

# Strawberries

## IN HAWAI'I

BY MEGHAN MINER MURRAY

**S**WEET AND SUCCULENT STRAWBERRIES CONCENTRATE springtime sunshine into summertime treats on the U.S. Mainland. But thanks to Hawai'i's more consistent daylight hours, local growers can bring berries to market virtually year-round. And that's not the only reason Hawai'i-grown berries are superior—local fruits pack an unparalleled flavor punch when compared to those shipped from California, Hawai'i's primary source of strawberries. The rose relative bears a finicky fruit: easily bruised, highly perishable and one that begins converting sugar to starch shortly after plucking. Strawberries picked a little too early—as farms often do when they are packaged for long transit—remain underripe and actually continue to lose sweetness the longer they go unconsumed than those picked at eaten closer to peak ripeness.

Kula Country Farms on the slopes of Maui's Haleakala has been growing strawberries for 18 years and is Maui's largest berry grower. Its fields blanket 11 to 12 acres of the 70-acre fourth-generation family farm—it's the second-largest crop for them behind the island's namesake onions. Owner and farmer Chauncy Monden says his family is constantly testing new varieties—they've even tried hydroponics—to try to get the best tasting fruit. But the farm's biggest strawberry asset is its variable elevation spanning 2,200 to 3,800 feet.



Kula Country Farms 12-acre strawberry field in Kula, Maui.

"We try to play with that sometimes," says Monden. "We can mimic [some of the growing conditions of] Southern California all the way up to Northern California. There, in the fall, the big production will start in Orange County or Mexico and then it will move up the coast to Santa Maria, Oxnard and then it will move up the coast to Watsonville to end the season. So, we kind of follow that pattern on our farm. And we do get a different result. We can plant the same plant in the same month and, at a high elevation, it will come out like a month later ... This way we can extend the season and diversify the risk."

If Hawai'i's strawberries are extra sweet and can span a longer growing season, why aren't all farmers growing them?

As with most crops, there's a catch.

"The challenge is [strawberries] are not bred for us here. We've gotta make do with the varieties we can get and try to make it work," says Monden. "Our climate's a little wetter than California. In the wet season we've gotta strip the berries and just throw them away."

Luis Rincon, patriarch of Rincon Family Farms in Hawai'i Island's Waimea—another large strawberry grower with 19 acres—agrees—"It's a challenging craft"—but cites different reasons. Though his fields lack the elevation variation of Kula Country Farms—all are between 2,200 to 2,400 feet—the region's more arid climate means he doesn't suffer the same spoilage issues with rainfall. "They grow well here," says Rincon. "But every variety has their resistance for different things. Some are weaker than others. Every so many years, we have to go through different varieties ... to trial them. We plant 2,000 to 3,000 plants just to see what they do. If they do good, then you plant more."

Unlike Kula Country Farms, which plants twice a year, Rincon Family Farms only plants once, with fruit ripening around Christmas and the middle of February. It's all just too much work for a small operation, he says—from procuring



Local strawberries beginning to ripen.

the runners to plant from California and Canada to adapting those plants to grow in Hawai'i's conditions, and, especially, finding workers to pick the ripe berries. "Nobody wants to bend down eight hours a day," he says.

For that problem, at least, Kula Country Farms has found a clever solution. Between February and June, they allow strawberry fans of all ages to pick their own cartons of peak-ripe berries. It even remained open during this year's pandemic, providing an essential

opportunity for both fresh produce and the chance to get outdoors when other options were shuttered. "It's a great way to expose kids to agriculture and show them how things grow," says Monden.

Despite the challenges, says Rincon, "marketing is excellent—there's not a problem with that." With the lush red berries on display regularly from small growers throughout the state, they practically beg to be eaten. "We actually can't produce enough to meet the demand." 🍓