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Remembering Hawaii's Rice Industry

Rice may not be the first crop that comes to mind when thinking about Hawaii, but for nearly a century, rice played a major role in the Islands' agricultural landscape. While today all of Hawaii's rice is imported, the story of local rice cultivation is deeply tied to immigration, innovation, and changing markets—and it's a history worth remembering.

A Flourishing Start

Rice cultivation in Hawaii began in the early 1860s, spurred by demand from Chinese immigrants who preferred rice to poi, the traditional Hawaiian staple.



Initially imported, rice soon became a locally grown crop as abandoned taro patches—already terraced and irrigated—proved ideal for rice paddies. Even areas of modern-day Waikiki were once home to water buffalo and sprawling rice fields.

The introduction of tariff-free trade with the U.S. gave Hawaii's rice industry a significant boost. By the 1920s, rice was second only to sugar in both value and acreage. Over 10,000 acres were devoted to rice, and farmers experimented with more than 130 different varieties. The industry was a collaborative effort, with the Chinese focusing on rice for export and the Japanese cultivating it for home use.

A cornerstone of this booming industry was the Haraguchi Rice Mill in Hanalei Valley, originally built by Chinese immigrants and later owned and operated by the Haraguchi family. The mill endured multiple disasters—including fires and hurricanes—and was lovingly restored several times before closing in 1960, marking the end of an era for commercial rice production in Hawaii.

Why Did It Decline?

Several factors led to the collapse of Hawaii's rice industry:

- **California Competition:** California began producing short-grain rice more efficiently and at lower costs using mechanized equipment, while Hawaii continued to rely on labor-intensive hand farming methods.
- **Consumer Preferences:** As Japanese immigration increased, so did the preference for short-grain rice, which California specialized in. This further undercut Hawaii's long-grain rice, traditionally grown by Chinese farmers.
- **Economic Pressures:** Labor costs, water use, and the inability to scale up with mechanized production made local rice farming economically unsustainable.
- **Unsuccessful Revival Attempts:** Despite efforts by the University of Hawaii in 1906 and again in the 1930s to revive the industry, these initiatives failed to gain long-term traction.

By the 1960s, Hawaii's once-thriving rice fields were largely abandoned, leaving behind little trace of their agricultural past.



The Present and Future of Rice in Hawaii



Today, no commercial rice is grown in Hawaii. All rice consumed locally is imported, mostly from the U.S. mainland. However, the story doesn't end there.

Companies like Kubota Hawaii are now involved in importing, milling, and selling Japanese rice on the Islands. Meanwhile, experimental farming projects and research into high-value rice varieties hint at a potential (though limited) revival of rice cultivation in Hawaii.

One small rice farm still survives in Kauai, quietly continuing the legacy of Hawaii's rice pioneers. Water use, labor demands, and economic competition remain significant challenges, but the interest in locally grown, specialty rice offers a glimmer of hope.



Mushroom Kamameshi Recipe (Japanese Mixed Rice)

Servings: 5 –6 servings

Ingredients

- 2 cups kombu dashi soak a piece of kombu about the size palm in 2 cups of water overnight
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 tbsp cooking sake
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 2 cups Japanese short grain white rice any brand will do
- 2 cups mushrooms of choice: shimeji, oyster and enoki mushrooms
- 1 cup lotus root thinly sliced
- 1/2 cup carrot julienned
- Optional chestnuts in syrup, chopped



Instructions

1. Prepare your kombu dashi
2. Wash rice by rinsing with your hands about 3-4 times in a bowl, draining the water in between rinses, then drain well.
3. Combining kombu dashi, soy sauce, cooking sake, sugar and salt in your rice cooker.
4. Add drained rice to the rice cooker along with all remaining ingredients. Give everything a gentle stir to, then cook as you normally would your rice.
5. After the rice has finished, stir the rice until everything is nicely dispersed. Top with chopped chestnuts

Rooted in Kauai: ResiRoots Café Brings Local Flavors to Life in Kekaha

At ResiRoots Café, food isn't just something they serve—it's a story about land, legacy, and the bold flavors of west Kauai. Nestled in Kekaha, ResiRoots is turning Hawaii-grown crops into unforgettable eats, one delicious bite at a time.

Every dish at our café begins with locally grown, island-milled ingredients—from taro and cassava to breadfruit and green

banana. We don't just use them—we craft our own flour blends in-house, blending tradition with innovation to create something truly unique. The result? Bagels, waffles, baked goods, and ice cream that not only taste incredible but also support Kauai's farmers and food economy.

Take our signature taro bagels, for example. Made with organic wheat flour, fresh taro puree, and our custom flour mix, they're more than breakfast—they're a celebration of Kauai's agricultural potential. Served warm with local spreads and paired with island-roasted coffee, it's a taste of home you won't forget.

But ResiRoots isn't just about what's on the plate. It's about reimagining what's possible with Hawaii's crops. By investing in sustainable farming and local milling, we're helping to grow a food system that's rooted in resilience, innovation, and aloha.

Come taste what Kauai can grow.

