

STEAKING THEIR CLAIM

Kunoa Cattle Company is bringing locally grown, large-scale beef production back to O'ahu.

Kunoa Cattle Co. co-owners, Jack Beuttell and Bob Farias

Hawai'i is in the midst of a food sustainability revival. Filling a void in the movement for a more self-sufficient state, **KUNOA CATTLE COMPANY** is on the verge of playing a major role in Hawai'i's local livestock and beef industry. With a progressive business model and forward-thinking leadership, Kunoa Cattle Co. has begun to ease Hawai'i's dependency on imported beef—providing pasture-raised cattle products for residents and visitors.

Kunoa Cattle Co. is what you could call a full-service cattle company and livestock processor that handles each aspect of the meat supply chain. From raising their own cattle (and purchasing cattle from other local ranchers), to harvesting and processing meat, as well as distributing products to grocers, restaurants and consumers; Hawai'i has never seen a livestock enterprise built to this scale, according to co-owner Jack Beuttell. Hawai'i has had small-scale processing operations in the past, but nothing as expansive as what Kunoa Cattle Co. has developed.

In the process of running a healthy business operation, co-owners Bob Farias and Beuttell bring their passions for positively impacting Hawai'i's local economy and regenerating the Islands' ecology.

As of 2017, roughly 90 percent of beef consumed in Hawai'i is imported. That is a statistic Kunoa—meaning “stand-free”—intends on decreasing. “Our thought is why don't we keep the animals here in Hawai'i, where we have optimal growing conditions and obviously have the market to consume the product. With Kunoa's entrance into the market we now have the infrastructure to accomplish that,” says co-owner Beuttell—who points out Kunoa Cattle Co. beef products are already available at Times Supermarkets statewide, military commissaries on O'ahu and boutique grocers.

Kunoa Cattle Co.'s young story—the company was founded in 2014—is one that began with cross-country communications between Beuttell and Farias, a third-generation rancher from Kaua'i and former champion team roper.

“Bob had been incubating this idea of essentially reengineering the beef supply chain in Hawai'i. We began working remotely in 2014. We put together a business plan and submitted it to the Elemental Exceleator program in Honolulu. We won some seed money and entrance into their 2015 Go-To-Market cohort program. That served as the impetus for me to take a chance, so I left the East Coast and moved to Hawai'i full-time to work with Bobby to launch Kunoa,” says Beuttell—who has a background in environmental investment consultancy and worked as a ranch hand in Montana and Colorado.

In Hanama'ulu on Kaua'i, Kunoa Cattle Co. raises 2,000 heads of cattle on 4,000 acres of former sugarcane land. With their combined expertise in cattle ranching and partnered relationships with cattle ranchers throughout the state, Farias and Beuttell knew the inventory for sustainable beef products in Hawai'i was available. The problem they sought to solve was how to develop a scalable harvesting and processing system that would allow Kunoa Cattle Co. to maintain all areas of the supply chain locally.

“Originally, we were planning to build a facility on our ranch on Kaua'i, but decided against that and in favor of acquiring the Kapolei facility, which for all intents and purposes met our needs ... in terms of size and capabilities,” says Beuttell.

The acquisition of the former slaughterhouse, located in the Campbell Industrial Park, took time. After putting in their bid in 2015, the facility sale closed in November 2016.

“That was really when Kunoa got its start in earnest. Until then, we were operating on a contract to purchase the facility and were raising or buying cattle and processing them on a pilot basis to test our customer assumptions,” Beuttell explains.

By Chris Fleck





PHOTOS: LEAH FRIEL

Already U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)-certified, upon acquisition, the facility was in need of upgrades in order for Farias and Beuttell to scale their operation.

No easy task, as the Kunoa Cattle Co. co-owners spent capital and effort demolishing and refurbishing many areas of the facility, which now includes processing capabilities. Prior to the upgrades, the facility was only equipped for harvest.

Harvesting of cattle is an industry term for slaughter. The processing element, as Beuttell describes it, "to get the carcass into a format that is saleable ... you have to process the carcass into smaller packaged pieces, like a chuck roast, tri-tip, or tenderloin.

The harvest and processing practices is where Kunoa Cattle Co. further exercise their care for raised animals.

"Whether we buy from Big Island, Maui, Kaua'i or O'ahu or ship our own," Beuttell explains. "Everything comes to O'ahu, where we harvest the animal in our facility using upgraded equipment designed specifically for animal welfare. We installed equipment designed by renowned animal welfare expert Temple Grandin."

The last 18 months Kunoa Cattle Co. has worked to introduce their products to the public through various sales channels. Those include retailers like grocery stores, restaurant and food service buyers, and a direct-to-consumer e-commerce avenue where customers can purchase beef products directly from Kunoa Cattle Co.'s website or on Amazon.com.

In combination with efforts to boost the local economy and provide humanely, locally raised beef products to consumers, Farias and Beuttell know keeping Hawai'i's cattle in state, rather than having them shipped to the mainland for processing, can have beneficial effects on the local ecology and climate.

"We read all the time that cattle are bad for the climate because they emit so much methane. Much of that narrative is true, but is almost entirely tied to the industrial feedlot model ... where animals are put in feedlots the last 120 days of life and fed petroleum-based feeds like corn, soy and wheat," says Beuttell. "Monoculture systems create all this negative environmental impact. There is essentially no grass in these environments to absorb that nutrient and lots of chemicals and antibiotics are introduced to keep the animals 'healthy.' This essentially negates the natural eco-system of a cow and what goes inside a cow."

In opposition of that method of tending to cattle, Beuttell references the positive impact bison, antelope and other grazing ruminants had on the organic matter and soil health of the Great Plains prior to monoculture, industrial farming.

"Our thesis, which is consistent with the regenerative grazing movement on a global basis, is: livestock, if raised properly, can be used as a tool to build soil and promote grass productivity. We view livestock as a tool to regenerate landscapes, to pull carbon out of the atmosphere, put it in the soil, increase biodiversity and the micro-organic diversity of the soil, increase plant spacing, reduce exposure of soil to the atmosphere, and help reduce run-off."

Kunoa Cattle Co. sells traditional beef products and limited pork products on a retail basis. Recently, they've introduced direct-to-consumer online purchase options that include beef bars, beef jerky and Ohana Boxes of steaks, stew meats and ground beef—that come in 10- or 20-pound packages sold for \$4.59 per pound. ●

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT KUNOA CATTLE CO. OR TO FIND A LOCAL KUNOA CATTLE CO. RETAILER VISIT KUNOACATTLE.COM.