

## Hirabara Farms

**Who:** Pam & Kurt Hirabara

**Where:** Mana Rd. Kamuela

Kurt & Pam Hirabara are two very special farmers, who through Kurt's deep science background, and her dedication to quality and style have been providing Merriman's with baby lettuces and other specialty produce for about two decades. On less than two acres, Hirabara Farms manages to produce their specialty lettuces, a mix of 13 types, varying in color, shape and flavor at a rate of 350 pounds a day. Merriman's receives a mixed variety of lettuces, including: Red Oak, Lollo Rossa, Frisee, and Cocarde, just to name a few. Kurt and Pam's dedication to quality and to consistently providing us their great produce just reflects their understanding of how much the farmers of Hawaii affect the capabilities of fine cuisine in Hawaii, and they do a wonderful job of it. If you have eaten a salad at Merriman's you have probably tasted the fruit of their labor.



### **More of their Story from Food & Wine Magazine:**

Five years ago, Kurt Hirabara a crop scientist on the Big Island, and his wife, Pam, who worked in the marketing department at a bank, decided to tackle this problem. Traditional Hawaiian agriculture—sugar, pineapples—was in decline, and growers were looking for alternatives to coffee and macadamias. The Hirabaras' first farm, a tiny experiment on half an acre, was near the slopes of an active volcano on the Big Island. Volcanic soil is some of the most fertile in the world, but winds blew chemical vapors from the volcano's eruptions to the fields, causing a



residue to settle on the leaves. After four years of fighting the “vog,” they moved north to Waimea (also called Kamuela), a cradle between two extinct volcanos. There they found soil and a climate that were hospitable to their Big Island Babies—13 varieties of tender baby lettuces that are now served at some of

Hawaii’s best restaurants, including Alan Wong’s, Chef Mavro, Padovani’s Bistro & Wine Bar and the Ritz-Carlton, Kapalua. “They pick the greens in the morning, and I put them on your plate at dinner,” Wong says.

The same topography that allows people to ski (atop Mauna Kea) and surf (at Kona) on the same day also allows lettuce to thrive not far from tropical fruits. In Waimea, at 2,900 feet, the Hirabaras can grow vegetables that couldn’t survive the heat at lower elevations near the ocean. Because good land is so astronomically expensive, their lettuce farm is tiny—only an acre and a quarter is being cultivated. But they produce 2,400 pound of baby lettuce a week from it.

The Hirabaras are now working with the owners of four larger farms in Waimea, in the hope that the area’s score of microclimates (created by variations in elevation, rain and wind) will allow them to grow cooler-weather produce like strawberries, artichokes, fingerling potatoes, asparagus, heirloom tomatoes and carrots. Pam Hirabara will handle marketing for the group, working with the same chefs who buy their Big Island Babies.

“They get that crunch to their lettuce that I’ve never found anywhere, even in France,” Mavrothalassitis says. The Hirabaras take no credit. “It’s not the farmer—it’s the Big Island,” Pam Hirabara says. “Things grow exceptionally well here.” Her husband agrees: “The island is alive, and so is the soil. The Big Island is getting bigger all the time.”