

Ark of Taste catalogs endangered food

By [Joleen Oshiro](#)

Posted December 01, 2015

December 2, 2015



COURTESY ANGELA KAY KEPLER

The huge native Hua Moa banana resembles a squash.

COURTESY A

The flesh of

For 40 years Laurie Carlson has been enjoying a particular locally grown orange she unabashedly calls “the best citrus ever.” She came across it for the first time while managing Kokua Market in Makiki, when a distributor brought it in from Aiea.

“It’s so juicy and just so delicious,” she said.

Over the years she's found the fruit for sale in Waianae and, recently, Chinatown. And — she must be living right — it turned out to be one of the trees in the yard of what's now her Maunawili home.

"It has a tight-fitting skin, and when you scratch the skin with your fingernail, it has a distinctive smell different from any other citrus," she said. "It starts out green and turns a bright orange. It can be small, but the big ones are 3-1/2 inches around."

Carlson, 63, has a lot to say about the fruit, but for the life of her, the one thing she cannot share is its name.

"I've been researching for two years, and I've been told it's a Mandarin fruit from Okinawa. But nobody knows what it is," she said of her inquiries with scientists and agriculture experts. But all hope is not lost. The USDA operates a DNA citrus lab in Riverside, Calif., and if all else fails, she will find a way to get a leaf over for analysis.

Carlson has also been trying to propagate the orange tree, without success. Yet she is nothing if not determined.

"I will make sure it gets a name and it gets propagated," she said.

Carlson, regional governor of Slow Food in Hawaii, shares this tale of her beloved fruit to illustrate the importance of the Ark of Taste, a program established by Slow Food International that catalogs delicious, endangered foods across the globe. Slow Food promotes sustainability, cultural diversity and quality. Slow Food celebrates its 26th anniversary Dec. 10.

Since 1996 more than 1,100 products from more than 50 countries have been added to the International Ark of Taste. The Slow Food USA ark includes more than 200 foods.

Identifying and championing these foods keeps them in production and on our plates, says the organization.

Hawaii has eight items on the ark list, with a few more pending approval. They are Hawaiian ulu (breadfruit), white kiawe honey, ohia lehua honey, Manalauloa kalo (taro), poi from kalo, alaea (traditional Hawaii sea salt), Ele Ele (black Hawaiian) bananas and Hua Moa bananas. Pending approval are five varieties of ko (Hawaiian sugar cane). One item Carlson will soon help submit is the Manini banana, believed to be indigenous to Hawaii, which is distinctive for its variegated peel and leaves.

Carlson says if her orange turns out to be endangered, it also would be a good candidate for the ark, just for its deliciousness.

"When someone takes something from home with them far away, they will take the best, something that's near and dear to their heart. Someone from Okinawa started growing this orange here in Hawaii, and I know why!" she said. "Wonderful flavors

should not be lost. It's our inheritance as humans to have so many wonderful varieties of foods."

IN HAWAII people might wonder why poi made the ark, but Carlson says poi production has been on a general decline. In 2012, taro production decreased 17 percent from the previous year. Yet nowhere in the world is kalo culturally more important to a people than in the isles, where the Hawaiian creation myth declares the kalo plant a sibling to mankind. "This is a big deal," Carlson said.

It has also been a fundamental food source. Every part of it is used, from the corm, which is pounded into poi, to the leaves and stems, which become luau.

Foods on the ark aren't necessarily nominated in the place where they originated. The Hua Moa banana, for instance, was nominated by Slow Food Florida. In the 1960s or '70s it was taken to Florida and the Caribbean, and the variety became popular in Cuban preparations.

"Cubans twice-fried them — they fried them once, then squashed them and fried them again. It's a popular way to eat them in Florida," said Carlson.

Meanwhile, the sugar cane varieties pending approval, nicknamed "noble canes" to reflect their upright, straight stalks, don't resemble the green cane familiar to modern residents. Noble canes are colorful with soft piths, which traditionally were pounded and wrung by hand to extract the juice.

Noa Lincoln, an assistant professor at University of Hawaii's College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, says the canes were used for much more than sweetening food.

"Medicinally they were important. They were used externally for cuts and wounds. When the sugar crystallized, it dried out the wounds," he said. "Internally, they served as a taste enhancer to make medicines more palatable, and they were an easily digestible source of energy."

Today ko is being used commercially by local alcohol producers, but Lincoln says anyone can process it at home.

"If you have a hand-cranked press, it's simple to make homemade molasses or use the juice straight," he said.

Carlson says many ark foods became endangered when farming went industrial.

"Some foods don't transport well. In a nationalized food system, if food cannot be transported, it's lost," she said. "The Bradford watermelon, for one, is a delicious, sugary sweet watermelon grown in the South. But it has a delicate skin. If it is stacked it gets crushed, so it cannot be transported. A lot of foods went away because of things

like that. The Bradford watermelon got resuscitated because of the ark.”

Food-making traditions also qualify for the ark list. Items such as sake or soy sauce in Japan, for instance, take a sense of culture and heritage to produce. Carlson says Hawaii will expand its focus to seek out such items, many of which were brought in by immigrants.

Whether grown or made, the food we eat helps define us, she says.

“We have personal connections to food — dishes our grandparents made, something we ate when we were small. In a large sense food is a connection to our culture. Poi, miso soup — they have a larger meaning.

“Food gives us a sense of belonging, of history, of connectedness.”

Visit slowfoodoahu.org, slow foodhawaii.com (Big Island), slowfoodmaui.org and slowfoodusa.org.

NATIVE BANANAS ENTER THE ARK

The Hawaii native bananas on the Ark of Taste — the Ele Ele and Hua Moa — are cooking bananas, says Angela Kay Kepler, a retired botanist and author of “The World of Bananas in Hawaii: Then and Now” (\$80, University of Hawai‘i Press, \$80).

And cook them she does, often. Kepler says she and her husband eat bananas roughly twice a day. In fact, she uses them in place of potatoes, which she says she hasn’t consumed in more than 25 years.

Kepler has arguably the largest collection of traditional bananas in the world growing on her 3-acre property in Haiku, Maui, including every Hawaii variety. What she’s most excited about is the USDA taking tissue cultures of each one. “It’ll probably be available in a couple of years,” she said.

In the kitchen, Kepler has a standard preparation for any of the native Hawaii bananas, which have a firm, never mushy consistency: In a pan of butter and coconut or olive oil, she fries slices, then sautes them with grated garlic. A sprinkle of salt and they’re done.

Though these bananas can be cooked green, for a starchier, more potato-like product, Kepler always cooks riper fruit. Its sugars caramelize and enhance the banana aroma and flavor she so enjoys.

Sometimes Kepler takes it a step further, using the slices as a “crust” for quiche-type pies. Here’s a favorite:

BACON AND EGG PIE WITH BANANA ‘CRUST’

Courtesy Angela Kay Kepler

5 to 6 cooking bananas, firm-ripe or ripe, but not overripe

Vegetable oil for sauteeing

10 slices bacon

4 eggs

2 cups milk

1/2 cup combo of finely chopped green onion, fresh parsley and basil

1/2 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese

1/2 cup toasted breadcrumbs

2 to 3 tomatoes, diced

Heat oven to 400 degrees. Peel bananas and slice thinly lengthwise.

In pan with minimum amount of oil, saute slices. Drain off excess oil and arrange slices in bottom of a pie plate.

Cook bacon until crisp, drain on paper towels and place on bananas.

Blend eggs and milk and pour into pie plate. Sprinkle with chopped green onions and herbs, then top with Parmesan, breadcrumbs and tomato slices.

Bake 15 minutes or until top is golden brown. Serves 4 to 6.

Approximate nutritional information, per serving (based on 6 servings, 5 cooking bananas and 1 tablespoon oil for sauteeing bananas): 450 calories, 17 g fat, 6 g saturated fat, 155 mg cholesterol, 600 mg sodium, 63 g carbohydrate, 5 g fiber, 30 g sugar, 18 g protein

Variations:

>> Replace the bacon with 10 to 12 medium shrimp.

>> Omit milk and break 7 to 8 eggs onto the bacon strips, shirring them slightly with a fork so the yolks run slightly. Bake as usual.

>> Saute bananas with grated garlic for richer dish.













