

You grow, girl

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Jul 29, 2012 LAST UPDATED: 04:45 p.m. HST, Jul 31, 2012

StarAdvertiser.com

Cooperation by a cheese maker and a dairy shows how women benefit our food network

By Joleen Oshiro

When Naked Cow Dairy sought to boost its production of artisanal cheese, owners Monique van der Stroom and Sabrina St. Martin found it required a \$15,000 piece of equipment. That was too big a price tag to pay for the sisters, who had already made a big financial commitment in starting their business, the only dairy on Oahu.

What are two female farmers to do?

As it turns out, collaborate with other women involved in Hawaii's food network.

Chef Gida Snyder, a Kapiolani Community College culinary school graduate, was already busy developing cheeses for the dairy when she organized an online fundraising campaign for the equipment.

She paired her efforts with Lisa Asagi and Dan Naka-sone, Hawaii agricultural advocates who run the social enterprise project She Grows Food, which spotlights how women are moving our food system forward.

Asagi documented Snyder's work for the dairy via a video that became part of the chef's pitch on IndieGoGo, an online platform for soliciting public donations.

Asagi also helped conceptualize a one-day cheese shop where the public could taste some of Snyder's creations. Naka-sone handled publicity on the She Grows Food website, and Asagi spread the word through social media. On March 10 the "pop-up" shop opened in Kakaako to a huge crowd, and donations exceeded the goal and brought wider notice for the locally made product.

Now, Naked Cow Dairy cheese is regularly sold at farmers markets.

Snyder said the intent of the endeavor was not simply to raise money, but to rouse community interest.

"This kind of thing helps people feel invested in what's going on in the food scene," she said. "It tells people, 'If you want this thing to exist in our world, you have the power to make it happen.' It empowers people to help shape society."

The dairy's experience with She Grows Food is one example of how women have become a dynamic force in food systems, not just in Hawaii, but across the globe.

On the Net:

www.shegrowsfood.com

Although She Grows Food gets involved in local food issues that don't always necessarily center on women, it is guided by the theme of "women shaping the future of food."

The power of women is something that has long moved Naka-sone, who once had a career in advertising. He is fond of calling women "the game-changers," citing a 2009 study by the Rockefeller Foundation that confirmed women are responsible for 75 percent to 80 percent of household spending.

"Women baby boomers pretty much control spending globally," he said.

Armed with such information and his partnership with Asagi, herself a powerful creative force, Naka-sone found in She Grows Food the chance to pair women's alpha consumer status with the need to ensure a stable food supply for Hawaii by growing food here.

"There's a trend internationally of tackling hunger through women," Asagi said. "If you put the means of agricultural technology with women, they will not only feed their families, they will feed their communities. Then they will send the children to school, especially the girls. And they will fund other women. With one seed you can create a whole orchard. These women have the power to give life back to an entire community."

Nakasone believes that when female consumers hear such stories, they are inspired to support female farmers with their spending dollars. Asagi calls this "voting with your fork."

In the past year, She Grows Food has been involved in several projects.

With the cheese project wrapped up, it is creating an information hub, funded by the U.S. and Hawaii Agriculture departments, that will offer online databases on Hawaii's agricultural products — what they are, where they are grown and where they can be accessed — and community-supported agriculture and farmers markets. The data will be available on the She Grows Food website.

The project is also tied to a joint effort by Asagi and Snyder called the Green Wheel Food Hub, a social enterprise dedicated to creating greater access to fresh, locally grown food to low-income communities.

In March, Green Wheel ran a pilot project that took Electronic Benefit Transfer service (for those who receive government food assistance) to a pop-up farmers market at a low-income housing complex.

The response was positive, and the women are now working with various farmers markets to incorporate EBT service on site.

A Thursday-evening Wahiawa market organized by the Waihawa Community Based Development Organization will begin EBT service next month, thanks to Kaiser Permanente and Kanu Hawaii, who have joined GreenWheel by helping to cover start-up costs. Plans are also in the works for the service to become available at Hawaii Farm Bureau's Hono-lulu (Blaisdell) market.

Green Wheel provides market organizers with a "playbook" that includes step-by-step instructions and templates on how to implement the service — everything from registering with the local USDA office to creating a logbook of transactions. They also provide guidance when needed.

Fiscal support for Green Wheel also illustrates the concept of women helping women. One sponsor is Feed the Hunger Foundation, run by Hawaii-born women Patti Chang and Denise Albano.

"They have a real commitment to helping communities in need through the empowerment of women," Asagi said.

Whole Foods is another sponsor. Green Wheel was a recipient of the store's "5% Day" and "Recycle Your Change" programs, wherein a percentage of customer spending and donations of customer change, respectively, are donated to community programs. So far, the programs have raised more than \$8,250 for Green Wheel.

"Green Wheel Food Hub made perfect sense because our goal is to get fresh fruits and veggies out to the community," said Whole Foods marketing manager Natalie Aczon. "We want to see those EBT machines in the farmers markets by the end of the year."

If tHESE projects didn't keep Asagi and Naka-sone on the pulse of Hawaii's food community, their "day jobs" would. Naka-sone promotes local agriculture through his marketing work, and Asagi helps run her family's Asagi Hatchery.

Asagi's own story illustrates how women are meeting the challenges of transforming Hawaii's food system. She

traded in a writing and filmmaking career in San Francisco to oversee the hatchery, once run by her grandfather and father, alongside her mother, a sister and a niece. Asagi and another sister are also managers at the Hawaii Farm Bureau Federation's farmers markets.

Asagi said that in the decades since her grandfather started a chicken-and-egg farm in the 1930s, the hatchery thrived supplying Hawaii's chicken farms — until the arrival of big-box stores, which imported eggs and poultry in large enough quantities to undercut local suppliers.

"In 1984 there were about 21 egg farms in Hawaii. There was a good market for chicken and eggs," she said. "By 2004, Pacific Poultry (the last Oahu producer) had stopped producing local chicken. It almost put us out of business."

Now the last hatchery in the region, Asagi provides chicks to Saipan, Guam, the Northern Mari-anas, American Samoa and Kiri-bati, plus a few backyard and small, up-and-coming farms "trying to take hold."

"In these economic times, we're seeing a resurgence of people recognizing how important it is not to lose our knowledge and our ability to feed ourselves," Asagi said.

Copyright (c) Honolulu Star-Advertiser