



Off-Road Chicken

Hawaii has its own style of barbecue, and it tastes best where you'd least expect

BY SARAH ROSE PHOTOS BY TONY NOVAK CLIFFORD

> I TURN THE CORNER AT MAKAPUU POINT ON THE SOUTHERN SHORE OF OAHU, SCOPING out lunch. To do so in earnest means rolling down the window. The sign I'm looking for is a plume of smoke. On voggy days like this, I can sometimes smell the smoke before I see it. So far, nothing. I drive north through the cowboy country of Waimanalo. And there it is: a black cloud billowing from under a giant banyan tree at Waimanalo Elementary School. Lunch, huli-huli style, is ready.

Hawaiian road food can be counted among the world's great culinary attractions: you'll find pineapple stands, shrimp trucks and bags of pickled mango. But huli-huli chicken rises above them all. It is basically a smoked chicken with a Hawaiian twist — or turn, as the case may be. In the Hawaiian language, "huli" means to flip over, as in: "You win the canoe race?"

"Nah, we hulled."

I pull into the schoolyard, which is full of cars on this Saturday. People line up at the smoking grill, offering a *shaka* to Henry Flores and Kenny Torres, who have been serving huli-huli chicken along these roads for 14 years.

"Hey, where you been?" asks Kenny, every customer an old friend.

"Ready?" Henry asks, placing a wire rack over 60 halved chickens.

"Huli!" Kenny answers, and together they flip the entire tray of meat in an elegant gastronomic ballet.

The smell alone is worth paying for. But there's more to it than aroma and profit. This is a fundraiser for the local elementary school. Due to the state's budget crisis, these huli-huli fundraisers are everywhere. And they've created some interesting competition.

"I came for a vacation and I'm still on it," Tom Lackey told me earlier. He stood next to a hand-built auto-rotating chicken pit. Tom sells chicken twice a week at the Pepe'ekeo Farmers Market on the Big Island. He arrived in 1969 as a tourist, and from the looks of it, the Connecticut native is wearing the same Hawaiian cowboy hat he bought on that trip. The standard grass was worn through, all brim and no crown, and a shock of white hair

peeked past the broken reeds. He wore a meat thermometer clipped to the pocket of his green aloha shirt. "Now the only time I'm ever cold is when I reach into the cooler for a beer."

Tom claims his sauce, with only five ingredients, is the best on the islands. He gave me a taste on my finger: Ginger? Yes. Soy sauce? Yes. Brown sugar? Yes. Garlic? Yes. But I couldn't figure out the liquid that binds it all.

"Is it beer?" I asked. No. Chicken in

hand, I turned to leave, and Tom whispered in my ear: *pineapple juice*.

Back in Honolulu while driving down Nimitz Highway, I couldn't help but notice a giant huli-huli stand right next to a Hilo Hattie souvenir shop. Is McHuli chicken next?

I pulled over and saw a pit at least 25 feet long, with whole chickens rolling across the brand-new huli chicken conveyor belt. A middle-aged woman with freckles and a smile rang up my order.

Huli sauce was created to be Hawaii's version of teriyaki more than 50 years ago, but Huli has since become synonymous with fundraising on the islands.

It was Kristina Shimabukuro, the proprietor, who can cook 20,000 birds in a day, raising \$80,000 to buy uniforms for the high-school football

team or new gear for the fire station.

"I never finished school," she said, placing my chickens in a foam container. "This is my education."

As a child in Vietnam, she attended school six days a week. On the seventh she went to classical cooking school to please her French father. Her secret is simpler than Tom Lackey's: The chicken is dusted with salt and paprika. The skin on mine was crisp, the meat succulent. It would be an elegant dish anywhere, even on the side of the highway.

"This is freedom. I decide my own fate," Kristina said proudly.

Back in Waimanalo, Kenny and Henry's chickens have all sold out. They're chiding the customer who purchased the last 10 chickens. "I think we'll have to cull some moa," Kenny says, referring to the Polynesian jungle fowl that freely roam all over Hawaii.

With the beach air and the kiawe-wood smoke, I'm content to tuck into the chicken right there under the banyan tree. As I tear off a drumstick, the amber sauce lingers between thigh and leg before dripping free. I take a bite. Sweet and smoky, juicy and fruity. A little bit Asian, a little bit mainland — tastes like Hawaii to me. ■ ISLANDS.COM/taste



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Chicken Adobo (Philippines)

The meat is marinated in garlic and vinegar for two, sometimes three days. Tip: You'll need a tissue.

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Jerk Chicken (Jamaica)

Smoking was first used to repel insects and preserve the meat. Tip: Don't forget the ground cinnamon.

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Chicken Feet (Hong Kong)

With enough bullion and soy sauce, and with a tub of oil in the deep fryer, toes can be tasty. Tip: Trim the nails.

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