

FRESH FROM THE 'ĀINA

EXECUTIVE CHEF MARC MCDOWELL MIXES
HORTICULTURAL SKILLS WITH CULINARY CREATIVITY TO
THE DELIGHT OF MAKENA'S DINING GUESTS

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The garden developed from a desire for sustainability coupled with McDowell's continued culinary experimentation.

Cuban oregano is one of the more exotic herbs found in the chef's garden. (Opposite) McDowell's take on the cemita combines papalo, roasted Kurobuta Heritage pork, Oaxacan cheese and avocado.





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Makena Beach & Golf Resort’s Executive Chef Marc McDowell is both a graduate of the prestigious Culinary Institute of America at Hyde Park and a passionate horticulturist. It is the combination of these connected interests that makes him one of Maui’s most creative chefs.

The resort’s onsite garden provides everything he needs to experiment in his cooking, from staples such as basil and thyme to more exotic edibles such as the French spike lavender that grows a few feet away from a lush hedge of Cuban oregano. There are even a few surprises: A member of the landscaping department identified what McDowell thought was a weed as a cherry tomato-sized eggplant from Laos, which he now plans to use in the kitchen.

Very little is by accident, however. The latest addition to the sprawling garden is pápalo or pápaloquelite, a cilantro mimic from Central America used in Mexican cooking and in Central and South America. Tasting it, one picks up notes of green pepper, cucumber and the soapiness of cilantro. “It’s kind of like gazpacho,” McDowell remarks.

This presence of authentic Hispanic herbs like Mexican oregano, epazote and pápalo doesn’t stem from McDowell’s extensive background in or focus on the region. Rather, he is continually pushing himself, stretching his own skills and repertoire and seeking new flavors and challenges. He discovered pápalo through his reading.

“It was in a book called ‘Exotic Herbs: A Compendium of Exceptional Culinary Herbs’ by Carole Saville,” he says. “The copy was old and crusty by the time I got it, but in its pages I learned about Mrs. Burns’ lemon basil, cilantro and pápalo. We’re going to be doing a lot more Latin stuff now that I’m growing it.”

He proceeds to describe a sandwich called a *cemita*, originally from Puebla, Mexico. The ingredients are typically restricted to meat, cheese, sliced avocado and red sauce on a sesame seed-covered brioche-like bun. McDowell’s version, he explains, will feature “roasted and sliced Kurobuta heritage pork, avocado, Oaxacan cheese, a chipotle pepper puree and pápalo—essential to the sandwich. It’s incredibly tasty, but I couldn’t offer it until I could grow the pápalo. There was no other way to get it.”

The garden itself developed from a desire for sustainability coupled with McDowell’s continued culinary experimentation. “The thought of growing everything I serve stimulated me to plan and develop the garden I had at a former job, where I only had one acre to use,” he says. “The opportunity to use much more land enticed me to Makena and inspired this new garden.”

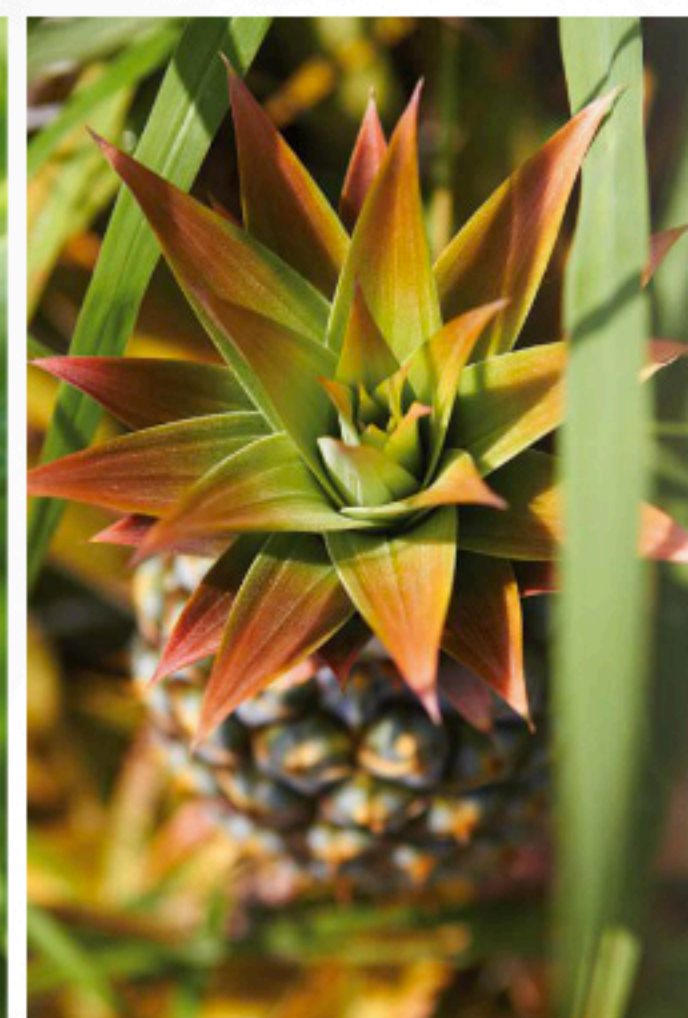
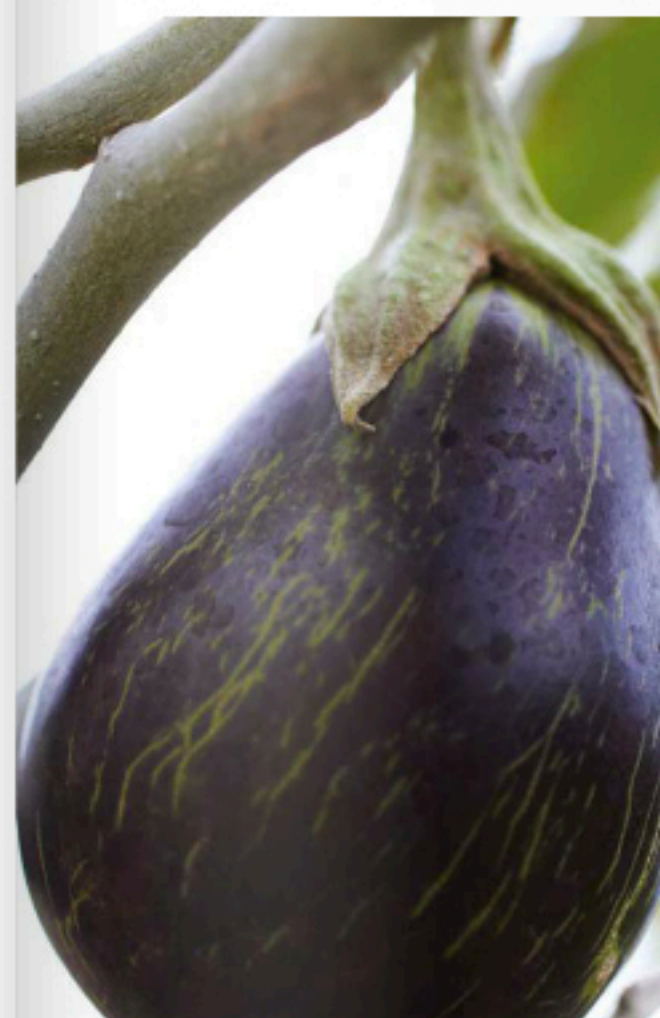
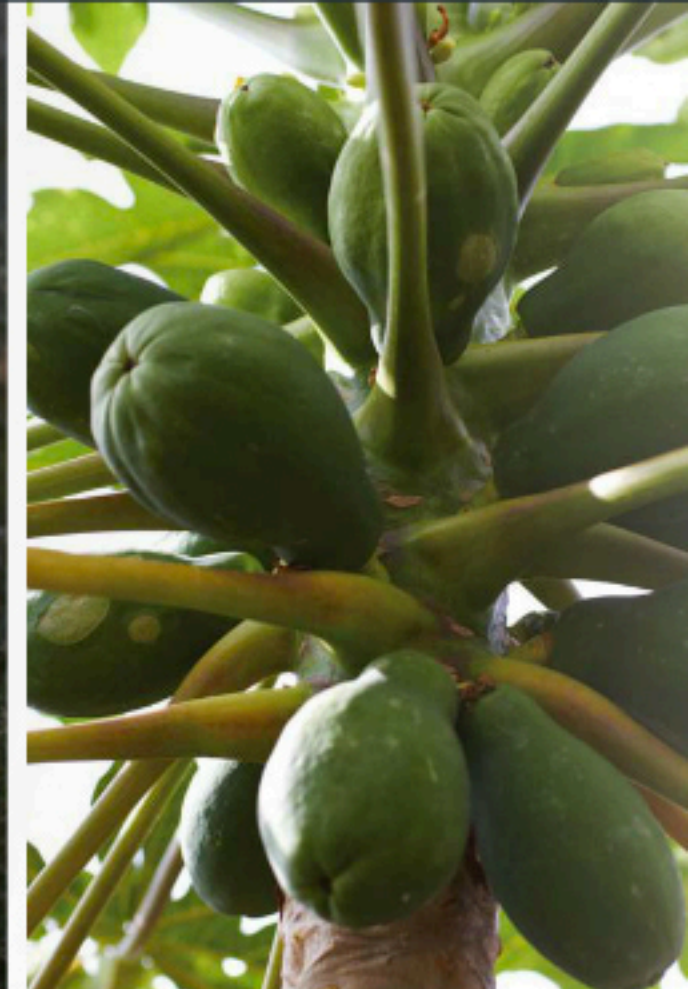
The space continues to grow and evolve. Peach palms have been planted along the garden’s edge and will eventually provide fresh hearts of palm. Non-GMO (genetically modified organism) papaya trees flank the other side. In the middle, a mix of pantry necessities such as basil and thyme mingle with exotic chocolate mint and purple sage seedlings.

With such a bold and experimental attitude, do things ever go wrong when incorporating a new and unusual element into his food? “Yes,” McDowell confirms, shuddering slightly at the memory, “with African blue basil. There was an episode of ‘Iron Chef America,’ where Morimoto went for that herb. He was able to make 10 dishes with it and ultimately won. I realized, ‘I have a lot of African blue basil. I’m going to go crazy with it!’”

But it turns out this particular strain of basil has a robust flavor, akin to camphor and anise. “It’s an extremely strong taste that will easily overpower things if you don’t watch out,” McDowell says. “You know right away: a little too much is too much. It’s about experimenting ahead of time and fine-tuning.”

Experimentation tempered with expertise is a theme in McDowell’s food, but so is a pervasive “do-it-yourself” attitude. “I believe in sourcing the freshest stuff,” he says. “If you can grow or raise or make it yourself, that’s even better. Don’t overcomplicate the food. Yes, your presentation needs to be appealing, but the food itself cannot have flavors that clash.”

Fresh ingredients are key. “If you get something from Mexico, does it have any flavor left by the time it’s shipped



THE FRUITS, VEGETABLES AND HERBS THAT POPULATE THE RESORT’S GARDEN REPRESENT THE FLAVORS OF MANY COUNTRIES AND ARE THE INSPIRATION FOR THE IMAGINATIVE DISHES MCDOWELL CREATES FOR THE RESORT’S RESTAURANTS.

here?” he muses. “Tomatoes, for example, shouldn’t ever be put in the refrigerator; their essence starts to deteriorate. If they arrive refrigerated—because that’s the only way they can get them to you—you’re handcuffing yourself from the start.”

Not everything, however, can be sourced from the resort’s garden. Seasonality plays a role, as do the axis deer that live on the island—a gift from Hong Kong to King Kamehameha V in the 1860s—which wreak regular havoc on the crops. As a result, McDowell looks to Maui’s Kumu

Farms for fresh, organic solutions. They provide nearly everything he can’t grow himself.

Recently, McDowell began experimenting with deer-proof crops. “The deer don’t like the French lavender, and we can use it in the pastry shop,” he says. “It makes a nice sorbet if we match it up with lemon, particularly the sweeter Meyer variety.”

With the thriving garden’s help, McDowell creates culinary magic by blending curiosity, sustainability and passion.