

Hot and New



Hot and New is Cassidy Apo's column on the freshest restaurant openings and must-try menu debuts because the best bites wait for no one! Follow Cassidy on Instagram (@casskineeats).



(Top) The Kalo Hotline is a movement to feed Hawaii's communities.
(Above) Kalo growing at Hookuaaina (Photo by Cassidy Apo)

WHERE THE PLATE BEGINS

STORY BY CASSIDY APO
PHOTOS COURTESY HOOKUAAINA

Food in Hawaii is never just about eating — it's about people, place and land. While convenience often pushes us toward the fastest results, farmers, chefs and communities are choosing a slower, more intentional path rooted in patience and care.

Restaurants may be what we see first as diners, but behind many plates is a network of farmers and producers whose work makes those meals possible. That connection is becoming more visible, as chefs and growers work together to strengthen local food systems and highlight the names of farms and local products on their menu.

In Maunawili, that slower path is being carried forward through the work of Hookuaaina, a kalo farm grounded in cultural restoration and community healing. Dean and Michele Wilhelm began restoring the 8-acre parcel in 2007 with a vision of creating a place where people could gather and reconnect through kalo — a crop deeply significant to Hawaiian culture and regarded as a symbol of life. The farm welcomed challenged youth and families seeking healing through land-based, culturally rooted work.

The farm now harvests 30,000 pounds of kalo annually, hosted more than 20,000 volunteers, supported paid internships and apprenticeships, and helped return the land to

agricultural use — all while centering around education, stewardship and community connection.

Hookuaaina's vision expanded to the broader Koolau-poko region, and it recently announced it had expanded to 116 acres of agricultural land in Palawai with the goal of turning the Windward Coast, once a vital source of nourishment, into a modern-day breadbasket.

Alongside that effort came the launch of the Kalo Hotline, a phone number community members can call to order kalo, donate to Hookuaaina or learn more about the nonprofit and its mission.

Individuals weren't the only ones to reach out; local restaurants did as well.

Chefs in Kailua are finding thoughtful ways to incorporate Hookuaaina's kalo into their menus. At Cinnamon's, owner Alika Nam features poi as a "kanaka upgrade" to the restaurant's Hawaiian Plate. Understanding that kalo availability can vary, Nam and his team also highlight the ingredient through rotating specials such as poi pancakes with haupia sauce and a savory kalo hash.

"By putting native ingredients on our menu, we're showing the versatility of underutilized ingredients that are crucial to our culture," shares Nam. "We hope it inspires other industry operations to follow and gives

HUNGRY FOR MORE FOODIE NEWS?

Want to be featured on Crave's Instagram?
Tag @crave_hi in your photos with #CraveHI
and show us what you're eating — or craving!



guests a chance to taste what's possible."

At Over Easy, chef Nik Lobendahn works with kalo on a weekly basis, adapting dishes based on what's available. Hookuaaina kalo has appeared in the eatery's loco moco, pancakes with kalo sauce, focaccia and even a multi-course dinner that highlighted the kalo across multiple preparations. Rather than building menus around consistency alone, Lobendahn embraces flexibility as part of the process.

When Hookuaaina launched its Kalo Hotline, neighborhood ice cream shop Please Come Again joined the effort with a limited-edition flavor. The kalo milk tea boba ice cream was made with Hookuaaina's poi, and proceeds from each scoop and pint was donated back to the farm.

"We were moved by the beauty and abundance at Hookuaaina and wanted to create a flavor that was nostalgic to us," say owners Kyle and Josephine Wai Lin. "We

had the idea to do kalo milk tea boba and immediately we were transported to drinking taro boba at the mall after school. We loved the idea that we could connect kalo to something so pop culture, it made us see the product in a new light."

By understanding that kalo isn't always available, these chefs and business owners are learning to work with the land, not around it. The result is honoring culturally significant ingredients, supporting local farmers, and bringing conversations about food security and continuity to the table.

As Hookuaaina enters its next chapter, its work serves as a reminder that even the most memorable restaurant dishes begin long before the plate and is rooted in the land, shaped by people and carried forward through community.

To learn more about future restaurant partnerships and Hookuaaina's work, visit hookuaaina.com.

(Left) Over Easy's farm-to-table dish featuring Hookuaaina poi
(Right) Please Come Again's kalo milk tea boba ice cream

Hookuaaina

ADDRESS:

916 C Aulua Road,
Kailua

HOURS:

By appointment only

WEBSITE:

hookuaaina.org

PHONE:

1-833-EAT-KALO
(1-833-328-5256)

INSTAGRAM:

@hookuaaina



Cinnamon's poi pancakes with haupia sauce