

Poi

~~Read the book~~
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his was no ordinary meal. Fine woven mats, covering the ground, were almost hidden under the fresh leaves of the *ti* plant and tropical blossoms. Spread across this bed of beauty were fruits of the land and sea, the riches of the Islands: pyramids of coconuts, sugar cane, pineapples, guavas, bananas, man-

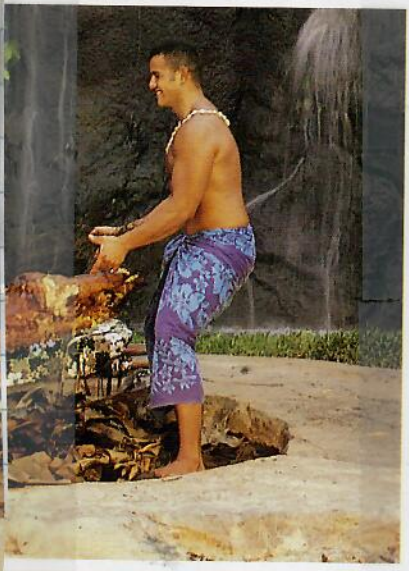
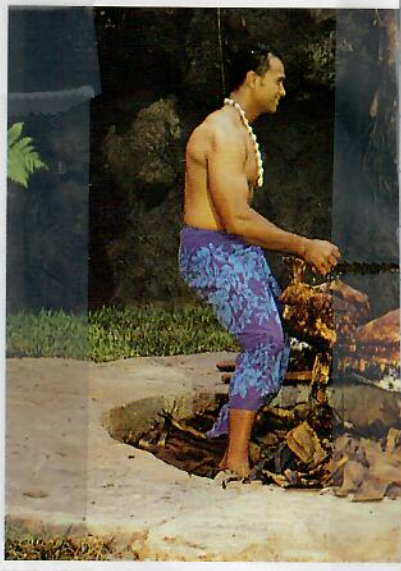
which they were cooked. Golden 'ilima blossoms floated in silver bowls, ready to refresh stained dining fingers. Chicken, pigeon and native duck were roasted to a crisp. Bowls spilled over with mullet, snapper, crab, eel, squid and lobster. Poi, a staple food of the Islands, pounded smooth from the taro root, was served in generous quantities.

Small wonder that historian and author O.A. Bushnell, describing the lavish Hawaiian feast held a century ago,

It changed the customs with one symbolic act. He sat down for a ceremonial dinner with the royal women, thereby abolishing the *kapu*, or the rule against family dining.

Early accounts of life in Honolulu describe massive feasts. Reports from these gala events, including menu, music and dance, were carried in the Hawaiian-language newspapers. One could read how the monarchs entertained visiting European royalty. An account of one event hosted by King Kamehameha III listed 271 hogs roasted in earthen pit ovens, 482 calabashes of poi, 1,820 fresh coconuts and other delights—a challenge to cater at the best of times, but an especially complex affair without the benefits of refrigeration. King David Kalākaua invited so many guests to his 50th birthday party that they had to be fed in shifts of 500. One description of a gala feast used, for the first time, the term *lū'au*, taken from a favorite dish made with young taro leaves, coconut milk and chicken or octopus. The name stuck.

Traditional feasts could last for days. In her book, *Nānā i ke Kumu*, Hawaiian scholar Mary Kawena Pukui describes different types of *lū'au* and the strict rules dictating what would be prepared and served. Life-changing events such as birth, death and marriage were honored with a *lū'au* gathering. On confirmation of a first child on the way, the father of the mother would begin to raise a pig which would later be served at the *'aha'aina māwaewae* feast. The celebration took place within 24 hours after the child was born. Mullet and taro leaf were required along with poi, shrimp, seaweed and crab—each dish thought to



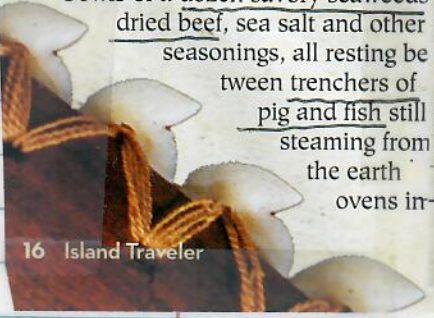
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goes and oranges; platters of baked taro, sweet potatoes, breadfruit, onions, chili peppers and pears; and bowls of a dozen savory seaweeds dried beef, sea salt and other seasonings, all resting between trenchers of pig and fish still steaming from the earth ovens in

said: "Never in my whole life had my nose been treated to so many enticing aromas, my stomach to so many assaults upon its strength."

Joy of the Feast

In early times, Hawaiian men and women did not dine together. Some foods were even forbidden to women for day-to-day dining and royal celebrations. In 1819, King Kamehameha



inspire the health and well-being of the child.

Another major family celebration was, and often still is, the *'aha'aina pālala*, a baby's first birthday lū'au. Centuries ago, this event had strict ceremonial rules requiring special foods. If the baby was to be the first born of the ruling chief, then gifts of high value were stored away in advance for the child. Feasting and hula honored the baby. Chants, or *haku mele*, honoring the name of the child were composed in the belief that they might influence the life of the newborn. Some of these songs are still sung, accompanied by hula passed down through many generations. Today the "baby lū'au" is a chance to gather friends and family to share food, stories and music, and possibly present a chant or hula for well-being. Then, as the local joke goes, you "eat not till you're full, but till you're tired!"

The Royal Treatment

Historical journals recount the time in 1889 when Robert Louis Stevenson sailed from the continent to enjoy the hospitality of King Kalākaua, who hosted a magnificent lū'au in the writer's honor. The dinner, complete with cut crystal and fine china, was only slightly less formal than normal gala events that regularly took place in the king's palace. Kalākaua and male guests wore dark jackets. The ladies wore long-sleeve gowns. Everyone wore a lei. Princess Lili'uokalani, later to be queen, sat on the king's right, and Mrs. Thomas Stevenson, the writer's mother, sat on the king's left. The only significant difference between the Waikīkī feast and an 'Iolani Palace dinner was that at

Waikīkī, the king and his guests were seated on the ground.

Roast pig, steamed *laulau*, poi, fish, sweet potato, seaweed and coconut were staples of the early feasts, but as early as the 1800s the lū'au menu began to change. Missionaries are credited with the addition of cake. Coconut milk was thickened to become *haupia* pudding. Whaling ships arrived stocked with salted fish from the Pacific Northwest. Mixed with onions, chili peppers and tomatoes, *lomilomi* salmon became a favorite dish, and it still is common at lū'au and lunch buffets.

As different nationalities came to work Hawai'i's sugar-cane fields, each added favorite dishes and new flavors to Island gatherings. The Chinese brought chicken long rice made with bean thread noodles. Chicken adobo came from the Philippines. White rice and sushi were brought from Japan. Raw fish has been translated by Hawai'i's chefs into dozens of kinds of marinated raw fish, or *poke*, from delicate to spicy. The lū'au continues to evolve, a mirror of the melting pot of cultures that flavors modern Hawai'i.

Kālua Treat

A lū'au is always on the "must-do" list for Hawai'i visitors, and it's fun and fascinating to watch as the pig is prepared and cooked in a traditional *imu*. Large logs are laid in a pit. Rocks cover the logs. The logs are burned, the rocks heated lava-hot, and then covered with banana stock. The pig is lowered into the imu in a hammock of wire. More banana leaves and burlap bags and layers of wet canvas cover the pig. Ten or so hours later the covers are carefully removed, and the cooked pig is lifted from the pit on a carrier and moved to a spot where the moist morsels of roasted meat can be loaded onto platters for the feast.

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