

The Lore of the Lu'au

By Deston S. Nokes

It should be a law in Hawaii: No visitor may leave the 50th state without enjoying at least one lu'au. Nowhere else can you experience Hawaiian culture presented in such abundance. From mouthwatering foods to stories told in song and dance, Hawaiian lu'aus come from the heart of its people.

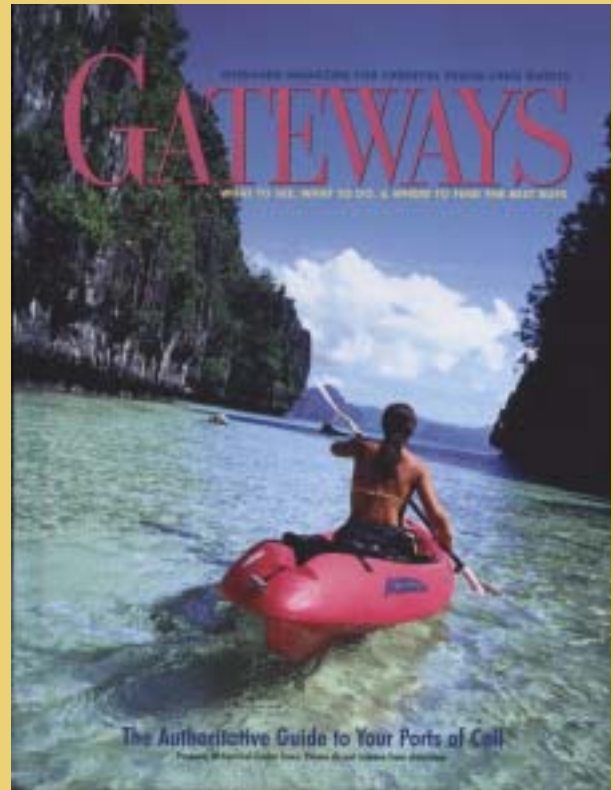
There's much more to lu'aus than passing the poi, tossing back mai tais and swaying along with hula dancers. This traditional Polynesian banquet nourishes traditions that date back centuries. The feast began in Tahiti and was brought to Hawaii by ancient Polynesian settlers.

Long ago, Hawaiians called these feasts 'aha 'aina, as a means of communicating with their gods and of celebrating significant events. The feasts that honored English explorer Captain James Cook after he arrived in the islands in 1778 featured the same foods you'll find at

celebrations today: kalua pua`a (roast pork), breadfruit, coconut, vegetables, rock salt and poi – a Hawaiian staple made of pounded taro root that reminds many first-time tasters of library paste.

In Cook's day, guests sat upon mats and ate from large, wooden calabash bowls using their hands. Some bowls contained poi, a staple of the Hawaiian diet made from pounded taro root. Meat was served on platters and dry foods like sweet potatoes, salt and dried fish were laid directly on ti leaves.

It was also a time when men and women didn't eat together. This *kapu* – or law – was broken in 1819 by King Kameahameha II and Princess Kaahumanu so that all could share in the feast. While it's still not clear who's idea it was to abolish the *kapu*, it's interesting to note that men still do most of the cooking at modern lu'aus.



Carnival Cruise Lines Magazine - winter 04/05



About 150 years ago, the name was changed to *lu'au*, after one of the celebration's favorite dishes: the tender leaves of a taro plant combined with chicken and baked in coconut milk. You can still enjoy that dish today, along with other simple, nutritious delicacies, but no one will offer to chew your meat for you, as the Hawaiian priests offered to do for Capt. Cook.

A backyard gathering for 500 people

To obtain a local perspective on how *lu'aus* have evolved, I spoke with "Uncle" Sam Ako, the cultural advisor at the Ka'anapali Beach Hotel, and a frequent musician at the Old Lahaina *Lu'au* in Maui.

Modern *lu'aus* take on the flavor of a backyard party, Ako said, except that they are often thrown for 400-500 people. First, you have to invite your entire family (yes, no matter what), plus all your friends and neighbors. It helps if the host knows people who can dance and play instruments to provide entertainment, otherwise you have to hire a band.

"Most *lu'aus* are thrown to celebrate a child's first birthday, a graduation or wedding," Ako explained. "At weddings, tradition had the groom's family preparing the feast, but now both families help."

According to lore, the more there was to eat, the more love was shown the honored guest, Ako said. "Therefore, preparing for this kind of celebration starts two months in advance."



Pounding poi



Preparing the feast

Cooking takes all day. Around 5:30 a.m. start your fire in the *imu*, which is an oven dug in the earth or sand. For a 200-lb. pig, a pit should be about three-feet wide, five-feet long and one-foot deep. Preparing the *imu* alone can take three hours.

Kiawe wood (mesquite) is used because it burns hotter with less smoke. Volcanic rocks are heated by the wood, and once they are white hot, the coals are raked aside and banana or ti leaves are placed upon the rocks.

Lay your clean, gutted pig upon the ti leaves and place some of the white-hot volcanic stones are placed inside the animal's cavity to ensure thorough cooking. Hawaiians will either use tongs or just dip their hands in water and QUICKLY place the stones inside. Today chickenwire is placed under a layer of ti leaves to make removing the food easy.

Next, place other foods for the feast on the bed of leaves. Ako said this can include turkeys, chickens and even a side of beef. Taro is baked in an imu to soften it for preparation into poi. Also, bananas, potatoes and breadfruit can join the mix.

You then cover your imu with additional ti leaves or water-soaked burlap bags. Finally, cover the whole thing with dirt to ensure that no steam escapes. Cooking the feast takes another 8-10 hours, so by late afternoon, your meats should be tender and *pale'he* – falling off the bone.



Cooking the pig in the imu

“Seafood is also an important part of a lu’au,” Ako said. “Octopus is cooked on the open fire until it’s nice and rubbery. Ahi tuna, shellfish and freshwater shrimp are also served. White crab is salted and eaten raw.”

Lomi lomi salmon is found at almost every luau in the islands, and is made with cold diced salmon, tomatoes and onion. Mahi-mahi, guava chicken and terriyaki dishes are common

dishes at lu’aus, but they are modern additions to the traditional menu.

Ako said while today’s lu’aus feature mai tais, older celebrations featured a variety of fermented concoctions made from pineapples, guava or bananas. The most popular is ‘awa, or kava kava as the herb is known on the mainland, which can have a numbing effect. Long ago it was prepared by chewing its root and spitting out the juice. ‘Awa traditionally is used in Hawaiian ceremonies to cement relationships between groups of people or to welcome strangers.

The lu’au begins

Guests at a lu’au are greeted with fresh flower leis. There are lots of traditions associated with leis and flowers. Guests should never take off a lei at a lu’au, as it is a gift to be appreciated. Women wear their flower over their right ear if they are single or on the left –

closer to their heart – if they are married or in a relationship. Pregnant women are given open-ended leis.

After a prayer is said over the food, the feast begins. As diners sample the succulent delicacies, the entertainment begins. At the *Old Lahaina Lu'au* in Maui, we were treated to a program of Hawaiian hula. The program told the story of Hawaii with a parade of gorgeous dancing and vibrant music.

Ako said that his fondest lu'au memories are evoked in the music. "To me a lu'au means getting together with the best musicians in town, there's no rehearsal, we just start playing the songs we love."

At the *Old Lahaina Lu'au*, where Ako performs, they stick to the traditional format as much as possible, from the music to the preparation of the food, as well as the style of dancing. "We try to portray the traditional Hawaiian lu'au as much as possible," Ako explained, noting that the show is so popular, it's sold out six weeks in advance.

At the end of a local lu'au, all the food is wrapped up and taken home by guests. "However, guests who take kalua pork home should always wrap it in a ti leaf. Otherwise their car will break down on the way home," Ako said. "Strange things happen."

The true measure of a lu'au's success, Ako said, is not how good the food is but how long guests talk about the celebration afterwards. "That," he says, "was the greatest tribute to the hosts."

Attend a lu'au next time you cruise to Hawaii and you're sure to be talking about it for years to come. It's a culinary and cultural adventure that no visitor can fail to savor.

