Covered in golden grasslands, lava flows, and a forest of kiawe trees, the Kohala Coast on the Big Island of Hawaii is arid savanna, not tropical jungle. Less than 10 inches of rain fall per year, compared with the island’s eastern side, where spots can get soaked with 300 inches of rain annually.

This coastline seems ill-suited for farming. But the kiawe, a mesquite originally from South America, loves it here. The trees’ roots reach down through a layer of silt and then between the lava crags to tap into water trapped beneath. The trees grow huge, and three or four times a year they blossom with brilliant clouds of dangling yellow flowers—the source for Volcano Island Honey, considered by many to be the finest in the world.

It takes countless numbers of flowers to make one pound of honey; it takes one bee a whole lifetime to make one tablespoon. The result is purity in a jar, white, with an elemental richness, a concentrated blast of the Earth’s sweet essence.

“Bees historically have been looked at as a connection to the spiritual,” says Richard Spiegel, the company’s owner. “The Earth grows the tree, the tree grows the flowers, and the bees gather the nectar. But the bees also help me remember what’s real. If I move too fast, they’ll sting me.”

Volcano Island Honey Co. is
one player in the revolution that has transformed Big Island agriculture. The demise of the sugarcane industry and a growing demand for gourmet items have created a cadre of entrepreneurial small farmers who produce an endless array of specialty crops and produce: vanilla, hearts of palm, mushrooms, and chocolate.

The Big Island is a remarkably fertile place, where 200 kinds of avocados and 100 varieties of bananas thrive. "More types of fruit grow here than just about any place in the world," says Ken Love, a South Kona fruit grower. "Ships bound for Asia or Europe stopped here in the 1800s with what they had picked up in South America or the tropics. They came here, threw out their garbage, and it all began to grow."

Ranging from sea level to nearly 14,000 feet in elevation, the Big Island is almost as varied in its geographic diversity. Less than a million years old, it's one of the youngest places on Earth—and thanks to the lava flows from the Kilauea volcano that continue to add new land, the Big Island is growing younger all the time.

Both literally and metaphorically, this is a brave new world. As I travel the island and listen to farmers' stories, I find myself pondering a no doubt pretentious but fundamental notion. When people change their lives, do they change the world? For Richard Spiegel, such questions come with the territory. A native of New Jersey, he came of age in the 1960s. He practiced law briefly, traveled across the country in a Volkswagen bus, and eventually ended up with what he describes as a mountain man existence in Washington state. Then, while cutting wood for the winter, he was seriously injured in a saw accident and realized he couldn't recover in such a remote spot. He called a friend who lived in an old Shinto temple on the Big Island and came here to heal. That was 36 years ago.

Spiegel had kept beehives back on the mainland and soon started beekeeping here—the origin of Volcano Island Honey Co. Beekeepers had worked the kiawe forests for 100 years before he arrived, but it's a technique that really distinguishes his artisan honey. Combels of honey are hand-selected from 150 hives rather than the thousands that many beekeepers maintain. By not using heat as conventional honey extraction, Spiegel preserves enzymes, allowing his product to crystallize without processing; the operation is entirely organic.

For all of his idealism, Spiegel also recognizes the irony of his situation. As he puts it, he's a one-time hippie who eschewed sugar, only to end up producing gourmet honey at $15 per 8-ounce jar. It's like those bee stings thatzing him back to reality: Spiegel understands that when he speaks at business schools about organic small farming, he won't be taken seriously unless his honey succeeds not just artistically but financially too.

"The edge of hypocrisy follows me all the time," he says. "We touch the Earth but sell at Neiman Marcus."

Fog drifts across the rolling green pastures of the Waimea upcountry, which provides a transition from the yin of the serene Kohala Coast to the yang of the tropical Hamakua Coast. Once a major sugarcane growing area, the northeastern coast is now a center of the new Big Island agriculture, as farmers and producers transition the land from sugarcane to specialty crops.

Among the growers here is Honolulu native Jim Reddelkopf. Ten years ago he was a tour operator who wanted to establish a new life for his family in a rural setting. Despite having no growing experience, he purchased 6 acres on the slopes of Mauna Kea, near Pahualo, hoping to produce a high-value crop. During a dinner conversation, he learned that vanilla came from an orchid. Farmer or not, Reddelkopf was convinced vanilla would grow here. After all, this is the Orchid Isle, home to thousands of varieties.

---

Chefs in paradise

The Big Island's agricultural renaissance is the result of a creative collaboration between growers and innovative Hawaiian chefs. In the 1980s, celebrated chefs Peter Merriman and Alan Wong helped pioneer a regional cuisine inspired by fresh local ingredients. Merriman and Wong are still going strong, but now a new wave of chefs is on the rise—among them Jim Matubas of GameHouse, and Joshua Kemer of Hilo Bay Cafe. Both are devoted to an island cuisine based on local ingredients, such as the lomalo that Kemer served at the Hilo Farmers Market.

The possibilities are almost endless, but in Hawaii, plates are as diverse as the island itself. For all the opportunities a chef has on the Big Island, there is also the usual assortment of pressures. When they need to impress, Kemer and Matubas each craft a dish that's holdable, Big Island style: they go fishing.
“So we took all that we ever had and laid it on a dream,” he says.

Redefining eventually learned about Tom Kodoka, a Kona orchard grower who had been experimenting with vanilla for decades. Kodoka shared his insights, and now Redefining’s Hawaiian Vanilla Company is the only commercial vanilla operation in the United States, raising 30,000 vanilla plants in greenhouse facilities. The greenhouses are near a century-old yellow wood frame building where the family hosts lunches featuring dishes that incorporate vanilla, from hamuus to pumpkin soup.

At first glance, the economics of Hawaiian vanilla look appealing. A pound can cost $200 wholesale, and a 1-acre’s worth is equal to 20 acres of coffee. But making a pound of vanilla takes 100 beans, which must be handpicked. The vanilla plant, a twisting Little Skip of Horror-style vine with dangling fingerlike seedpods, flowers only one day a year and then for only a few hours.

So Redefining can’t afford to rely on random pollination by bees. Instead, each of the ephemeral, celery-like blossoms is hand-pollinated, a delicate task done either with the tip of a fingernail or a slender bamboo pick. Redefining’s wife, Tracey, and their three oldest children do much of the pollinating themselves, with other workers helping out during the busiest times.

“Vanilla is the most labor-intensive crop in the world,” Redefining says. “You have to have some emotion to make it work and the passion to do it right. When we bring people to work in this operation, we’re bringing in their whole lives. Their joys, their sorrows, and their hopes.”

South from Pa’auilo, State 19/Mamalahoa Highway slithers in and out of steep gullies dense with jungle vegetation. Turning off at Kolekole Beach Park, I discover that the view from the road barely reveals the pristine beauty of this side of the island: Eden-like in spots but with swinging thunbergia vines and tangled stands of aloea and wild guava, chaotic and ominous in their drama.

Lesley Hill and Michael Crowell bought a 100-acre sugarcane plantation on the edge of this jungle. If the sugarcane business was dead, this was its corpse: rusted, beaten land with the stench of crushed, fermenting cane. “We couldn’t find a single earthworm,” Hill says. “In places, the topsoil had been scooped off and all that was left was hardpan. The erosion on the island is unbelievable. We had to save this land from running down to the ocean.”

After years of loving rehabilitation, it’s productive land again. Views extend from Mauna Kea to the Pacific, and while some areas feature orderly plantings, the sheer abundance gives the farm an almost feral quality. Near its open-air Balinese-style structures grows a huge range of fruits, from Meyer lemons to durian, a spiky, basketball-size Southeast Asian fruit equally renowned for its custardly flavor on the tongue and its gagging odor to the nose. The farm’s main crop, however, is hearts of palm.

Following successful trials with betel, a spineless palm native to Central and South America, the couple planted 35,000 seeds.

My exposure to hearts of palm has been limited to canned stuff so underwhelming in flavor and texture that a big whiff of durian would seem a welcome antidote to its blandness.

“Machine in hand, Crowell goes to a palm and hacks off a section. He keeps thwacking and whacking until he removes the skin’s sheaths, revealing the pristine white heart.”

“Vegetable ivory,” he declares.

I bite in and the palm crunches sharply, releasing a mildly sweet flavor. Even tastier is the section of young leaves, translucent white tissue that unfolds like a scroll.

Crowell and Hill’s Waimea Agricultural Group regularly sells hundreds of pounds of hearts of palm a week, which...
Enjoying the bounty

For information, contact the Big Island Visitors Bureau (www.bigisland.org or 808/961-5797).

Farms

Hawaii AgVentures. The Big Island Farm Bureau program arranges tours covering individual farms, including Volcano Island Honey Co. and Wailea Agricultural Group. From $65; reservations required. www.hawaiiagventures.com or 800/660-6011.


Hilo Farmers Market. The most diverse of the island’s many farmers’ markets. Wed and Sat “from dawn ’til it’s gone.” Mamoru St. at Kamuela Ave., Hilo; www.hilofarmersmarket.com or 808/933-1000.

Merriman’s Farm Visits & Dinner. Stops typically include outings to Waimea’s Honopua Farms, which grows organic greens and flowers for leis. Visits conclude with a four-course dinner at Merriman’s. 1:15 Tue; $125. 65-1227 Opelo Rd., in Opelu Plaza, State 19/Maumaloa Hwy. and Opelo Rd., Waimea; www.merrimanshawaii.com or 808/885-6822.

The Original Hawaiian Chocolate Factory. Tours of the South Kona factory, which uses Hawaii-grown cocoa beans. $5; reservations required. 78–6772 Makenaani St., Kailua-Kona; www.originalhawaiianchocolatefactory.com or 808/322-2626.

Volcano Island Honey Co. Tours and tasting $10; reservations required. 46-4013 Pu‘uona Rd., Honoka’a; www.volcanoislandhoney.com or 808/775-1000.

Wailea Agricultural Group. See Hawaii AgVentures, left, for tours. Buy hearts of palm online at or Honomu farm stand (call for directions). www.waileaag.com or 808/937-7591.

Dining

The ConoHouse. The restaurant is one of Hawaii’s most romantic. $$$; dinner daily. Mauna Lani Resort, 68-1400 Mauna Lani Dr., Kohala Coast; 808/885-6622.

Hilo Bay Café. A blend of regional specialties and updated American classics. $; lunch and dinner daily. 315 Moko’a’a St., Hilo; 808/935-4939.

The Hualalai Grille by Alan Wong. Specialties by a super star of Hawaii Regional Cuisine. $$$; lunch and dinner daily, reservations suggested. Hualalai Resort, 100 Kaupulehu Dr., Kailua-Kona; www.hualalairesort.com or 808/325-8525.

Merriman’s Restaurant. Another landmark of Hawaii Regional Cuisine. $$$; lunch Mon–Fri, dinner daily. See Merriman’s Farm Visits, left.

Lodging

Hawaii’s Best Bed & Breakfast. A good resource for inns throughout the island. www.bestbnb.com or 800/262-9912.

Mauna Lani Resort. Oceanfront classic with a protected swimming beach. 342 rooms from $430; 68-1400 Mauna Lani Dr., Kohala Coast; www.maunalaniresort.com or 808/367-2323.

The Palms Cliff House Inn. A small inn on the Hamakua Coast has the atmosphere of plantation-era Hawaii. 8 rooms from $175. 28-3514 State 19/Maumaloa Hwy., Honomu; www.palmsclifthouse.com or 808/963-6076.

prompts the question of just who is buying this stuff. With Hawaiian restaurants featuring regional cuisine, there’s certainly a local market. But the Islands remain the most isolated inhabited place on Earth.

Welcome to the age of express shipping: The farm takes individual orders for freshly cut hearts of palm from chefs all over the mainland and can have them delivered within two days. “Yeah, it’s pretty remarkable,” Crowell says. “I’ll be thinking, ‘You guys are in Chicago or New York and we’re in the jungle, all the way out here on a corner of the Polynesian Triangle.’

Big Island, small world.