

‘Ulu – Breadfruit

“*E lawe i ke o, he hinana ka i’a kuhi lima*”

Take vegetable food; the hinana fish can be caught in the hand.

‘Ōlelo No’eau, Mary Kawena Pūku’i

Mo’olelo

There is a *mo’olelo* about *Kū* and the origin of the ‘*ulu* tree. During a long famine, after bidding his family farewell, *Kū* sank into the ground until he disappeared. His wife cried, watering the ground with her tears.

Soon an ‘*ulu* tree sprouted, grew quickly and bore abundant fruit, more than enough to sustain his family. When more seedlings appeared, they were given to others to plant. With this gift of love and nourishment, *Kū* saved his family and his people from starving. This explains why, although the ‘*ulu* is considered a *kinolau* form of *Kū*, it is not *kapu* to women, unlike other *Kū* foods.

‘*Ulu* is believed to contain the strength and *mana* of *Kū*, the god of war, who is the protector of all plants in the forest, and a guardian in all work and sickness, and is embodied in tall trees.

Propagation

The one early variety of ‘*ulu* introduced by the first Hawaiians was seedless, having to propagate the plant by its shoots. ‘*Ulu* bears fruit in about three to five years, continuing to bear fruit for more than 35 years.

Cooking and Preparation

The best eating ‘*ulu* is picked from the tree when it is mature (when the light green skin turns a whitish-gray). In a preparation called *piepiele* ‘*ulu*, overripe ‘*ulu* can be pounded into *poi*, mixed with coconut milk, wrapped in ti leaves and baked in the *imu* or oven.

The natives, according to Malo, prepared ‘*ulu* by cooking it in the *imu* or roasting. More recently, John Wise tells of cooking ‘*ulu*, ‘*uala* (sweet potato), *kalo* and *mai’a* (banana) by placing them on a bed of *honohono* grass laid on hot *imu* stones, covered with a thick blanket of ti leaves and the whole covered with mats and old *kapa*. While *kalo* and *lu’au* leaves require three to four hours to cook, the ‘*ulu*, ‘*uala* and *mai’a* are cooked more quickly.

Today, ‘*ulu* is prepared many different ways including cooking in the *imu*, oven-baking, broiled *pulehu*-style, or steaming on top of the stove. Once cooked, ‘*ulu* can be made into *poi*, similar to that done with *kalo*. This was eaten when *poi kalo* was not available or in coastal areas where *poi kalo* was often in short supply.

Nutritional Implications

‘*Ulu* is an excellent source of complex carbohydrates, low in fat, high in fiber, and a good source of potassium and vitamin C. The nutritious value of ‘*ulu* made it an excellent source of nourishment in long travels and helped to sustain the body during long periods of labor and physical endurance. The ‘*olelo no’eau* used above supports this – take the vegetable foods (*kalo*, ‘*ulu*, and ‘*uala*) along the journey; don’t worry about the meats because they can be found along the way.

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