

CRACKING the Mac

It's the King Tut nut, the eternal kernel, the hard-headed shell whose contents we love so well

BY BILL HARRY

The concretelike construction of the macadamia nut shell will resist a direct hit from a 500-pound bomb. Or so it seems if you've ever tried to open one. It takes 300 pounds per square inch of pressure to pop this baby. The mac nut, Hawai'i's favorite nut case, is—no kidding—the hardest nut to crack on the planet.

This is simply poetic justice, because the macadamia is also the most delicious nut in the world. But then, it must be at the prices it fetches. And it's even good for you.

But first you gotta get at it. At home this presents a challenge. Forget about a conventional nutcracker; you'll just bruise your hand, then dent your noggin when the slippery shell goes ballistic.

This is why one erstwhile Big Island mac nut grower, who prefers to remain nameless, came out with the Mac Cracker. It looked deceptively like the familiar hinged tool that makes easy work of lesser nuts, but this device had an edge—two of them actually, two blades that would split the shell when enough muscle was applied, though the grower admits that there was “a bit of a knack to it.” Much like the occasional government weapon system, questionable bookkeeping from a shady partner led to





BELLE'S MAC NUT PESTO

- 1½ cups packed basil leaves
- 1 cup toasted mac nuts
- ½ cup olive oil
- ½ cup grated parmesan cheese
- 3 cloves garlic
- ½ tsp. salt

Finely chop the toasted mac nuts in a blender or food processor. Set aside. Finely chop the garlic, add basil then finely chop while slowly drizzling in olive oil. When well-blended, add the rest of the ingredients. The pesto will keep for weeks in the fridge, and a little lemon juice squeezed on top will help it stay green.

cancellation of the project, even though a national big-box store had ordered a gazillion units.

A hammer doesn't work either. Hit too soft and it bounces off like you've hit a Star Trek force field; a little harder and you've got a scattered mess of nut and shell.

It's best to let the pros handle it. Most of them roll the hard-headed nuts between two revolving drums, thousands every minute, creating a crunching, crashing sound like you've got a pile of rocks on the rinse cycle in your washing machine. Much more fun is the gun used by Mac's Nut Co., also on the Big Island, which is the world navel of mac nuts.

This weapon system shoots nuts one by one to bounce back and forth off an anvil and titanium piston at 400 miles per hour. It's very effective, apparently, but probably not something you'd care to set up in your kitchen.

Why all this trouble for a mere nut? Because there is nothing "mere" about the mac. Poets, philosophers and accountants all agree that, with its buttery, slightly sweet taste and its firm, soft-crunch texture, the mac leads the pack. It's, pardon me, the eternal kernel, the King Tut nut. In the hallowed halls of macadamia academia, nutty professors have conclusively shown that the mac is the most, and often causes otherwise rational individuals to drone on annoyingly with purple superlatives—like me.

Fortunately, Annabelle Lewis is not one of these people. Make no mistake, she knows that the mac is No. 1, but she mostly lets her recipes do the talking, except to say that "mac nuts rule in my kitchen."

Belle, who lives in Volcano on the Big Island, is a superb cook. If you're ever stuck with her in a hobo camp and she invites you over for a boxcar lunch of, say, sautéed cardboard garnished with lawn clippings, trust me, just go. Mac nuts transform several of Belle's otherwise merely exquisite recipes into food fit for the gods. She sprinkles crushed mac nuts on 'ahi like gold nuggets. She dips shrimp in a fine coconut and mac nut fairy dust. She fortifies her tort with the same kernel.

Then there is her mac nut pesto. She's tried walnuts and pine nuts and whatnot, but now and forever more, says Belle, it's mac nuts or no go with the pesto. If you die without your

pie in the sky, that's OK. If you expire without a lyre, that's OK. But if you go to meet Mephisto without tasting Belle's pesto, well, you blew it.

That's a mouthful for a nut that was ignored when its tree was first planted in Hawai'i. Native to Australia (not Scotland, as some believe), *Macadamia ternifolia* was brought here as an ornamental tree, which is odd for two reasons. First, no offense, Miss Mac Nut Tree, but you are not exactly supermodel material. Your dark, waxy leaves grow from branches that shoot out in every direction like Medusa on a bad-hair day. Second, you are high-maintenance, dropping thousands of nuts during peak harvest from August to January. This could make a stroll through the ornamental garden seem like skating on marbles.

But commercial growers are happy to skate all the way to the bank, because nuts on the ground are nuts ready for harvest. Mac nuts are too self-confident to play hard-to-get, so they pluck themselves when at their peak, then patiently wait to be fetched.

On the Big Island, where virtually all of Hawai'i's mac nut orchards grow, the nuts are mostly fetched by Filipina, most of them over 50, some in their 70s and 80s. They scuttle beneath the low branches, their hands a blur of nuts in and out of the bucket. Three buckets make a bag. They usually fill about 45 bags or more a day, which adds up to a paycheck that's more than just peanuts.

But only about 15 percent to 20 percent of the nuts harvested will fulfill their rightful destiny between your teeth. Most fall by the wayside because of rot, boring pests, damage during processing or just because—to use the growers' technical terms—they're "peeweesees."

The rest of the fruit (botanically, all "nuts" are actually either fruits, seeds or legumes), will come to you dressed in many ways: in milk chocolate, dark chocolate or white chocolate; in a jacket of pale green *wasabi*; in a coat of honey; a dusting of sweet chili or onion and garlic. Mauna Loa Macadamia Nut Corp., the world's biggest mac retailer (owned by food giant Hershey's), markets 31 different mac products, which come in more sizes and kinds of packaging than Oprah. Island Princess, owned by former Honolulu dentist Mike Purdy, made its name selling macs covered in hard toffee and soft chocolate, and now has a product line with 21 mac items. Other companies also produce a mac nut beer and liqueur, and no doubt a pizza will roll off an assembly line soon.

This blatant exploitation would seem shameless and seedy, except that you're hard challenged not to like something about all of these concoctions—even though one curmudgeon recently opined that trying to mate the mac with Japanese horseradish was "a waste of wasabi."

Or maybe a waste of the mac. Because, ultimately, to truly know the nut, you've got to have your way with it naked and raw (it, not you, please), unroasted, unsalted, unfettered by fashion accessories.

Right in the orchard, you can tear off the green husk with your teeth, then break open the shell with your hammer, and, after several failed efforts, hold in your hand a whole, raw, still moist, almost white macadamia nut. But at this stage, its texture is rubbery, its taste pale. After heat-drying in a holding bin for a week to 10 days, the firm, dried nut can hold its own and stand up to you for just that moment you desire before giving way in a tide of fat flavor. And it hasn't even been roasted yet. Once roasted—well, it's no wonder that this is thought to be the chosen nut in the bowl that sits at the left hand of God.

You can also use mac nut oil to anoint your salads. All those nuts that are too broken, too peewee, too ugly or otherwise unfit for presentation—some 80 percent of all those

MACADAMIA NUT TARTS

Ingredients for the custard:

- 2 lbs. unsalted butter
- 4 lbs. light-brown sugar
- 2¾ cups all-purpose flour
- 8 tsp. salt
- 10 cups scalded milk
- 60 egg yolks
- 3 tsp. vanilla extract

Brown and strain the butter through a fine sieve into a heavy, wide-bottom saucepan. Add light-brown sugar, flour and salt to the butter. Place the pot on the stove and turn heat to high, mixing constantly, until all ingredients are incorporated and no lumps remain. Place the yolks in a stainless steel bowl and temper with the scalded milk. Mix the milk and yolk mixture into the butter/sugar/flour mixture and bring to a boil. Whisk this constantly, touching all points of the pan. Bring to a boil and continue to whisk over the heat until mixture bubbles, and then becomes very thick. Quickly pour the custard off into a stainless-steel bowl and fold in the vanilla extract. Cover the surface of the custard with parchment paper to prevent a skin from forming. Chill completely. Yield: Four 10½-inch tarts.

Tart recipe:

- 1½ cups diced, roasted 100-percent Hawai'i-grown macadamia nuts
- 1 each brissée dough tart shells
- 1½ cups sweetened whipped cream

Fold the roasted macadamia nuts into the chilled custard and fill each tart shell so that it is slightly mounded in the center. Top with whipped cream. Place in the refrigerator and allow to set.

—Douglas C. Lum, executive chef, Mariposa

harvested—are pressed into service to make oil that will be used in dressings, sautéés, even cosmetics.

A company on O'ahu's North Shore makes that oil. Dana Grey seems much more like your favorite grandpa than head honcho of Oils of Aloha, which is the only business in the Islands making mac nut oil. He buys the poor, sad nuts (and shells and stems) that didn't make the cut, puts them in a press and turns them into liquid gold.

The folks at Oils of Aloha have also made other mac nut discoveries. What remains after the oil is removed is called "press cake." For years, the company contributed the press cake to a pig farmer in Nānākuli. As things happened, pigs that ate the press cake turned out leaner, better-flavored meat. Also, extra press cake was put through a grinder and sieves to make a grit used in facial scrubs and soaps. Now, Oils of Aloha president Matthew Papania has discovered that the press cake makes an excellent smoking chip for the grill, which imparts a delicious, unique smoke flavor to chicken, meat, fish, turkey and vegetables. What a nut!

It's true that macadamia nut oil and the nut itself are high

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in fat, but, like Friar Tuck, it's good fat, 80 percent mono-unsaturated. That's the good stuff that helps fight heart disease and high blood pressure; mac nut oil has a higher percentage of it than any other cooking oil. It's also low in evil omega-6 fats (think lard) and high in angelic omega-3 fats (think fish). Plus, mac nut oil boasts a much higher "smoke point" than olive oil, making it great for sautéing.

It has to be said, however, that something is lost, as so often happens during alchemy, when you turn the nut into oil. In this case: taste. The lavish butteriness that fills your mouth when you bite into the nut disappears in the oil. It is merely a lubricant, whereas good extra-virgin olive oil gives tang and definition, which is no doubt why Oils of Aloha makes products infused variously with chili, garlic and Italian herbs.

Not long ago on the Big Island, some friends gathered for a mac nut potluck. They enjoyed garlic-onion mac nuts in a bowl, mixed greens drizzled with rice vinegar and herb-infused mac nut oil, baked chicken with mac nut crust, and Annabelle's mac nut tort. Late in the evening, after everyone had gained a couple of pounds, flushed their arteries with omega-3 and regained consciousness, somebody wondered if it was entirely proper to bestow such collective adulation upon a marble-size woody fruit.

Clearly, that guy was cracked.



BILL HARBY is a longtime Hawai'i-based free-lance writer, editor and photographer. After 23 years in Honolulu, he moved last year to his dream cottage in the rain forest outside Volcano Village, on the Big Island.

MACADAMIA NUT CHICKEN

- 1 cup unsalted 100-percent Hawai'i-grown macadamia nuts
- 24 oz. chicken, cut into bite sizes
- 40-60 pieces of chopped dried chili peppers (deep fried until crispy)
- 1 cup diced zucchini
- 8 Tbsp. sliced onions
- 8 Tbsp. green onions (cut in one-inch pieces)
- 8 Tbsp. vegetable oil
- 4 Tbsp. oyster sauce
- 4 Tbsp. fish sauce or oyster sauce
- 12 Tbsp. chicken stock or hot water
- Ground black pepper to taste

Over medium heat, sauté chicken with vegetable oil until the chicken is cooked—about one or two minutes. Increase heat to high and add zucchini, oyster sauce, fish sauce and black pepper. Sauté for 15 seconds. Add chicken stock. Cook for about one minute, until half of the chicken stock has evaporated. Add macadamia nuts, crispy dried chili, sliced onions and green onions. Sauté for no more than one minute or until the onions are cooked. (Prolonged cooking will make the chili peppers soggy.)

—Chai Chaowasaree, chef and owner, Singha Thai Cuisine and Chai's Island Bistro

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