



that he has had to order from the mainland but would rather not. “There’s a real opportunity,” he cajoles the crowd. “Somebody could get rich growing green and red peppers in Hawaii.”

The farmers buzz as they scrutinize the single sheet. “I don’t think we have the elevation for pears and apples,” says Paul Johnston, owner of Kekela Farms, to Joey and Donna Mah, “but we could try some asparagus. How’s that working for you?” The Mahs own J&D Farms and specialize in flowers, but Babian coaxed them into cultivating asparagus. Four Seasons purchases nearly their entire crop of the vegetable—or at least the portion not reserved for Babian’s new restaurant on the island.

Babian left the Four Seasons last summer to open Pueo’s Osteria, an Italian farm-to-table restaurant where local products make up about half the menu. “One of our biggest-selling dishes is wild-boar pappardelle,” he says. “We braise local wild boar and serve it with braised Kekela Farms kale and toss it with homemade pappardelle noodles.” Babian always offers a *crostata* on the dessert menu. “But instead of using a mainland peach, I use a local mango,” he says. “I think mango is an upgrade

on the peach anyway.”

Babian’s locavore approach is leading a new wave of Hawaiian dining. A generation ago, Alan Wong, Roy Yamaguchi, Peter Merriman, and others unshackled fine dining in the islands from a slavish imitation of the French kitchen. Calling their approach Hawaiian regional cuisine, they featured Hawaiian products and flavors but did not address the issue of sustainable local agriculture. The juicy local ahi steak on the plate was, more often than not, surrounded by vegetables shipped from California because the chefs had no real alternative. Today, Hawaii still imports 75 percent or more of its food.

That does not suit Babian. Last November’s chef-farmer symposium at the Four Seasons also marked the opening of the hotel’s fine-dining venue, Ulu Ocean Grill and Sushi Lounge. Ulu’s opening menu began with the List—and the current menu still does.

The List is justifiably a source of pride for the chef and his former restaurant. The Hawaiian Islands may be lush, but they are inhospitable to most nonnative food crops. Apples and pears, for example, require dormancy

enforced by at least 800 continuous hours of temperatures below about 40 degrees, and they can only be cultivated high on the mountainsides—where cloud cover can stunt the trees. Other nonnative crops like peppers and tomatoes are susceptible to fungi and nematodes that thrive without a winter freeze to keep them in check. Moreover, farmers constantly have to supplement the volcanic soils with key nutrients and contend with periodic “vog,” an atmospheric haze of volcanic ash that blots out the sun.

None of that has deterred Babian’s enterprising farmers. A few years ago, Mike Hodson retired from being a narcotics detective to raise tomatoes under plastic-covered hoops in the Waimea Homelands (similar to a Native American reservation on the mainland). Early on, he asked Babian to critique his crops. “More acid,” Babian told him, “and slightly more sugar.” Hodson kept tweaking his drip of organic nutrients until he was growing perhaps the planet’s best-tasting tomatoes, aptly dubbed Wow! The Four Seasons and Pueo’s Osteria get the top of the crop. Meanwhile, Hodson’s backyard venture has expanded: Wow! tomatoes

*The majority of ingredients used at Ulu, which opened last November at the Four Seasons Resort Hualalai, are locally sourced.*