



# KUKUI

THE TREE THAT KEEPS ON GIVING

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“Lift your eyes and look up *mauka*, towards a valley, for a stream that looks like silver.” That’s how my mother taught us to recognize the silvery, gray-green foliage of kukui trees that wind through the wet windward valleys of Hawai‘i. Islanders love this tree because it’s the one native plant whose luminous, pale-green groves are identifiable, from a distance, in the mountains.

Also called the “tree of light,” or “candlenut tree,” *Aleurites moluccana* is the official State of Hawai‘i tree, a “canoe plant” with a long history of utility and value to the Polynesians. They discovered that the nuts would last a long time if kept dry, cool and protected from salt water, and that the tiny embryos within the seeds would then grow in new environments. And so, on their double-hulled sailing canoes, they carried kukui on their journeys across vast stretches of the Pacific.

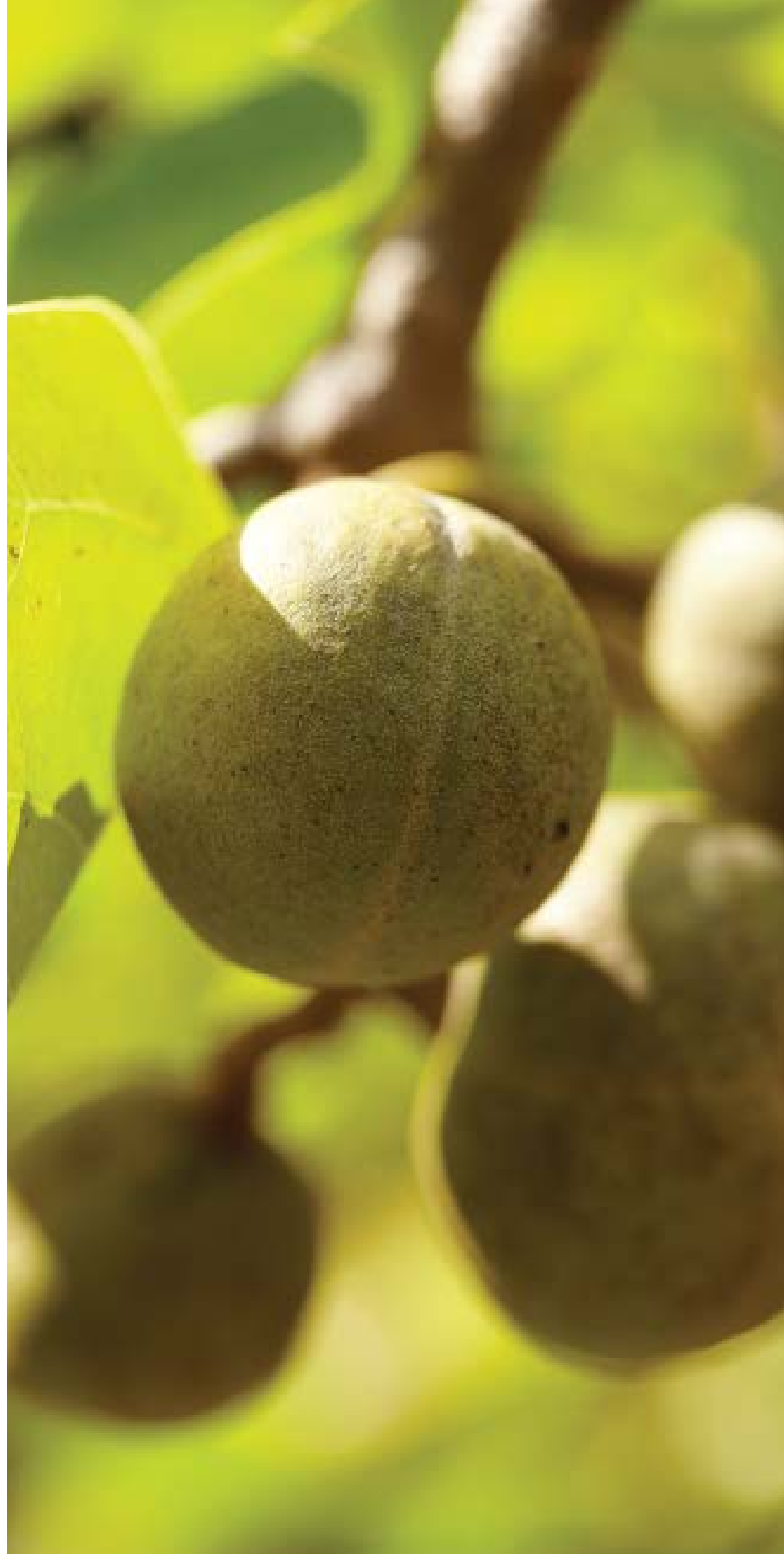
Kukui grows well in warm habitats like Hawai‘i, and as a native of Southeast Asia and a member of the *Euphorbiaceae* family, it has relatives all over the world: poinsettias from Mexico, *banuicalad* (an oil-producing tree) from the Philippines and Tung oil trees from China. Para rubber trees from the Amazon are another kukui “cousin.”

Today voyagers and cultural practitioners still prize the kukui plant for its usefulness in food, dyeing and medicine, while landscapers consider it an urban forest staple that is as attractive as it is drought-tolerant. Schools, too, like to plant kukui because it symbolizes knowledge and enlightenment.

#### THE TREE OF LIGHT

The Hawaiians of old used kukui nut oil to make torches for night hula, *lū‘au* and fishing. They also made candles by roasting the cracked nuts and stringing them on a coconut midrib. As one finished burning, it would ignite the next. Stone lamps, too, were fueled with kukui oil and wicks made of *kapa*.

At sea from their canoes, fishermen were known to chew kukui kernels and blow them out to sea. Its oil was thought to calm the





The Hawaiians used kukui fruit, also called candle-nut, to make torches and candles in pre-contact days. Today, farmers use its porous leaves for mulch and compost.

water and make it glassy, enabling them to peer into the depths and spot the best fish to catch.

In the mountains, kukui provided a safe zone in a wildfire. A seasoned forester once told me, “Heidi, always head for the kukui zone if you’re trapped by a fire.” Why? Because kukui trees store water in their trunks during wet times, giving them a measure of protection from droughts and fires. When they’ve fallen as litter in the forest, the leaves, too, stay moist and cool.

Perhaps that’s why farmers prize kukui leaves for making mulch and soil-building compost, especially in hot, dry coastal areas that need to conserve water resources and improve soil fertility.

#### THE ART OF KUKUI

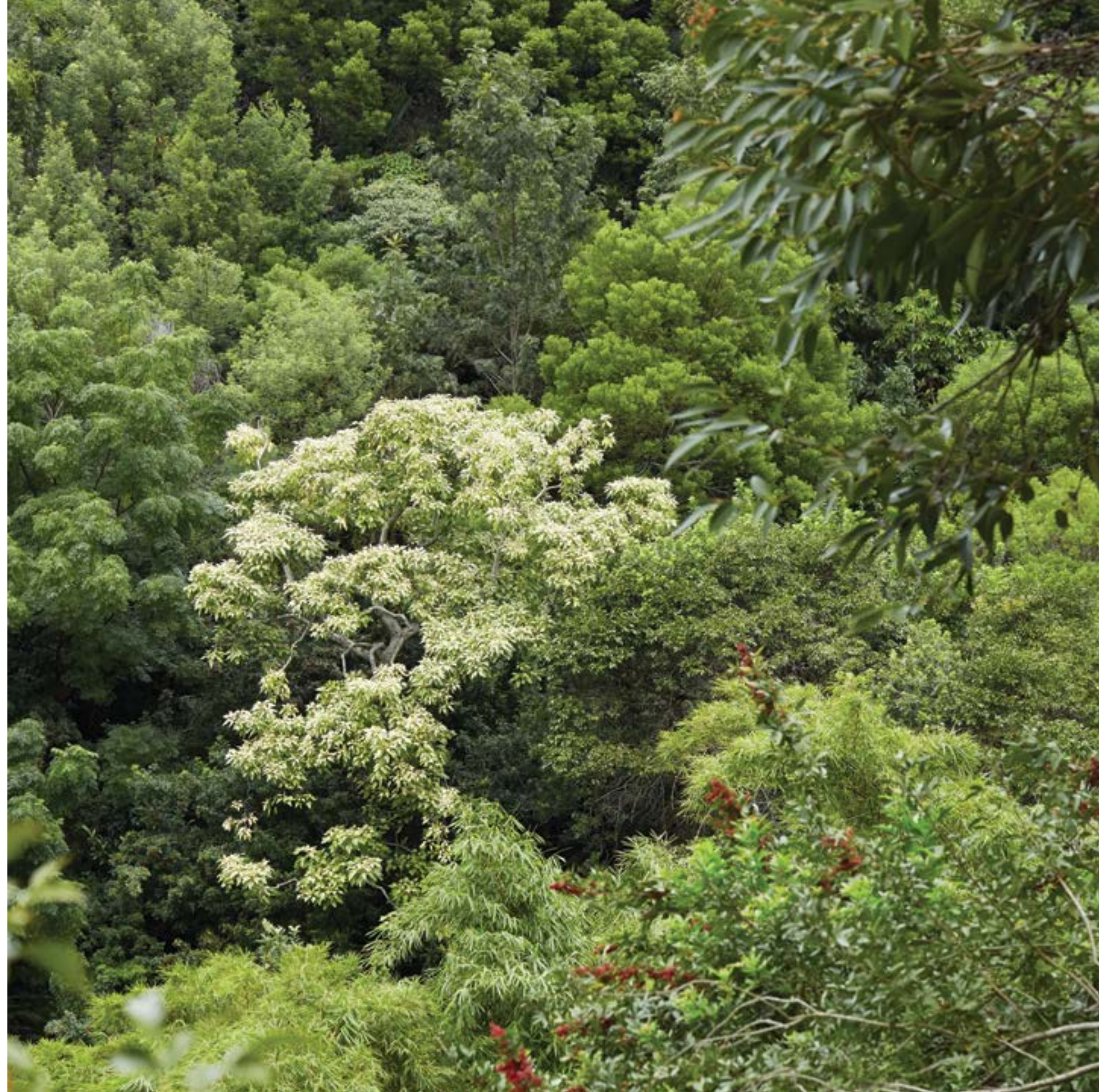
Quilters point to the kukui leaf as a popular motif in their stitched cotton squares, while others use it in their leaf rubbings and crafts.

More familiar is the lei of kukui nuts—polished, rough, whole, cut, black, white or brown. A hospitality staple in Hawai’i, it’s ubiquitous in lei greetings, events and ceremonies and is the official lei for the island of Moloka’i.

Mature black or dark brown nuts are usually the material of choice, but there are variations. The young kukui nuts make white lei. The “teenage” nuts are beige, and the mature nuts, usually highly polished, can also appear in a matte, textured, unpolished black tinged with grey. One of my favorite lei has all the colors of kukui nuts and was a gift from May Moir, who for more than 40 years arranged flowers for the Honolulu Museum of Art.

Kukui lei are often presented to welcome VIP men to Wailea, while women receive fresh flower lei and the children, shell lei.

Kukui is also a tradition at Destination Resorts Hawai’i, where employees receive a brown kukui lei at the start of their employment





Kukui nut lei are popular islandwide. At Destination Resorts Hawai'i, specially engraved white nuts, right, commemorate employee anniversaries in five-year increments.

and a white kukui nut on their yearly anniversaries. Every fifth year, the white kukui nut is specially engraved with the number of years they've worked there, so that, one by one as the years pass, employees can replace the original brown nuts with white kukui in what becomes an ongoing, personalized anniversary lei.

Lei materials also include kukui flowers and leaves. Reminiscent of lilacs, the delicate flowers make stunning lei, as do the silvery leaves with their stems intricately wound. Long-stemmed leaves are

ideal for teaching children: Knot a stem, thread the next stem in, knot it and keep it flat as you build the garland.

Among the quintessential kukui bearers are the regal *pā'u* riders in floral parades. Riding horseback with yards of silk and satin in their voluminous skirts, they use kukui nuts instead of pins in their costumes. The kukui nuts are twisted and tucked into their skirts and waistbands to help keep the fabric in place, while the leaves, flowers and nuts become lei for rider and steed.

I also find kukui nuts a pleasure to collect and hold, a kind of meditative tool. Perhaps that's why the lei make great "worry beads" for travelers in the hurly-burly of airports, or while in flight.

### THE MIGHTY NUT

Before garlic, onions, herbs and spices entered their culinary world, the Hawaiians relied on seaweed and the mighty kukui nut. Their main condiments were various types of *limu* (seaweed) and *'inamona*, a mixture of roasted kukui nuts and Hawaiian salt. While Hawaiians love the labor-intensive *'inamona* and prize its unique flavor, it is an acquired taste, and those with a sensitive *opu* (stomach) had best be aware of its powerful laxative effect. Unlike macadamia nuts, kukui must be roasted.

Also labor intensive, but without such caveats, is the use of the nut in dyeing *kapa*, the bark cloth of the ancients. Kukui was the source of at least three colors of *kapa* dye—black, brown and gray.



Kukui trees are identifiable in the forest, where they grow abundantly, by their wide, silvery-green leaves. Kukui nuts ultimately produce fine kukui oil, right, a staple in spa and beauty products.

Various parts of the plant were used, and *kapa* traditionalists today still use its oil to waterproof *kapa*.

“The outer bark from the trunk and roots creates a beautiful red-brown, and some say the roots are even more intense in color,” says horticulturist Lisa Schattenburg-Raymond, who teaches classes on *kapa*, Hawaiian ethnobotany and Hawaiian fiber arts at University of Hawai‘i Maui College. “This was used to dye *kapa* and is also one of the ingredients in canoe hull paint and in dyeing *olonā* fish nets.” She makes and decorates her own *kapa*, and as a research associate at Bishop Museum, she also spends a lot of time poring over *kapa* archives and exhibitions.

“The color red disappears underwater,” she continues. “It’s the first color in the spectrum to disappear this way, and this hides the

net from the fish. Kukui also preserves the fiber. Those *olonā* nets lasted for over 100 years.”

The soot from burned kukui was mixed with *‘alaea*, a brick-red soil used as coloring matter, to also embellish *kapa*, and kukui oil helped to waterproof it. Raymond has used kukui oil on her own hand-made *kapa* and has found that it saturates the fiber and intensifies the colors.

About making her own kukui oil, she says, “It’s time-consuming. But it’s pleasant to work with, feels nice on my hands and has a scent that is nutty and distinctive.” She also uses the oil on her *ipu* (traditional Hawaiian gourd), where “it makes a burnished shine and deepens the color over time.”

Not surprisingly, the beauty world has discovered kukui, too. Spas throughout Hawai‘i feature various kukui oil treatments because the properties of the oil are considered important for healthy skin metabolism. At Willow Stream Spa at The Fairmont Kea Lani, Maui, kukui and coconut are among the three high-grade, organic healing oils in “Hawaiian Oil Enhancements,” a program that tones, heals and hydrates the skin. Kukui oil’s smoothing and soothing effects also make it popular for *lomi lomi* massage at Spa Grande at Grand Wailea and in facial and skin products throughout the resort. Key to the oil’s success is its versatility.

I recently received some Trader Joe’s kukui lotion, proof that the “canoe plant” of the Polynesians has definitely arrived. 🌿