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Breadfruit: When it thrives, it provides

December 5, 2010 - By KEKOA ENOMOTO, Staff Writer

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HANA - In sleepy Hana, a breadfruit revolution is unfolding.

The 8-year-old Breadfruit Institute, overseen by the National Tropical Botanical Garden of Hana and Kauai, aims to export tens of thousands of breadfruit treelings starting in 2011 to provide a sustainable food source for the hungry around the globe.

This initiative culminates a five-year Breadfruit Institute project to propagate the tree from its tissues - not just its roots - in collaboration with a research team at the University of British Columbia at Okanagan.

The 10-acre orchard inside the entrance to Hana's 464-acre Kahanu National Tropical Botanical Garden contains the world's largest breadfruit collection, with 260 trees representing 137 varieties, said institute Collections Manager and Curator Ian Cole in Hana.

Breadfruit is valued as a prolific tree that can thrive in a wide range of ecological conditions with minimal care, while providing a huge volume of high-carbohydrate, low-fat, nutrient-rich fruits. 'Ulu, as it's called in Hawaiian, is also a good source of vitamins and minerals.

"Here we have an important (food) use from its long, rich history in the Pacific islands," Executive Director Diane Ragone said by phone Friday from Kauai. "Breadfruit has been grown for 2,000 to 3,000 years in the Pacific, and it spread in 2000 to the Caribbean, and from there to other tropical places. So breadfruit has a rich history in Hawaii and the Pacific, and more recently in the Caribbean, to feed people because it provides enough starchy goodness and is very nutritious."

Breadfruit trees grow up to 85 feet tall. Among the highest-yielding food plants, a single tree may yield up to 200 fruits a season. South Pacific trees produce 50 to 150 fruits annually.

Ragone recalled studying the trees as part of her doctoral research in the South Pacific nearly 25 years ago.

"I traveled to Micronesia and Ponape," she recounted. "In the high islands of Micronesia, I saw incredible agroforests containing breadfruit trees. Many of the trees were 2,000 years old and had been growing as a sustainable agricultural system, with a lot of other useful plants planted with them.

"It was an 'aha' moment - think of what we could do for a place like Haiti that has been deforested," she said.

But root propagation of breadfruit was slow and laborious, with

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BREADFRUIT CRAB CAKES

spotty success, she said. Then, in 2003, she guided a University of Hawaii master's degree candidate to investigate tissue-culture, in-vitro propagation of breadfruit. The result has been "healthy, vigorous, disease-free" treelings that can be shipped, she said.

Cole said 50 to 100 plants of the Ma'afala variety will be available to Hawaii growers starting in February, with at least 20,000 more available in May. Other varieties are in the pipeline, he added.

"What we'd really like to do on a local level is be able to provide our expertise and high-quality breadfruit trees to farmers, homeowners and nurseries throughout the state of Hawaii," he said.

"However, we also have a global initiative and a global goal to make trees available to farmers in nonprofit organizations that are working with fighting hunger issues. There are people involved in a project currently in Jamaica and Haiti that are getting trees and putting them in the ground in the next couple months," he said, with an end result to "distribute breadfruit to hungry people. So we have a local, state-of-Hawaii goal and also a broader, international set of objectives."

The Hana collection of breadfruit varieties had been established by Ragone after more than 20 years of travel to 50 Pacific islands. Cole, who joined the Breadfruit Institute six months ago, called his job "daunting" to feed, prune, water and care for Hana's core collection of 260 trees.

"For the last 20 years, those trees have received very little management," he noted. "Before I came on in June, nothing had happened except for the trees to be mowed around. There was no fertilizer, no real pruning; so my job is working to try to reverse years of not-ideal management.

"But I'm not complaining," he added.

He cited the international nature of the breadfruit project, with Hana and Kauai providing trees to Canadian research facilities, and principals in San Diego and Germany marketing to nonprofits that eventually will serve people in Haiti, Jamaica and elsewhere. Locally, he met recently with members of the Hawaii Homegrown Food Network to organize an inaugural Breadfruit Festival, tentatively set for Sept. 24 in Kona.

"I think it's very exciting," he said of coming events. "I often feel like I don't have enough arms or hours in a day. Occasionally I am a bit overwhelmed with all we're trying to do. For all intents and purposes, it's just Diane and myself, with big, big plans for 2011. The limiting factors are nature, ourselves, time and a host of other things.

"But I love the project. That's why I came onboard."

For her part, Ragone mentioned a recent TV documentary that described the potato being introduced to Europe 500 years ago, at which time people called the tuber bland and insipid.

"But look at where it is today," she said.

Likewise, although breadfruit may not be familiar to palates in areas like West Africa, "we could see major impacts from planting breadfruit, definitely within 20 years. If we planted hundreds of thousands of breadfruit trees, I think in 100 years we could see huge agroforests. I envision a huge difference in food production within our lifetime, within a decade," she said.

Meanwhile, she said a new breadfruit cookbook is in the works with "so many wonderful ways to eat breadfruit." She and colleagues plan to revitalize breadfruit statewide by educating people on when and how to harvest, and how to prepare and use breadfruit.

Ian Cole said, "I make really, really yummy breadfruit crab cakes that my neighbors and my friends in Hana all love and go crazy for."

Ian's Hana-style Crab Cakes:

1 large or several small ripe breadfruit

2 or 3 fresh jalapeno chilies

1/2 to 1 pound fresh crab meat (or steamed fish, flaked)

1 large Kula onion, diced

1/3 cup chopped cilantro

1/3 cup grated Parmesan cheese

3 or 4 teaspoons red pepper flakes or to taste

2 or 3 teaspoons Old Bay seasoning or to taste

Hawaiian salt

Juice of 2 or 3 limes

Splash of beer

Peanut or sunflower oil

Dipping sauce:

2 or 3 tablespoons ponzu sauce

1 cup plain yogurt

3 or 4 teaspoons wasabi powder or to taste

Steam breadfruit thoroughly.

Roast jalapenos on grill or cook in a pan over medium heat until they begin to "sweat," then dice.

In a bowl, combine crab, onion, cilantro, cheese, jalapenos, red pepper flakes, Old Bay seasoning, generous amount of Hawaiian salt, lime juice and beer; set aside.

Cool breadfruit enough to handle, but while still warm, cut chunks from skin and add to bowl with crab mixture. Coat hands lightly with oil; then knead mixture thoroughly until a uniform consistency is achieved. Form into cakes, stack them on a plate and cover with a damp towel.

In a cast-iron skillet or good pan, heat one-quarter inch of peanut or sunflower oil. Cook crab cakes until golden brown, and place in oven set at 200 degrees to keep warm until serving.

Mix dipping-sauce ingredients. If making ahead, wasabi will become more potent the longer it sits.




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"I just want to really encourage people to grow and eat more 'ulu," she said.

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