

A close-up photograph of a green macadamia nut on a branch. The nut is round and has a small stem at the top. The background is dark, making the green nut stand out.

Cracking the Code

(One Mac Nut at a Time)

MACADAMIA NUTS ARE A WONDER FOOD.
IF ONLY THERE WERE ENOUGH TO GO AROUND.

By Paul Wood

Photography by Rachel Olsson



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“Our macadamia nuts are the biggest and best in the world,” said Brett Scott Pafford, chef at Gannon’s in Wailea Resort. “They are such beautiful, buttery nuts with the absence of any bitterness.” By “our” he meant “Hawai’i’s” mac nuts, contrasting them with the smaller, tougher ones grown in remote terrains and climates. In his mind, though, he was thinking of Hawai’i Island, hands-down the commercial heartland of the Island crop. Pafford didn’t realize he could get them now grown on Maui.

Ironically, this island still grows sugar and still provides world-class pineapple out of Hāli’imaile. But even with patches here and there, we’ve never quite succeeded with macs. For example, it is widely known that Jim Nabors, entertainer and former television star, has a macadamia grove out in Hāna. The Cessna pilots all know it. As they come in from Kahului Airport and drop to the Hāna Airstrip, they can see the dark shaggy canopies of the “Naborly” orchard. They report to the tower: “We’re at 300 feet right above Gomer’s Pile.”

But a patch is not agribusiness. So far, Maui has experienced only one commercial-scale venture in macadamias. You can see the trees, 1,500 acres of them, when you drive the beach road from Central Maui toward windward West Maui. Thick and unkempt, the orchard fills mauka (toward the mountain) land where Waichu meets Waihe’e, an area prized by pre-contact planters for its rich soil and access to stream water. This is where Wailuku Agribusiness, a sugar company wishing to diversify, made a serious commitment to Maui macadamia farming circa 1980.

“The venture failed magnificently,” says Avery Chumbley, who was then president of Wailuku Ag. Part of the trouble was this area’s sloping dirt ground, ground that is not flat and cinder-like as on Hawai’i Island. “That made it difficult to maintain a workable orchard floor,” says Chumbley. “Then there was the exposure to salt air. Those trees took a beating year after year.” Shipping costs were debilitating.

According to Hawai’i Business magazine, the orchard made its first profit in 1994, over a decade after its planting. Then historic El Niño droughts hit the Islands in ’97 and ’98. “We mothballed the operation on December 30, 1999.” The company later liquidated.

But the trees still live. They may not be as productive as one might have hoped. But what they continue to produce is one of the best food items you can find. Perhaps a changed business model, something on a less ambitious, more locally sustainable scale, could provide access to a little-known island resource—Maui macadamia nuts.

Something on that scale seems to be happening right now, giving hope to those who know and love this nut. This is not front-page news, but is rather a kind of whispered, over-the-backyard-fence talk. A growing number of Maui chefs are discovering that they can get their hands on actual Maui-grown mac nuts from these Waihe’e orchards.

Those interested in this resource need to know two things about macadamia nuts. One: they are amazingly good for you and should be a daily staple of every home pantry. Two: they are so difficult to harvest that they’ll likely always be hard to find.

First, nutrition: Don’t be deceived by the mac nut’s taste, which is pure cream diluted with tree-bud essence. And when the nut is roasted, the taste becomes less shy and starts to hang around in the edges of your mouth, sweetening. Then you want to eat a lot of them. Then maybe you catch yourself, thinking you shouldn’t.

But you should. You can’t possibly have too many of them in your diet. Although they are 80 percent fat, they will never make you fat. They are loaded with fatty acids that are “monounsaturated.” Instead of clogging arteries and raising cholesterol levels, macadamia fats pass without harm into the digestive system and release concentrated energy. Some say the oil in macadamia is even healthier than the finest olive oil. Macs fit seamlessly into the Mediterranean diet. They nutritionally replace artery-clogging lipids such as those derived from chicken, lard or drive-through sandwiches. Of course, marketed macs might be coated with salt, chocolate, or Spam seasoning (whatever that is), but the nut in its natural form is as healthy as a farm-fresh salad in Tuscany.

The authority for making this claim is University of Hawai’i at Mānoa Professor Harry Ako, chair of the Department of Molecular Biosciences and Bioengineering. “Mac nuts are very healthful items to eat,” he said, “mostly because of what they don’t do. They don’t cause cancer. They don’t cause arteriosclerosis. They lower your cholesterol.”

One study from University of Hawai’i in 2007 states that “short-term macadamia nut consumption modifies favorably the biomarkers of oxidative stress, thrombosis and inflammation, the risk factors for coronary artery disease, despite an increase in dietary fat intake.” It concludes that “regular consumption of macadamia nuts may play a role in the prevention of coronary artery disease.”

Dr. Ako has put a lot of study into macadamia oil, which is “super clean” with a very high smoke point, and which stays fresh without refrigeration for almost two years. He also



advised a now-successful start-up called Oils of Aloha, which produces mac oil as a safe, stable component of cosmetics.

A good nut, however, is hard to find. Mac nuts form on hanging floral tassels, each flower capable of producing a single Ping-Pong-ball-sized fruit. This fruit consists of a leathery green outer husk that splits open like a clam to reveal a shiny caramel-brown shell within. It's easy to shuck the husk, but that is where the easiness stops.

To get to the kernel, you have to crack that perfectly spherical shell. But the shell is like solid Kevlar. Using a standard kitchen nutcracker, you feel as if you're trying to crack a pool ball. You can run over a mac nut with a semi hauler, and it won't break.

People who crack macs at home tend to use the karate "hammer blow" technique, an arcane term applying to the dynamics of force. You let the nut dry for a couple of weeks until the kernel can be heard knocking around inside. Then you put the nut on a block and, with a metal mallet, swing as though you intend to drive a 16-penny nail with a single blow.

Your target is a slick, hard sphere, so if your aim is slightly off, zing! Expect a miniature cannonball. But hit it square, and the shell cracks into curved pieces of chocolate-colored shrapnel thicker and harder than anything you've ever thought a plant could produce.

A new company called Waihe'e Valley Plantations is now harvesting a large area of the Maui orchard, drying and cracking the crop via off-the-grid technology. (The company is ready to expand into fruit trees and aquaponics.) Spokesperson Shannon Christensen says that WVP's farm methods reduce the labor force, and its on-site processing eliminates shipping costs.

New Maui entrepreneur Cynthia Dystra is using WVP's product and a community-funded commercial kitchen in Wailuku to create her product—roasted Maui macadamia nuts under the label Hawaiian Heritage Farms. We found them at the Native Intelligence store in Wailuku and immediately realized that they were crunchier, tastier and fresher than any others we had ever tasted.

The distribution is still small, but let's hope we're at the

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ODE TO THE MAC NUT

Having discovered the health benefits of eating mac nuts, you'll likely want to eliminate all other foods (who needs them?) from your diet. However, if you're still hung up on dietary diversity, here is a sampling of macadamia nut options in Wailea.

For a gluten-free side dish that's light on the carbohydrates, simply mix quinoa with toasted pieces of macadamia nuts. That's what DUO (Four Seasons Resort) does, using black and white quinoas enlivened with preserved lemon, fresh herbs and a little olive oil. Tommy Bahama's kitchen uses mac nuts to encrust cheese from Maui's Surfing Goat Dairy and serves that with mango salsa and a sweet soy glaze. Gannon's does something similar (with the addition of

pistachios) and serves that with a frisée-watercress-baby beet salad built on top of a mac nut pesto. In fact, any salad gets a creamy effect from macs, softening the bite of lemon or vinegar. Consider chef Ben Henion's invention at Joe's—a Hawaiian salad with a southwestern flavor. He pairs watermelon and spicy wild arugula; then moderates the flavor with mac nuts (mallet-crushed), Kula strawberries and Manchego cheese, dressed with honey-guajillo (a type of chile) vinaigrette. Ben likes to purée roasted mac nuts, mix with Molokai sea salt, stash for a few days, then serve as-is for a universally appealing garnish.

Maui entrées, especially fish, are famously dressed with macadamia. Tylun Pang, ex-

ecutive chef at The Fairmont Kea Lani and KD Restaurant and perennial winner of culinary honors, has diners using pure macadamia oil to sear their seasoned fish on a volcano-hot stone. Gannon's serves a mac-crusting pork fritter with grilled pineapple. Gannon's Executive Chef Brett Scott Pafford says the macadamia adds "complexity on the textural level." He uses them to "cut" other nuts in order to "set the balance" of flavors. Desserts? Consider KD's heavily cacao-bean-based chocolate baked custard, built on a praline crust of Maui mac nuts. Just one bite and you'll know: This nut deserves top billing in the kitchen, especially when it's grown on Maui.

