

WORTH their SALT

Salt is simple, says Moloka'i-based salt maker Cameron Hiro. It requires little—only seawater, sun and time. Yet, for such a small, elemental thing, salt has, for centuries, been of tremendous value. Ancient Hawaiians considered *pa'akai* sacred, using it for medicinal purposes and to preserve and enhance the flavors of food. Today, chefs and foodies alike rely on salt to make the flavors of their dishes sing.

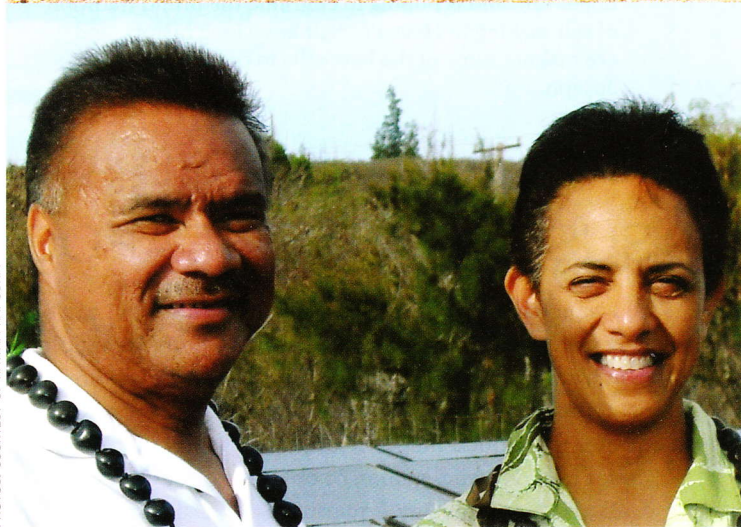
There are four common varieties of salt: iodized table salt, kosher salt, sea salt and *fleur de sel*, a type of sea salt. In recent years, there has been renewed interest in the craft of harvesting Hawaiian sea salts, and bags of the pure, white (and sometimes red and black) crystals have been showing up on grocers' shelves. Leading the pack was Hawai'i Kai Corp.'s Moloka'i-made sea salts. Hawai'i Kai Corp. was founded in 2003 by Kent Clampitt, an entrepreneur and process engineer who got hooked on Moloka'i's pure salt while vacationing there with his wife. Clampitt built the company from the shore up, hiring Cameron Hiro, who was born and raised on Moloka'i, as his operations manager and salt master.

"My background is in the food-service industry," says Hiro, who attended college on the Big Island and moved back to Moloka'i in 1993. "I moved onto a 35-acre parcel on homestead land but I didn't see myself as a regular farmer. But I thought, 'salt farming, hmm, what's that all about?'" Clampitt eventually sold his shares, though he remains a consultant, and current president and CEO George Joseph bought Hawai'i Kai Corp. in 2008.

Hawai'i Kai Corp. may be making an ancient product, but the process is certainly 21st century. First, the company draws ocean water from off Moloka'i's coast and then, using a series of filters, purifies the water to FDA bottled-water standards, so it's left with pure ocean water that retains its natural salt levels. The water is processed through a reverse-osmosis system, which increases the salinity of the water. Then, using heat absorbed via a proprietary solar sealed reduction unit, the salinity level is again increased, this time to six times that of its normal state, and the water is filtered once more.

The final outcome is sort of like water on salt steroids, which makes the evaporation process easier and, because it requires less energy and time, more efficient. The water is transferred to the salt farm, where Hiro finishes the evaporation process.

Depending on the weather, it takes three to five weeks for the wet salt to form. When it's ready, Hiro collects it by hand and separates the salt from any remaining liquid. The



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF HAWAII KAI CORP.

↑ Hawai'i Kai Corp.'s four varieties of salt (top). Salt expert Cameron Hiro, with his wife, Jacque Hiro.

result is chunks of smooth, snowlike whole salt that Joseph says has been compared to fleur de sel, considered the *crème de la crème* of salt by many chefs.

Hawai'i Kai Corp. sells four lines of salt: Soul of the Sea, Palm Island Premium, Hawai'i Kai Gourmet and Moloka'i Gourmet. Each line is created using different formulations to yield subtle differences in taste and texture. All four brands offer white, red, green and black salts, each with its own distinct flavor. The white is the original form of the salt and is the base for all other varieties. Red salt is made by bonding *'alaea*, a red clay that is believed to have been used by ancient Hawaiians in a purification ritual called *hi'uwai*, to the white salt, resulting in a slightly pinkish varietal (it's a favorite of

Martha Stewart's). Due to its milder flavor, the red salt pairs well with kālúa pork and all types of fish, particularly grilled salmon, and is the most popular salt. The green salts contain organic bamboo-leaf extract and meld well with Asian dishes. The second most popular salt is black, which is the result of charcoal, an antitoxin and digestive aid, mixed with the white salt. Chef George

Mavrothalassitis, a man who definitely knows his salt, likes to pair Hawai'i Kai's black salt with chocolate because the smokiness of the salt enhances the chocolate's rich aromas and flavors.

Hawai'i Kai Corp. is experimenting with different salt blends using other locally grown products, including a Maui onion salt, and is hoping to continue the proud tradition of salt making in Hawai'i. "Salt has a long history, and we are making some of the best salts in the whole world," says Joseph.



↑ Hawai'i Kai Corp.'s Molokai salt farm.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF HAWAII KAI CORP.



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Grilled pineapple with Hawai'i Kai black sea-salt topping

- 1/4 cup honey
- 1/4 cup fresh lime juice
- 1 tablespoon grated lime peel
- 2 tablespoons orange juice
- 1 large, ripe pineapple
- Pinch Hawai'i Kai black sea salt
- 1/4 cup minced fresh mint

Whisk the first four ingredients in a large glass dish. Peel pineapple, cut crosswise into eight rounds. Remove core from each slice, discard. Add pineapple to dish, turn and coat. Cover with plastic wrap; let stand for at least an hour. Preheat grill to medium heat. Remove pineapple, reserving marinade. Grill until golden brown, about three minutes per side. Transfer to serving dish. Pour reserved marinade over grilled pineapple and sprinkle with mint. Top with Hawai'i Kai black sea salt.

SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD 101

You want to eat in an environmentally friendly way, but it can be tough to know what to do. Should you, for example, buy the wild-caught bigeye tuna or the farmed tilapia? Would it be better to order wild salmon or opt for scallops? Monterey Bay Aquarium's 2009 Seafood Watch Guide for



Hawai'i can help guide you through these muddled waters. The guide is broken down into three categories: best choices, which are abundantly available and are caught or farmed in environmentally friendly ways; good alternatives, which are still decent options, but involve some concerns about how they're farmed or caught; and the fish you may want to avoid because they're caught or farmed in ways that damage the marine environment. The categories are not

rigid absolutes—depending on the season, where the fish is from or how it's caught, the species could appear in more than one column. Don't be afraid to ask your local fishmongers and chefs where the seafood in their cases or on their menus is from, whether it's farmed or wild-caught, and how it was caught.

To download the Seafood Watch pocket guide, visit www.seafoodwatch.org. Sushi and other regional guides are also available, as is a handy (and free!) iPhone application available through the iTunes Store.

PHOTO: ISTOCK