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Mochi: NOURISHMENT FOR THE SOUL

BY JON LETMAN · PHOTOS JON LETMAN

Look closely at the full autumn moon and you'll find a rabbit hunched over a mortar using a large mallet to pound sticky rice into the dense sweet mass known as mochi. According to Japanese legend, the rabbit has been up there for ages—certainly long before Japanese immigrants brought the gooey confection to Hawai'i over a hundred years ago.

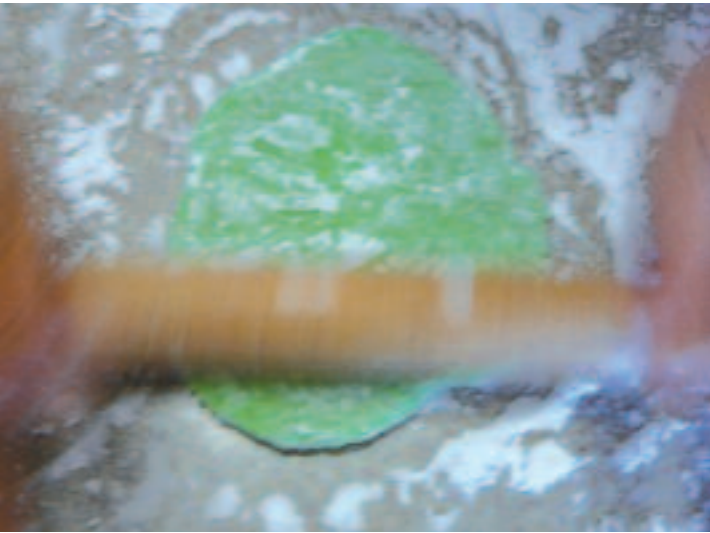
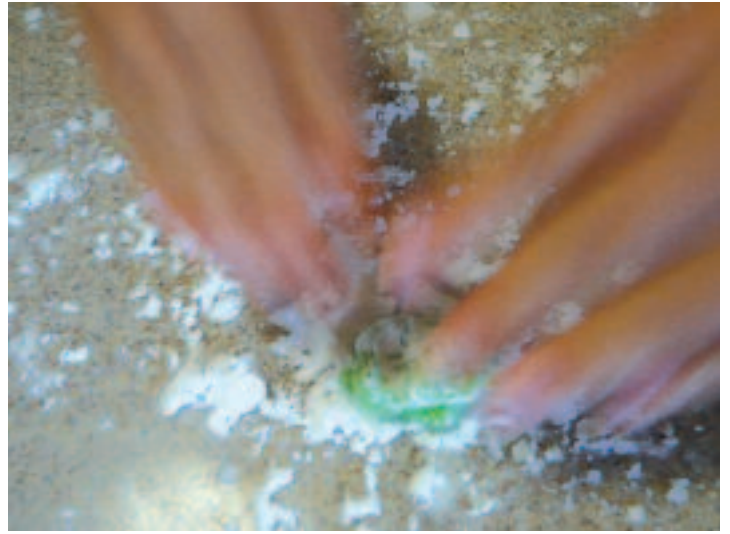
Sticky rice-based sweets come in many forms across Asia. Gao (China), duek (Korea) and palitao (Philippines) may not be household names, but for anyone who grew up in the Islands, has moved here or visited and acquired the taste, mochi is well-known favorite treat.

For the uninitiated, mochi, in the strict traditional Japanese sense, is mochi gome (glutinous rice) that has been steamed and pounded with a heavy mallet into a consistency that can be hand-formed into “cakes,” which bear no resemblance to Western desserts.

Shoryu Akiya, the reverend at Kapa`a Jodo Mission on Kaua`i, explains that mochi in its simplest form is represented by the two-tiered kagami mochi, flattened white orbs decorated with symbols of longevity and purity like small daidai oranges, dried shrimp and folded red and white Shinto shide paper zigzags.

Akiya and his congregation pound mochi rice at New Year's and for Children's Day (May 5) as a fund-raiser. Barely sweetened and made of rice, mochi can be kept frozen for long periods, which Akiya says makes it also a good emergency provision.

In its sweeter form, mochi is a confection stuffed with various forms of an (sweetened azuki bean paste) or shiroan (white bean paste) and enjoyed during Japanese celebrations like hinamat-



suri (Girls' Day), tsukimi (autumn moon viewing festival) or any time, served with bitter green tea.

In Hawai'i, where Japanese immigrants lived in plantation camps, exposure to other cultures created a hybrid "mixed-plate" society and fondness for other peoples' foods.

Janyce Imoto, general manager for Fujiya Honpo, a Honolulu confectioner since 1958, put it this way: "Since hanabata days, everyone grew up in one big pot and got a taste for other families' sweets. Mochi just became Hawaiian grinds."

At Fujiya Honpo, like most mochi-ya (mochi shops) in Hawai'i, the sweet is usually made from mochiko (mochi rice flour).

Popular forms like butter mochi and chichi mochi are made with milk, baked and cut into squares, sometimes with flavors like blueberry or haupia.

In Honolulu, the Japanese department store Shirokiya imports mochi from California confectioner Mikawaya and from across Japan.

Eddie Wakida, Shirokiya's food department manager, says a new product called mochi cream has gained tremendous popularity in Japan and become a big seller at Shirokiya's Ala Moana store. With more

than 20 flavors like mango, edamame and chocolate, mochi cream is wildly popular because it is "cute and colorful."

A local version of a mochi and ice cream combo is made by Bubbies Homemade Ice Cream and Desserts. Owner Keith Robbins has been making mochi for 13 years and today exports his flavored mochi ice cream to far-flung places like Singapore, France, Dubai and across North America.

"On a good day we produce 30,000–50,000 pieces of mochi," Robbins says. A self-proclaimed perfectionist, Robbins says his product is one of the most difficult imaginable.

"We take a hot, sticky food and combine it with a cold, frozen one."

Like most producers in Hawai'i, Bubbies' product is mochiko-based and steamed daily. Robbins offers 20 flavors from strawberry to wasabi.

Admittedly, mochi purists might turn up their noses at unconventional interpretations of a food with the gravity to be used as a ceremonial offering and might find peanut butter mochi is just a little too weird.



One mochi-ya that has found the right balance between old school and avant-garde is Two Ladies Kitchen in Hilo.

Operating out of a tiny shop near the Hilo Farmers' Market, owner and operator Nora Uchida demonstrates an unabashed willingness to explore, experiment and break through the azuki bean barrier while remaining true to the food.

"It was my Aunty Tomi that taught me. When she said 'it's now or never,' I was eager to learn," Uchida says.

She adds that the physical work of making mochi is exhausting and time-consuming because everything is hand-mixed and made in small batches. Two Ladies Kitchen uses traditional ingredients like shiso leaves (beefsteak plant), kinako (soybean powder) and yomogi (mugwort), a plant Uchida remembers picking wild on the roadside as a child.

"The way we steam it, we get light, fluffy mochi," Uchida says.

Two Ladies Kitchen makes mochi all day long, so lucky Hilo visitors can find fresh mochi even at 5 pm.

Uchida's aunt taught her to make traditional mochi using koshian and shiroan but as the business grew, Uchida noticed some younger customers wanted mochi without the bean paste and that's when she started experimenting with lilikoi nectar, Okinawan purple sweet potato, taro and brownie mochi.

A soft yellow peach-shaped mochi is called "momo" and stuffed with shiroan; another is shaped like a plum blossom and a third, called "butterfly," is blue. Uchida says her aunt first shook her head at the idea of blue mochi but eventually accepted it.

"When people come here, they open the box and are surprised at how beautiful the mochi is. The colors are all soft pastels and the mochi is all made by hand so everything really pops out of the box," Uchida says.

Mochi makers will tell you there is a sense of nostalgia associated with mochi—like a childhood memory in a palm-sized piece of sweet, colored goodness, something to be enjoyed by the eyes, the fingers and finally the tongue.

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O'AHU

Fujiya Honpo Inc. Ltd. 454 Waiakamilo Road (Honolulu)

Shirokiya 1450 Ala Moana Boulevard in the Ala Moana Shopping Center (Honolulu)

Bubbies Ice Cream Two locations:

- 1) 1010 University Avenue (on corner of University and Beretania) (Manoa)
 - 2) Koko Marina Shopping Center (Hawai'i Kai)
- Also available at Foodland Super Markets statewide

Nisshodo Candy Store 1095 Dillingham Boulevard (on the corner of Kokea and Dillingham) in Kalihi (Honolulu)

HAWAI'I ISLAND

Two Ladies Kitchen 274 Kilauea Avenue (Hilo)

KAUAI

Menchune Food Mart 2-3687 Kaumuali'i Highway (Lawa'i)



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