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The green hills of Maui

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Ali'i Chang buried his nose in a bouquet of fresh lavender, took a deep breath and closed his eyes beatifically.

"Mmmm, that is so relaxing," he said, offering the bundle to a group of travelers gathered for tea and scones at his 5-acre farm and tea shop, the Ali'i Kula Lavender Farm, at 4,000 feet on the slopes of Haleakala.

Suddenly turning playful, he leaped into the adjacent hedge of protea bushes and poked his head through the leaves, popping out beside a newly-opened blossom, silky-pink and as big as cauliflower.

"We used to sell protea to the Japanese," he said, beaming at the thought of the late 1980s, when the Japanese were flush with money. "They couldn't get enough flowers. As fast as we grew them, they bought them, until their economy collapsed.

"Then we discovered lavender, a plant that's been around for centuries since the Romans. It thrives in this cool climate, it's hardy and it has a hundred uses — for essential oils, soaps, lotions, even tea. And everybody loves it," he said.



Looking down towards West Maui from an elevation of 4,000 feet, Ali'i Kula Lavender Farm is nestled on the mountainside in the Kula district. Below, old-time rustic storefronts in Makawao town, upcountry Maui.

STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTOS

Leading us down to the processing shed, where bundles of sprigs lay in stacks, Mr. Chang showed us the racks where the sprigs are dried and the trays of loose flowers waiting to be bagged. Later on they'll be crushed for oil, stuffed into beribboned sachets or mixed into fancy soaps, lotions, fruit jams, scones and candles.

Then it was time to inspect the lavender field itself, where 45 kinds of the woody gray-green plants, each shaped into a half-sphere, climb the slopes in even rows, as neat and trim as a formal English garden.

"That's where we grow it," Mr. Chang said proudly, pointing up the volcano's green slopes. "Isn't that a beautiful sight? We love to share this place with visitors. It's a reprieve from the traffic on the coast, we think. And we want people to reconnect with the land."

Travelers who stop by for tea will certainly reconnect with the land. But agriculture has always been big business here on Hawaii's second largest island. The first Europeans to arrive in Hawaii were greeted by islanders paddling canoes packed with fruits, vegetables, pigs and fish, all raised on small plots and in man-made fish ponds. In the early days, at least, no ship sailed away without a hold full of food.

Much of that changed when American missionaries introduced sugar cane, which is still grown here on thousands of acres. Growing sugar cane is now Maui's second largest industry after tourism. But the recent emergence of small-scale farms and truck gardens at the 2,000- and 3,000-foot level in Kula, Makawao and Olinda, is a salutary trend. The soil is so rich that farmers cultivating small plots — from 2 to 10 acres — can grow enough to supply most of the hotels and better restaurants. And there's enough left over to sell at local groceries and farmers' markets.

"All the small growers know we're looking for better, fresher produce, so they're always trying new varieties," said executive chef Tylun Pang at the Fairmont Kea Lani Hotel in Wailea. "The more we buy, the more they grow, and we all benefit."

"We used to buy our vegetables from California, but if we order broccoli or lettuce or strawberries, we get 2-day-old produce. I can order red oak lettuce and baby greens from Kula in the afternoon and they pick them the next morning."

While most of Maui's upcountry farms aren't open for tours, many growers still believe in Hawaii's aloha spirit. If you're a closet Luther Burbank with a résumé to match, you might find a grower happy to



see you.

We lucked out at the Aina Lani Herb Farm, in Makawao, where chef Dan Fiske, who creates "event" dinners for guests and homeowners at Wailea Beach Villas on Wailea Beach, works hand-in-hand with Mike McCoy, the farm's owner. Mr. McCoy, who sells to hotels and restaurants, also sells (in bulk) to the public.

His west-facing garden grows the things you might grow at home, from oregano and marjoram to rosemary, lemon grass, parsley and green onions. But some species have morphed into something new.

"Mike's growing a half-dozen kinds of basil, each one with a unique flavor," said Mr. Fiske, walking through the rows and snapping off fresh leaves for us to taste. "If you like basil, remember that cooking kills the taste. I always sprinkle it on afterwards, just before serving."

Endlessly inventive, Mr. McCoy also grows chives, sorrel, Kafir lime leaves and arugula, as well as pomelo, papaya and sapote trees. When the sapote, a pale-green creamy-smooth fruit — ripened, Mr. Fiske created a new dessert for it, matching it with a light puff pastry.

The farm's newest product is micro-greens, which Mr. McCoy is raising in a new greenhouse behind the orchard. Look for them on garnishes, in appetizers and under tapas.

For most people, however, the joy of Kula and Makawao will be exploring the country on the roads less traveled, he says.

"You're not going to meet local people or feel the culture if you stay down in condo-land," said Jana McMahon, owner of Wild Lily Private Chef Services. "Rent a car and drive up to the top of Haleakala. In a couple of hours you'll pass through a half-dozen climate zones, from hot dry sea level to rolling farm land, to alpine forests and hills so green I always think of Ireland."

Along the way, she adds, wander down narrow lanes and keep your eyes peeled for small farms. She also recommends stopping at a couple of local farmers who've discovered the benefits of tourism.

"Check out the Surfing Goat Dairy on your way to Kula, on Omaopia Road," she said. "They make more than a dozen kinds of cheese — feta, chevre, all from goat's milk, of course. The quality and taste is excellent. I buy it, and so do lots of the restaurants. They have a regular tour you can take. Kids can milk a goat.

Another popular stop is Maui's only winery, Tedeschi Vineyards, at Ulupalakua Ranch, another 20-odd miles south of the Lavender Farm, on Highway 37. The winery makes carnelian and chenin blanc wines, and a specialty party wine made from pineapple. The setting is beautiful and the trees are magnificent. There's no food, though, so bring a



A lotus flower-filled pond surrounded by tropical plants follows the beach path, Wailea Beach Villas, Wailea, Maui.

picnic.

Guided tours of the botanical garden at the Ali'i Kula Lavender Farm start at 10 a.m. daily, and include a very pretty tea service (as much as you can drink) served with scones and jam. Afterward, check out the gift shop, managed by Lani Weigart. Shaded by big eaves and a tin roof, the shop is housed in a redesigned and white-washed plantation shed, with windows and an open-beam ceiling. Filled with shelves and racks, stacked with lovely gifts in all price ranges, it's a touch of old Hawaii.

The tour and tea party are \$35 per adult, but you can tour the garden on your own, for no charge, using Mr. Chang's self-guided map. The garden, a lush collection of beautiful and rare plants, grows on a west-facing slope, with panoramic views of Ma'alaea Bay to the west, and Kahului Bay to the north. Kindred spirits, says Mr. Chang, are always welcome.

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IF YOU GO

Ali'i Kula Lavender Farm: From Kahului, west of the airport, drive southeast on Pulehu Road or Haleakala Highway, through sugar cane fields, until you reach Kula Road heading south. At the intersection of highways 37 and 377, look for Rice Memorial Park and take the second left uphill, following the sign. The tea shop and gift store are a short walk up the lane. Contact the farm at 808-878-3004 or go to www.aliikulalavender.com.

Aina Lani Herb Farm: 808-572-1771; www.freshislandherbs.com.

Surfing Goat Dairy: 808-878-2870; www.surfinggoatdairy.com.

