

NAME IN THE NEWS

CONRAD NONAKA

The new Culinary Institute's director gets things cooking for students

By Vicki Viotti
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Conrad Nonaka, director of the Culinary Institute of the Pacific, knows his way around a kitchen, even the sparkling, video-enabled workstations at the institute's new Diamond Head campus. But the recipe for his career as a culinary educator included a key ingredient, motivation, and that came from his wife.

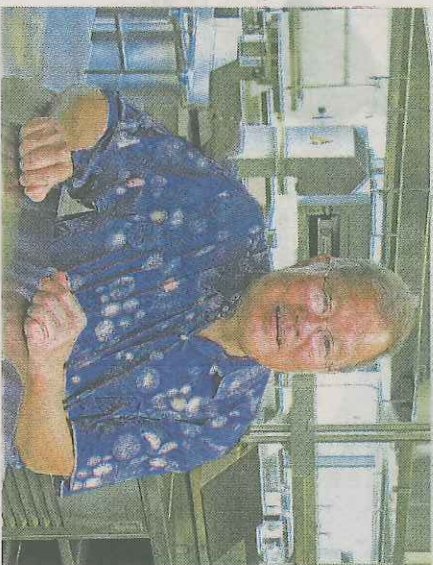
The Kauai-born Nonaka, 67, got his associate's degree from Kapiolani Community College, back when the campus actually was off Kapiolani Boulevard. After serving in the Army, the G.I. Bill gave him some options.

"So my wife, who was my girlfriend at the time, said, 'Are you going back to college?' I said, 'No, I'm just going to be a chef and be happy.'"

"And she said, 'No, Uncle Sam wants to pay you to go to college, and you're going to go to college,'" he recalled. "I guess she didn't want to marry a man with no degrees."

His bachelor of education came in a new program to develop more vocational trades teachers; Nonaka was the only one on the culinary track. His edible class demo projects were popular, he recalled with a grin.

Practicing his craft and business acumen took him from Boston to Taiwan through varied executive positions under Sheraton, Starwood, Westin and other luxury hotel



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brands. However, it was his faculty work at KCC that caught the attention of John Morton, then provost of the campus, for the institute envisioned at the former site of the Army's Cannon Club. Over 20 years in the making, the institute's new labs will open to their first student chefs this fall.

Nonaka is hoping for the \$30 million in the Legislature hopper for Phase 2, including a signature restaurant and competition/demonstration offers compensation.

Nonaka focuses on the mission, rather than on the state's pace of doing things.

"When you work in industry, you're always trying to outthink your competitor," he said. "In the business world, if you don't do something when you have the idea, right away, the competition will do it. In the state, it's like, 'Wait and see.' I learned perseverance, patience. It was a big adjustment."

Question: How will your training differ from what's been offered through the community colleges? For example: Is the bachelor's degree track new?

Answer: The Advanced Professional Certificate in Culinary Arts is an extension beyond the current community college offering. Culinary students will be required to attain their Associate of Science Degree from the current two-year culinary community college or an accredited two-year institute as a pre-requisite to enroll in the third-year advance professional certificate program.

The Culinary Institute of the Pacific Diamond Head (CIP DH), in partnership with the University of Hawaii-West Oahu, will offer a four-year bachelor of applied science degree in culinary arts with a concentration in culinary management.

In partnership with the University of Hawaii at Manoa, the Culinary Institute will also offer the bachelor of science degree in food science and human nutrition with a culinary track.

Besides the advance professional certificate program, the CIP DH will provide hands-on professional continuing education courses showcasing Hawaii's industry professionals, as well as domestic and international professionals. In addition to perpetuating Hawaii's Regional Cuisine, the cuisines and cultures of various regions of the U.S. and countries around the world will be featured.

Q: How much of an emphasis on Pacific cuisine is there in the curriculum, if any?

A: The curriculum will include a strong emphasis on Hawaii's diverse ethnicity, culture and heritage, from the history of ancient Hawaii, to the plantation era, through modern day.

To ensure that we are meeting or exceeding industry expectations and are on top of industry trends, students, professionals and culinary educators are continually engaged with farmers and other industry experts, including chef, farmers, fishermen, hotel executives, professional organization leaders and major industry

CEOs. This aligns with one of our objectives to graduate highly competent culinary students to join the ever-growing workforce.

Q: What value or reputation does the Hawaii brand have as a culinary niche?

A: For over 20 years, Hawaii Regional Cuisine has transformed the food of Hawaii to an exceptional level benchmarking the best cuisines of the world. This has made Hawaii a food mecca for both our local community as well as visitors from around the world. The advance culinary training will help perpetuate Hawaii's unique culinary brand.

Hawaii being the melting pot of the Pacific definitely provides the greatest opportunity for chefs and restaurant owners to showcase the diverse ethnic styles of food throughout Asia-Pacific.

We all grew up with it, especially during the plantation era where workers in the sugar and pineapple fields would bring their own bento or box lunch to share with their fellow colleagues. Today, with Hawaii's modern cuisine, chefs are taking those basic roots in preparation to the level that the dish itself is selling at a price 100 times from what it did back in the '50s and '60s.

Q: How would you describe the business climate for restaurateurs and other sectors of the food industry here? Any problems that need to change?

A: Hawaii is experiencing solid growth in the restaurant and food sectors. Major restaurant franchises, as well as trendy, neighborhood concepts are opening venues at a quick pace. The growth is faster than the workforce can fulfill.

Employee recruitment is a challenge, not only within the restaurant industry but overall business world. Restaurants are finding it difficult to recruit and maintain a strong workforce, which in turn impacts quality and service.

At some of the establishments, business has been cut back from operating 24 hours or during all day



parts, and menu offerings reduced.

Q: Are there career opportunities for your students here, or would they need to go to the mainland?

A: Yes, with the growth of business, students have more opportunities than ever. There are entry level, managerial and business positions available throughout the state. . . .

We also encourage our students to go abroad to gain global experience and new perspectives, and bring their learnings back to Hawaii to share with the community.

Q: Can you explain why the construction was phased in this way, with these facilities coming first, classrooms later?

A: Building in phases gave us more flexibility to work with the permitting and procurement processes, as well as construction schedules budgeting and fundraising.

Being a hands-on culinary education institute, we knew that the culinary labs were most essential to conducting lectures and classes. The lower parking area, student lockers and lounge, storage and outdoor cooking area were also completed as part of the first phase to assure a first-class student experience.

Phase 2 will include the signature restaurant, demonstration/competition theater, additional instructional lab and classrooms.

Q: Do you think the facilities will attract visiting chefs to give classes?

A: That's one of our goals. Our goal is not only to showcase the Hawaii chefs for what they do, because we have great chefs here in Hawaii, and we want to showcase their talent, their skills, what Hawaii has to offer.

But we really want to broaden the scope, to invite the very best from around the globe — especially Asia, because there are many great chefs of each respective country. And the idea of bringing the chefs in is not only for them to conduct training of culinary, but also to speak about the culture, and the story behind the food, and what it represents.