

Golf Oysters

PHOTOS COURTESY FOUR SEASONS RESORT HUALALAI



Above left, Kelsey Makida wades into Pūnāwai pond, a water trap-cum-oyster farm on the fifth hole of Four Seasons Resort Hualalai's golf course. The Kumamoto oysters not only clean the pond and help sustain a healthy aquatic ecosystem, they're a coveted menu item at the resort's restaurants (above right).

Sometimes, on Thursday mornings, a homeowner at Hualalai Resort on Hawai'i Island steps out onto his lānai to watch the harvest at Pūnāwai pond, a water feature by the fifth hole on the resort's golf course. Then, in the evening, he'll head down to one of the Four Seasons' restaurants and order the freshly plucked and shucked oysters on the half shell. "Farm-to-table" has become a cliché, but the Four Seasons Resort Hualalai is likely the only hotel to lay claim to golf-to-table seafood. It's also one of only two commercial farms growing oysters for consumption in Hawai'i—the other is Kualoa Ranch on O'ahu.

In 2001, David Chai, the then-director of natural resources at the Four Seasons Resort Hualalai, designed the 2.3-acre pond, which pumps in

underground seawater, and a few years later, introduced oysters to help clear the water of algae. Initially, he populated the pond with Hawai'i's native oysters, but they didn't grow fast enough. He then tried Eastern oysters, but they grew too quickly—Nicole Tachibana, who replaced Chai after he retired recently, remembers the bivalves ballooning to a size nearly the length of her hand. The Hualalai chefs fried them up into pō' boy sandwiches, but requested a smaller shellfish. The aquaculturists found a happy medium in the Pacific and Kumamoto oysters, of which they harvest about a thousand per week for the Four Seasons' restaurants.

But "pondside is the best way to eat it, directly from the pond to the plate," Tachibana says. Hualalai offers a tour of the operation for guests and

club members, accompanied by an oyster-and-champagne pairing set up on the edge of the pond. During the tour, aquaculture specialist Jason Falcone points out some of the pond's other inhabitants, including native awa (milkfish) and 'ōpae huna (also known as feeble shrimp). "The pond has to serve an aesthetic purpose," Falcone says, "but it was also built to be its own ecosystem." The roots of vegetation growing on the floating islands in the middle of the pond control the nutrient balance and have also become a nesting habitat for rare native ae'o (Hawaiian stilt birds) in the spring. Also part of the ecosystem: the occasional errant golf ball. But, Falcone says, "you'll really have to slice it bad to get it in here."

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