



Locals Only

*Chef James Babian plants the seeds of sustainability
in the fertile soil of Hawaii's Big Island.*

BY DAVID LYON

“Have you seen the List?” That is the question on the lips of five dozen farmers gathered for the third growers’ symposium organized by James Babian. A chef on the Kona Coast of Hawaii’s Big Island for more than 15 years, Babian is a big reason many of these farmers can stay in business. For some, he is the reason they are in business at all.

“When I first came to Hawaii, you could buy local lettuce, some fruits, and that was it,” Babian says. But in 2007, when he became the executive chef of the Four Seasons Resort Hualalai, Babian made local sourcing the foundation of his cooking. By



creating a stable, substantial demand, he helped the Big Island’s agriculture bloom. In the process, his List—a catalog of produce he wanted for his menu—started determining exactly what was being planted in the fields. If he needed a

particular type of berry, he asked a farmer to try growing it. And now he is about to hand out the List.

Once everyone is settled at communal tables with plates of barbecued pork, red and gold beets with crumbled goat cheese,

and grilled grass-fed rib eye with slices of black radish, Babian passes around the List. “If you grow it, we’ll buy it,” he says of the more than three dozen fruits, vegetables, and mushrooms

A sashimi plate at Ulu Ocean Grill and Sushi Lounge (top) features kampachi farmed in waters about 10 miles from the restaurant.