: Place the arugula in the center of each plate. Alternate the orange segments and tomato slices in a pinwheel shape on top of the arugula. Place two cakes on top of the salad. Drizzle with dressing and garnish with toasted macadamia nuts.

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