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Weekly

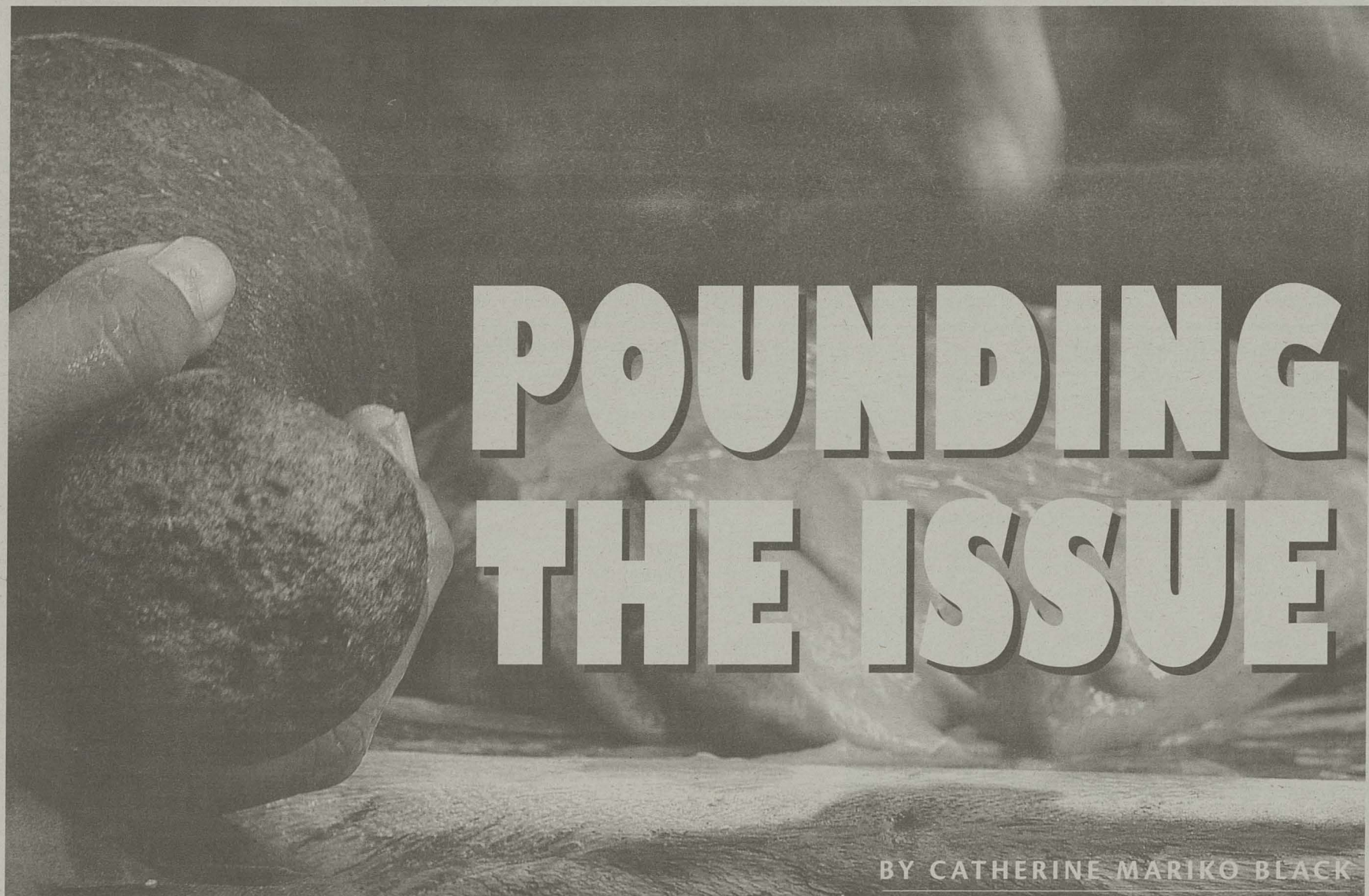
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The Right to Pound

THE MOVEMENT TO LEGALIZE PA'I 'AI—p5
BOXES BURNED • AVENUE Q • SAUSAGE MAKING

Redefining our relationship with the 'aina and with food is becoming a mass movement in Hawai'i. And for increasing numbers of people, the movement's soundtrack is the steady beat of stone striking wood in the traditional rhythm of ku'i 'ai, or pounding taro into poi.



THE PUSH TO LEGALIZE PA'I 'AI

As Hawaiian culture and the sustainability movement have flourished over the past few decades, so has the resurrection of taro cultivation and its popular byproduct: poi. Today, a new generation of cultural practitioners, farmers and entrepreneurs are questioning a legal system that deems hand-pounded poi or pa'i 'ai unsafe for public consumption and an economic system that keeps taro farming relegated to Hawai'i's agricultural margins.

You may have seen the yellow-and-green bumper stickers that read, "Legalize Pa'i 'ai" without knowing that these represent a slow-burning conflict between the taro movement and state law over the fact that hand-pounded poi cannot be commercially sold or distributed.

This is what Daniel Anthony, a cultural activist and ku'i practitioner, discovered in late 2009 when his booth at the Ward Farmers' Market was shut down and the pa'i 'ai he had sold to Town restaurant was confiscated by the state Department of Health (DOH). The official explanation was that food products not prepared according to DOH-approved procedures, namely in a certified commercial kitchen, cannot be sold in public.

Anthony, a charismatic and passionate 32-year-old whose mission is to revive this artisan industry, became something of a poster child for

the movement, but he is just the tip of the iceberg. A diverse coalition of taro farmers, cultural practitioners, educators, health professionals, community organizations and even the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA) have come out of the woodwork to support the "Poi Bill" in the 2011 legislative cycle. They argue that hand-pounded poi is crucial to the cultural integrity of the Hawaiian people, not to mention it's a healthy and nutritious food that has been safely consumed here for more than 1,000 years.

"INDIGENIZE THE LAW"

The bill proposes that producers of hand-pounded poi be granted an exemption from preparing poi in a certified food-processing establishment. This would be similar to a Hawai'i law that grants an exemption to home-based producers of honey, who are not required to use a certified kitchen. Ku'i practitioners argue that some of the rules governing food production in a certified kitchen are incompatible with poi's traditional preparation: for example, a rule that would require them to soak their wooden boards and lava rock pounders in bleach and other

chemical cleaning agents.

Most serious ku'i practitioners hand carve their implements and consider them to be of deep personal, cultural and even artistic value. There are also traditional 'olelo no'ea, maintaining that the dried poi left in the pores of the pounder is what prevents future batches from spoiling, possibly due to its "protective" bacterial content (more below).

Pa'i 'ai producers would have to take a DOH food safety course to obtain a permit. Like honey producers, they would have to clearly label their product with information about its unconventional preparation methods and sell directly to consumers.

The organizers of the bill also propose the law make it legal to purchase poi stored at room temperature, even though it is technically considered a "potentially hazardous food." While any experienced consumer knows that poi can be stored at room temperature, conventional wisdom holds that any cooked starch may accumulate pathogenic bacteria if not refrigerated. The proposed exemption for poi is based on another DOH rule that allows the purchase of more commonplace "poten-

tially hazardous" foods such as raw fish and meat as long as there is "customer knowledge" of the risk involved.

"Consumer choice plays a key role in perpetuating culture, but Hawaiian cuisine lacks the same legal protection that Japanese and European cuisine have with sushi and rare steak," says Amy Brinker, a UH law student and one of the organizers of the bill.

"There is no other food that is of more significance in Hawaiian culture. At one time, traditionally pounded poi was the staple food here, yet the current laws neither reflect nor honor this time-tested method of preparation. It's a public responsibility to push for a change to allow for this cultural practice."

She calls this "indigenizing" the law, or acknowledging that certain island realities can't be adequately upheld within conventional, Mainland legal frameworks. For example, the real estate law in Hawai'i was modified to allow for customary gathering rights.

The bill was introduced in both the House of Representatives (HB 1344), as well as the Senate (SB 101). SB 101 was approved by the Senate and sent to the House. HB 1344 safely passed two out of three House committees, but was stalled in the Consumer Protection and Commerce Committee, chaired by Rep. Robert Herkes, who represents District 5 Hawai'i Island.

Herkes' arguments for not hearing the bill included its "lack of enforceability and public interest." The hun-

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Newark, Calif. (January 19, 2011)— Chinese Restaurant News announced that Happy Days Chinese Seafood Restaurant located in 3553 Waialae Ave. Honolulu, HI, was named the Top 100 Overall Excellence.

Happy Days Chinese Seafood Restaurant, located in 3553 Waialae Ave. Honolulu, HI, is owned by Mr. Chan and Lisa Ng and offers traditional Hong Kong style Chinese favorites including dim sum, home-style stir-fried dishes and seafood, etc. Making sure to integrate traditional recipes with new trends, the restaurant offers menu items that are prepared in a healthy manner using only the finest and freshest ingredients.

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dreds of in-person and written testimonies for the bill, however, have been overwhelmingly in its favor, including those from the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, the Sierra Club, the Kokua Hawai'i Foundation and even, yes, the DOH itself.

As DOH Deputy Director for the Environment Gary Gill explains, "The Abercrombie administration and this DOH is eager to promote growing our own food and producing our own food products. [We are] working with the pa'i 'ai group to arrive at a solution."

The state agency and the organizers of the bill have met to exchange information about both conventional and traditional Hawaiian health and safety measures. The DOH has even agreed to use its laboratories to test poi at different stages in its fermentation or "souring" process, which appears to be due to lactic-acid producing bacteria (also considered "probiotic" or "healthy" bacteria, similar to those found in yogurt or sauerkraut).

"When the acid level of poi goes up, that is protective. Knowing how fast that acid level goes up over time, among other things, will give us greater information to ensure that the public health can be protected," says Gill. "The DOH has the discretion to design an appropriate food processing regulation for the production of pa'i 'ai, and we want to assure that anyone who is producing poi in the traditional fashion has been educated in food safety techniques, so that they know what measures to take to ensure that the food is not contaminated."

A NEW NICHE MARKET?

When it comes to political or public resistance, according to Anthony, there might be economic concerns about pa'i 'ai. "There's the idea that this presents some competition to the poi factories," he says. "But the reality is, there'll be a bigger pie to share. There are people who won't eat poi that like pa'i 'ai. Legalizing pa'i 'ai increases the market for everyone and gives consumers a second choice. Since the bill requires us to sell directly to consumers, the poi mills will continue business as usual when it comes to selling to restaurants and grocery stores."

Ku'i practitioners like Anthony maintain that the starchier taro they need to make pa'i 'ai is different from the taro poi millers usually use and is sometimes more labor intensive for the farmer to grow. That's why he and others have begun to pay double, or even triple,

taro's going price of about 60 cents a pound. It's also why he can sell his hand-pounded pa'i 'ai for \$10 to \$15 a pound, two to three times more than conventional poi.

Anthony believes this will be an artisan industry naturally regulated by the extensive training required to make good pa'i 'ai.

"If you don't know your taro and the quality of your taro well enough, it's not going to be long before either people don't buy what you have be-

"My generation has been remiss in perpetuating the culture, but the generation after me has become more vocal, forthcoming and courageous in retaking and strengthening the practice.

"I've been teaching more within the last three years because the younger generation is looking for this knowledge again. There are more Native Hawaiians eating poi now than there were 20 years ago."

Says Anthony, "Pa'i 'ai is going to be less hype in the

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—Daniel Anthony

cause you're not producing a quality product, or you'll have so much loss [of taro due to poor processing techniques] that you're going to go out of business. The aunts are only going to give you one chance, and if they don't like your poi, you just lost a customer for life. This is a business that'll be regulated by quality, where your best asset is word-of-mouth."

Anthony puts great emphasis on the economic health behind this issue.

"My number one question to the kupauna has always been, 'What do we need most in Hawai'i?' And they all say we need more taro farmers. So I looked at the numbers and at the current farm gate price for taro, which is what the poi mills are paying. I'd have to grow 100,000 pounds of taro to make \$60,000 a year. But if I sustainably farm and pound my own taro, I can make \$70,000 by selling just 7,000 pounds per year, and all I need is one acre. So the real question is, if we want more taro farmers, we need to figure out how they're going to make enough money to feed their families."

POI AS SACRED FOOD

These convictions are echoed in the words of "Uncle" Earl Kawaa, a 12th-generation ku'i practitioner and kupuna from Moloka'i who teaches a kalo workshop covering everything from cultivation to hand-crafting wooden boards and stone pounders to the art of pounding itself.

"Poi is 'ai kapu, sacred food, so those who ku'i understand that public health and safety has always been part of the practice," Kawaa says.

future but way more special, because everyone's going to have a connection to it in their own household, pounding and making their own. And, in my experience pounding with 3,000 people last year, people want to learn how."

Gill adds, "Hawai'i is far too dependent on food shipped in from overseas, and as part of sustaining our economy and the health of our people we need to grow and eat more food that is produced here. Growing taro and pounding poi is something I would personally love to see in thousands of backyards."

If the multiplication of school ku'i clubs, community lo'i and poi pounding at parties and gatherings around the state is any indication, this is a revival that will only continue to grow. Whether the Poi Bill is passed this year or next, it may be just a matter of time before taro and poi pounding are as much a part of our public education as math or science and family ku'i 'ai boards—and stones as common as any household appliance. ■

Organizers and supporters of the Poi Bill (SB101) invite the public to ku'i and eat pa'i 'ai. They will be collecting signatures for petitions, giving out bumper stickers and DVDs and providing information about the bill, pa'i 'ai and taro.

Hawaiian Caucus Day Celebration, Mon., 3/14, 10AM-2PM, State Capitol

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