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Mother and son keep laulau tradition alive

By Lynette Lo Tom, Special to the Star-Advertiser

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Eleanor Dodds and her son, Ken Weir, estimate that they have made a million laulau together. They both inherited the family laulau technique from Ken's paternal grandmother.

Ken Weir has many friends when he is steaming a huge pot of laulau in his Ahuimanu garage. Neighbors just happen to stop by when they smell that unique scent of taro leaves, pork and fish or his vegan version. They know he will share the delicious bundles, since he usually makes 100 at a time for family and friends.

He learned the techniques from his paternal grandmother, Marian Toda Weir of Hawaii Kai. His mother, Eleanor Dodds, said she continued the tradition in the 1980s, when she was a single parent feeding three children, running a lunchwagon called Leilani's. Weekend laulau making involved the whole family.

Weir continues the family tradition today, and he estimates that he has made more than a million laulau over 40-plus years.

Weir is executive chef at the student dining hall at Hawaii Pacific University's Aloha Tower complex. He says his grandmother and mother's cooking got him into the culinary world.

For years, Weir has also been making a healthy, vegan laulau. The kupuna (elders) have doctors who tell them "no more fat, no more salt," he said.

His vegan laulau is comforting and delicious, and can be enjoyed without guilt.

"It's a perfect meal for kupuna," he says.

Weir starts with the familiar leaves of the taro plant. He uses three large leaves or up to eight smaller ones, then adds a colorful assortment of unpeeled

kabocha squash, ulu (breadfruit), uala (sweet potato) and either firm or deep-fried tofu. No salt is added.

Most of the assembled vegetables are raw, but Weir steams the breadfruit for 10 minutes so it can be peeled easily and the core removed. To keep it vegan, it's important not to cook this version with the traditional pork and fish laulau.

Laulau needs to be steamed for hours to prevent undercooked luau leaves from causing an unpleasant itchy feeling in your throat.

The end result is a generous laulau that can satisfy even a carnivore. Its flavors and textures are interesting, and the smell of the luau leaves permeates the vegan feast.

Weir and his wife, Noel Nahale, also make ever-popular traditional laulau. Weir claims there is no comparison to the taste of freshly cooked laulau.

"Everything just melts together."

His mother adds: "I just love the fat so bad."

Weir uses two cuts of pork: one piece of the leaner butt or shoulder, and a piece of pork belly. He says traditional laulau must include the belly fat. He also includes fish that he salts himself, usually supplied by his fisher friends and family. The norm is salmon (from family in Alaska) or mahimahi, but he's used all types of fish.

Another element of his version is a piece of peeled sweet potato; he prefers the Okinawan variety. A sprinkling of Hawaiian salt is added to the bundle, then the laulau is steamed for five hours.

The couple has experimented using pipikaula, chicken, lup cheong (Chinese sausage) and spinach. But most often they stick to their vegan and traditional versions.

The two make laulau so often that they have their system down to a science. In fact, Weir might set the record for how fast he can assemble a laulau, wrap it in ti leaves and tie it with string into a tasty present.

All his laulau are so melt-in-your-mouth delicious, the aroma of them cooking is enough to inspire neighbors to stop to by and say hi.

WEIR FAMILY LAULAU

Select your type of filling, vegan or traditional. Each set of ingredients is enough for one laulau; multiply quantities to make more. The cooking instructions are the same for either choice.

>> **Healthy Laulau:**

3 to 8 luau leaves, washed and stems removed

1 (2-by-3-inch) piece kabocha squash, seeded but not peeled

2 (1-by-2-inch) pieces ulu (breadfruit, see note)

2 (1-by-2-inch) pieces uala (sweet potato), peeled (Okinawan variety preferred)

1 (2-by-3-inch) piece firm or deep-fried tofu, drained

2 ti leaves, cleaned (spines can remain)

>> **Traditional Pork and Fish Laulau:**

3 to 8 luau leaves, washed and stems removed

1 (2-by-2-1/2-inch) piece pork belly

1 (2-by-2-1/2-inch) piece pork butt or shoulder

1 (1-by-1-inch) piece salted salmon or mahimahi (see note)

1 (1-by-2-inch) piece uala (sweet potato), peeled (Okinawan variety preferred)

1/2 teaspoon Hawaiian salt

2 ti leaves, cleaned (spines can remain)

Stack luau leaves and top with vegetable and tofu pieces, or with pork, fish and sweet potato. Roll into a ball.

Place a ti leaf vertically in front of you; wrap it around the ball. Place a second ti leaf horizontally and wrap it around the first. Tie bundle with string, double-wrapping the vegan laulau to identify it later. Try to make each laulau the same size for even cooking.

Cook vegan laulau separately from traditional. Fill pot with about 1 inch water. Insert steamer basket or make a coil with rolled-up foil, then place a dish on it so dish is above the water line. Add laulau bundles. Bring water to boil, then reduce heat to low and steam at least 5 hours. Add more water as needed.

Unwrap to eat immediately or cool and freeze. Steam 1 hour to reheat if frozen.

Notes:

>> **To prepare breadfruit:** Steam it whole for 10 minutes, then discard the core, peel and cut it into pieces.

>> **To salt fish:** sprinkle with Hawaiian salt and let sit for one or two nights.

*Approximate nutritional information, per healthy laulau (based on fried tofu):
320 calories, 18 g total fat, 2.5 g saturated fat, no cholesterol, 25 mg sodium, 22*

g carbohydrate, 2 g fiber, 9 g sugar, 17 g protein. Approximate nutritional information, per traditional laulau: 440 calories, 35 g total fat, 12 g saturated fat, 80 mg cholesterol, 1,200 mg sodium, 9 g carbohydrate, 3 g fiber, 3 g sugar, 22 g protein.

Lynette Lo Tom, author of “The Chinese Kitchen,” is fascinated by old-fashioned foods. Contact her at 275-3004 or via instagram at [brightlightcookery](#). Nutritional analysis by Joannie Dobbs, Ph.D., C.N.S.

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