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Hawaii's Back Yard

Cheryl Chee Tsutsumi

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COURTESY STEEL GRASS CHOCOLATE FARM
A guide at Steelgrass Chocolate Farm reveals to an attentive group the secrets of growing cacao trees.

Farm plants seed for diversifying crops

Tony Lydgate's roots run as deep in Kauai soil as the 200 species of plants and trees that flourish at Steelgrass Farm, the beautiful



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Just when you
thought it couldn't
get any easier...

organic garden in Wailua where he lives and works.

Lydgate is the grandson of John Mortimer Lydgate, the minister, philanthropist and champion of Hawaiian culture after whom Lydgate State Park in Kapaa was named. Although Lydgate was born and raised on Manhattan island, he always felt a close connection to Kauai, thanks to his father's fond memories of growing up there and periodic visits with relatives in Haena.

For 20 years, Lydgate lived in Northern California, where he enjoyed a career as a designer of furniture, sculpture and architectural interiors.

However, he yearned to settle on Kauai, but it wasn't until 1998 that circumstances enabled him to do that and to help his children, Emily and Will, acquire the lush 8-acre parcel that has become Steelgrass Farm.

Although the property is owned by his children, it's clear that Lydgate is not "simply a hired hand" as he modestly claims. He played a major role in transforming the parcel, which at the outset was "a bad kind of jungle," he said, teeming with invasive introduced species such as lantana, christmasberry, albizia and African tulip.

Armed with chain saws, shovels and pickaxes, Lydgate, Emily, Will and some friends removed most of the existing vegetation a little at a time, every day, over two years.

"We then had this marvelous blank canvas," said Lydgate, "and when it came time to plant, we were guided by three principles. First, we wanted to supply some of our own food, so we planted a lot of fruits and vegetables. Second, we also wanted to feed our spirits, so we envisioned a lovely, tranquil environment. Third, we wanted our plantings to be useful for decorations, medicines, crafts and construction. Our goal was to create a landscape that was sustainable, edible and meditative."

Steelgrass Chocolate Farm Tour

» **Place:** Steelgrass Farm, Wailua Homesteads, Kauai. Directions given at the time of booking.

» **Offered:** 9 a.m. Mondays and Wednesdays

» **Cost:** \$60 per person; free for children 12 and younger. Custom tours (same price) available on other days and at other times for groups of five or more.

» **Call:** (808) 821-1857. Reservations required.

» **E-mail:** info@steelgrass.org

» **Web site:** www.steelgrass.org

» **Notes:** The farm's three-bedroom Hawaiian plantation-style main house sleeps six and rents for \$145 per night, double occupancy, plus a \$95 cleaning fee. Additional adults pay \$25 per person per night; free for accompanying children under 18. The main house features a large lanai overlooking the gardens, a contemporary art collection, book and movie libraries and a fully equipped kitchen. Also on the grounds is a recording studio that can be booked for projects of all kinds. Steelgrass' ongoing Power of Music workshop and concert series enables participants to listen to, learn from and perform with emerging traditional and contemporary artists from around the world.

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- » Once a rocker girl, always a rocker girl
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- » Isle Republicans need to redefine themselves
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- » Gathering Place: Get ready to put stamp of approval on Tomcats
- » According to Joe
- » Gentle ghosts of Christmas past
- » Letters

Columns | Dec. 23

**Corky's Hawaii:
Returns Jan. 1**
Corky Trinidad

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COURTESY STEEL GRASS CHOCOLATE FARM
People wait to taste the sweet pulp surrounding cacao seeds as they are scooped out of a newly opened pod.

THE FOCUS of this oasis is bamboo, vanilla and cacao, all of which, they believe, hold great commercial promise. It will take a few more years for those precious plantings to reach a level of maturity suitable for retailing, so the farm's main "product" now is public education -- promoting the potential of diversified, sustainable agriculture on Kauai.

"We've shared our knowledge, both successes and failures, by giving informal tours to our neighbors ever since we purchased the property," said Lydgate. "We've also held a few chocolate workshops, which featured demonstrations by a professional chocolatier from San Francisco."

Those activities evolved into the twice-weekly, 2 1/2-hour Steelgrass Chocolate Farm Tour: Chocolate from Branch to Bar, which launched in August. Hawaii is the only state in the nation where the cacao tree grows. As the tour's name suggests, it covers the spectrum of chocolate production, from growing the cacao trees to sampling the world's favorite confection, which has been touted for its health benefits as an antioxidant, mood enhancer and mild stimulant.

"We do blind tastings of 10 fine dark chocolates, including Valrhona (France), Amedei (Italy) and Dagoba (United States)," said Lydgate. "Everybody gets a pencil and paper to record their impressions of each one."

You'll also pick up fascinating tidbits about dozens of other tropical species. For example, you'll learn that steelgrass is a nickname for bamboo, a member of the grass family that's as strong as steel and widely used in construction in Asia and South America. The Lydgates recognize many other practical uses for it, including furniture, flooring, artwork and the making of musical instruments.

Kokua Line: Returns Jan. 3

June Watanabe

Island Images

S-B Photographers

Honolulu Lite

Charles Memminger

Weekly Eater

Nadine Kam

Hawaii's Back Yard

Cheryl Tsutsumi

Press Box

Paul Arnett

Water Ways

Ray Pendleton

Secrets to Success

Deborah & John-Paul Micek

Editorial Cartoon: Returns Jan. 2

Corky Trinidad

Under the Sun: Returns Jan. 6

Cynthia Oi

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COURTESY STEEL GRASS CHOCOLATE FARM
Rare and costly dark chocolates from makers all
over the world ready for a blind taste-testing.

You'll discover there's only a one-day window to hand-pollinate the delicate vanilla flowers, which yield the fragrant bean pods that sell for between \$5 and \$10 each and are second only to saffron as the most expensive spice in the world.

You'll savor star fruit, strawberry guavas and Kau oranges; crush and sniff the aromatic leaves of allspice and Kaffir lime, both popular in cooking; and peel long thin strips from papyrus stalks, which the ancient Egyptians combined to make paper.

"I love the opportunity I have to share Kauai's agricultural richness with visitors and our hopes for its future," said Lydgate, who sees himself as a modern-day John the Baptist and Johnny Appleseed.

"The idea is to get people to plant a few cacao trees, vanilla plants and bamboo in their yards. Over time we'd have a lot of small farmers, which would provide protection against storm damage and mono-crop disease vulnerability."

Obviously pleased, Lydgate notes that more than 1,500 cacao seedlings from Steelgrass Farm have been planted on Kauai in the past year.

"In the future," he said, "we hope to establish a Kauai Cacao Cooperative and create a new industry here.

"The Steelgrass Chocolate Farm Tour is the story of how our family realized a longtime dream about creating an environment to feed the spirit as well as the body. We hope the people who come here leave with renewed enthusiasm for doing the same in their own lives."

Cheryl Chee Tsutsumi is a Honolulu-based free-lance writer and Society of American Travel Writers award winner.

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