



STALKING THE  
**Wild Bamboo**

The Plant of a Thousand Uses

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INTO THE  
FOREST

(Opposite page) Bamboo forests creak and groan in high winds. (This page) Some species have a tensile strength stronger than steel.



*who is this who needs  
a song without a singer  
sings free as the wind*

—RICHARD CHAMBERLAIN

**If** ever a plant had a voice, a song without a singer, it would be bamboo. The sturdy, hollow stalk is an extension of the human breath, uplifting and comforting humanity through music, ceremony and the arts for as long as anyone can remember. Whether in the pan pipes of the Andes, the shakuhachi of Japan or the nose flutes and implements of Hawai'i, cultural practitioners have long celebrated bamboo for its beauty and utility, and for its layers of meaning.

Kapono'ai Molitau, a Maui kumu hula, has a deep understanding of bamboo and its cultural significance. Molitau's gallery, Native Intelligence in Wailuku, carries locally made implements essential to hula: the *'obe hano ihu*, the bamboo nose flute; the *pū'ili*, the bamboo rattles used in hula; and the *'obe kāpala*, the carved bamboo stamps essential in printing and embellishing kapa. Also used in hula are *kā'ēke'ēke*, bamboo pipes of various lengths, held vertically and tapped on the floor or ground to create a haunting rhythm for chanters and dancers. From ethereal to percussive, the instruments are used in ceremonies and hula, and Molitau says they are essential to a dancer's learning.

"In our hālau, we teach our students how to gather bamboo and make their own implements for hula," explained Molitau. "As hula practitioners, we value these instruments as an extension of who we are. They become an extension of the hula dancer and an extension of the kumu hula." For these and other reasons, said Molitau, "these practices are very important for the continuation of our work, and for understanding the viability and importance of the *akua* (gods) which they represent.

"We understand that bamboo is the *kinolau*, or physical manifestation, of Kū, Kāne and Lono," he said, referring to three of the four major Hawaiian gods. Kū, more commonly known as the Hawaiian god of war, is a symbol of the rising sun and male generating power, and Kāne, the top god in the Hawaiian pantheon, rules creation, sunlight and fresh water. Lono, the god associated with sound, is the patron of the annual harvest, the god of clouds, winds, sea and agriculture.

"When the bamboo stands straight and upright, it's a manifestation of Kū," explained Molitau. "The Kāne aspect refers to the waters that bamboo carries within it." The Lono aspects emerge,



THE LONG AND  
THE SHORT  
OF IT

(Opposite page) Richard von Wellsheim of Whispering Winds and (this page) a particularly colorful node.





## VIGOR

Opposite page) The plant is full of vigor, known to spring out of the ground and grow quickly into maturity.



he continued, when the chanters and dancers bring the implements to life by creating sound and rhythm.

It's no wonder, then, that bamboo is a plant of superlatives and limitless applications. One common species is capable of growing 48 inches in as many hours, making it the fastest growing plant in the world. And while we think of bamboo as long, willowy and tree-like, most definitely un-lawnlike, it is, amazingly, a grass. A member of the *Bambusaceae* tribe of the subfamily Bambusoideae, it's considered the most utilitarian plant in the world, appearing in more than 1,400 species growing from sea level to 13,000 feet.

From east Maui's streams to coastal and upland regions, there is no shortage of bamboo on the island. It grows wild in remote groves and forests, and it flourishes along mountain trails and waterfall idylls along and beyond the Hāna Highway. Farms and co-ops cultivate, distribute and sell it in various forms—in pots for planting, as building and nursery material, and in small clusters for rent, to be used at special events. At sea level, South Maui resorts and communities make clever use of the plant in general landscaping and in pool and



lobby areas, where bamboo furniture, trellises and accessories appear in informal settings. In the kitchen, some Asian restaurants serve bamboo shoots in traditional dishes, and bamboo implements—chopsticks, sake cups, ladles, steamers and serving trays—are standard fare in Asian restaurants on Maui and around the world.

Some species have a tensile strength greater than steel, which makes them uniquely suited to homebuilding in many climates and cultures. "One of the best for construction is the South American genus of *Guadua*," reports the University of Hawai'i College of Tropical Agriculture. "Culms used in Columbian houses more than 100 years old have stood up better than many hardwoods." The culm is the woody, hollow stem of the bamboo stalk, and its diverse patterns and colors—gold, black, striped, yellow, green and all shades in between—make it a versatile aesthetic and design element.

"Some people are scared of bamboo and think that it's going to take



over,” noted Richard von Wellsheim of Whispering Winds, a 100-acre employee-owned cooperative in Kīpahulu. “We realize that while our culture may not realize it, bamboo is controllable.” Growers like Wellsheim know, as with any other plant, that it just needs a little attention. And because heightened education and cultivation have caused the industry to “catch on,” says Wellsheim, “we’re creating a culture of bamboo.”

“The only time bamboo takes over is when the landscape is ignored,” wrote Richard Argo in *Bamboo Society Magazine*. “Maintain your bamboo, and it will enhance your landscape, not inhale it.” The adage, “You can’t kill it,” is a myth, the article continues. It just needs to be shown “who’s boss.”

For artists, musicians and craftsmen, even poets and calligraphers, the plant is a wellspring of inspiration. Just ask Eric Vaughan, a part-time Maui resident whose passion for the shakuhachi, the Japanese bamboo flute, has drawn him to Whispering Winds. The shakuhachi is extremely specialized, difficult to make and play, its every element prescribed by a tradition that culminated in the Edo period of 17th- to 19th-century Japan. Vaughan, who makes and



plays the shakuhachi, said Zen Buddhist monks wandered through the forests with their flutes to make music that “imitated the sound of the forest and their environment.” Their music was a vehicle of meditation, just as Japanese and Chinese calligraphers consider the swift strokes of their bamboo brush a form of spiritual practice.

As a plant that can survive drought, flood and other extreme conditions, and which releases 35 percent more oxygen than its equivalent in trees, bamboo makes good environmental and practical sense. Today we walk on bamboo floors, wear clothing of bamboo fabric and use plates, bags and utensils of biodegradable bamboo. We use incandescent light bulbs, which Thomas Edison developed with the help of carbonized bamboo, and we listen to music that once emerged from gramophones when bamboo needles were placed on vinyl. And when we enjoy a Maui hālau with the ethereal sound of the bamboo nose flute or the rhythmic beat of the pū’ili, we may think of Kū, Kāne and Lono and their place in our shared history. 🌿



IMPLEMENTS COURTESY OF NATIVE INTELLIGENCE



#### INSTRUMENTAL

(Opposite page)  
The thickness of bamboo is a factor in the crafting of ‘ohe kāpala. (This page) Bamboo rattles, called pū’ili, are a percussive accompaniment to hula.