AUNTY KNOWS HER LIMU

by Sarah Yamanaka

Vivian "Vani" Ainoa is a busy woman, passing her knowledge of limu to those who are eager to learn

Limu ʻeleʻele grows in brackish water in Aunty's backyard

Master limu ʻeleʻele preparer, community volunteer and entrepreneur Vivian "Vani" Ainoa bubbles with charm, charisma and positivity. We find her seated in her backyard at a table beneath the shade of 54-year-old milo trees located just a few feet from the shoreline.

"Come here, come join us!" she calls out, waving us over to join herself and Zulean, a volunteer intern from Ka Honua Momona, with whom Aunty Vani is discussing the program for the organization's monthly Community Work Day. We're welcomed with warm hugs and kisses and an invitation to sit down and be comfortable.

Surrounded by nature, Aunty shares her story about growing up on Molokaʻi, a life that she describes as hard, but which illustrates her initiative to create a life for herself. She lived on the east end where she had to hitch a ride in to school since there was no bus, and did this up until 10th grade at Kilohana, then to Hoʻolehua for high school.

"… I really wanted to finish school because my other siblings they never finish school," says Aunty Vani. At age 16 she started work at the old Midnight Inn in Kaunakakai so she could earn money and continue going to school. She lived with the owner as a companion and gained experience in the work world. Always within a 10-mile radius for most of her youth, she went on to work in the pineapple field and even helped build Kualapuʻu Reservoir.

After getting married, Aunty lived with her husband on Oʻahu so they could be close to his family. Living in a busy metropolitan area with three children for three years, and loving it, Aunty wasn't happy to hear her husband come home one day to say they were moving back to Molokaʻi.

"'Noooo,' I said, 'Why you taking me back to this rock?' So we moved back here; I didn't want to," she says with great emphasis, "but my children, they all thanked me for raising them here! I had four boys and one girl. And they're all thankful that we moved here. Because they know how to live, you know, they can go hunt, they can fish, so it turned out real well. Now, you tell me move — NO WAY!" she stresses with a spurt of bubbly laughter.

After returning to Molokaʻi, her husband worked for his aunt who had a service station and furniture and appliance store, which the couple eventually inherited.

"The experience of going traveling, doing marketing, and then, um, how I introduced video to the island ..." says Aunty. "You know, because we never had video, movies and stuff like that, we never had a theater."

Word is, she had attended a conference and became associated with a man who had a video business. As Aunty tells it, he gave her a proposition, "I'll send you videos providing

you give me half of the profits." So Aunty agreed and the movies were a hit showing in the furniture store.

"Afterwards, I told my friend — he had a plane — 'Can you take me to Lana'i?' He asked, 'For what?' I said, 'Cuz I gon take some movies ova dea!'" Another entrepreneurial success.

After focusing on the thriving business that Aunty and her husband had come to love for 34 years, the couple retired. They were awarded their Hawaiian Homestead land in 1964.

"You know, when my husband went pick this lot, everybody thought he was crazy because this was one stream," says Aunty. With the help of a friend's crusher, they crushed huge boulders to fill the stream and covered it. After the first rain, gravity carried the rainwater down from the mountain, so her husband diverted it. It left rocks in the ocean shallows that the limu eventually grew on. Aunty also noticed her cats would stand on a rock and drink water along the shoreline. She realized fresh water was running into the ocean, which the cats drank, as well as caused the limu 'ele'ele to grow.

"The (limu) spores are all floating around (in the ocean)," she explains, "it's just ready to go on a rock." So when her grandson had thrown a chunk of concrete on the beach, it was only a few days later that he called tutu to show her the limu had taken root.

There are different types of limu throughout Hawai'i, even different textures of 'ele'ele explains Aunty. "Get curly kine, some are smooth, some just float on the top (of the water). I went to one place where the limu, when it's high tide, it's the best time to go pick because they all floating up. It's long and different, and it's tedious to clean. All you do is grab 'em like this and pull, pull. This one I get (in the backyard) all clings to the rock. But this other place, there's all different ways of identifying the 'ele'ele."

She adds, " … some get rough water, like where Mac (Poepoe, Native Hawaiian fisherman and caretaker of marine resources on the island's east side whom we interviewed in our July 2016 issue) lives, yeah. There is mostly limu kohu. And I think līpoa is that side cuz it's rough water. Ours, we have līpe'epe'e, and then limu 'ele'ele, I have limu wawae'iole, the one that looks like rat feet, but it tastes like the limu 'ele'ele, it grows all over here. I'm pretty fortunate."

Limu has been a part of the Hawaiian diet for hundreds of years and continues to play a part in contemporary cultural dishes such in a variety of poke, traditional Japanese miso soup and so much more. Unfortunately, it's becoming difficult to find due to over picking, pollution and destruction of watersheds. There is also the threat of invasive species. Limu grow best in brackish water where fresh water meets the sea.

Aunty says she wasn't interested in limu until she was older. As a child, she used to watch her mom preparing it. "I remember how she did it; it was tedious. Hours and hours in the hot

sun! But I have a better method. My method is pick up, rinse all the sand out through the colander and then I look through it in the sun, find whatever is no good. And then once it's clean, you gonna see the water clean. The-e-en I would rub it and get all that silky."

I ask if she has some secret recipe, remembering how my mom used to pickle the ogo we used to collect on the beach on the 'Ewa side of O'ahu so long ago.

"There is no recipe," she says, looking moderately surprised. "You just prepare it! After I pau scrub all that and make 'um real smooth, then I salt 'um with water. Put it in bottles or containers, then just let it sit one day. Next day you eat it!"

I mention the fact that I hadn't realized how many native limu there are. "Talk about native — talk about invasive!" exclaims Aunty. "We don't want those invasive ones! I just wish people would have more contests, to have a competition where people would make something out of it (invasive limu). I told Noe (Noelani Yamashita, executive director of Ka Honua Momona Intl.), I would love to see us get a recycle place where we can have people gather it, bring it and we could recycle it for maybe mulch or some kind of fertilizer." It's a brilliant idea.

"You know, it would be something that we can kind of deplete these things," she continues. "Because these things grow! If it's dry like that and goes back in the ocean, it'll grow! It's terrible … they just come back alive once it goes back in the water! It's interesting you know."

As part of giving back to the community, Aunty Vani wants to teach the younger generation about the Hawaiian culture and how to give back. It's her priority.

She's had children from different schools come to Ali'i Fishpond and learn about limu 'ele'ele. With a contented smile she says she takes them to the pond, shows them what it looks like on the rock, how to pluck it, how to go through it and clean it. "It's so important that they know the right way, yeah."

To Aunty, of much more significance than learning to pick and prepare the limu, is the practice of sharing. "It's so important that they learn how to do things and give. You know, share it," she says. "I've said before, 'This is why we lose everything, because when they start planting it and selling it for profit, we gonna lose everything.' So I felt that it would be better if they understand that. I feel when you give, you have more. I feel that. And I don't believe in selling my limu. If I have it and somebody wants some, I'll just let them have it because my feeling is, it's like a gift, yeah."

According to its website, Kuaʻāina Ulu ʻAuamo (KUA) partnered with the ʻEwa Limu Project in 2014 to gather more than 30 traditional limu practitioners who represented the six Hawaiian Islands at Limu Hui. By coming together for four days of "learning, knowledge, sharing and discussion," the hoped-for result was to build trust, share knowledge and build collaboration toward common goals. The elders who hold traditional knowledge of limu and its practice live in mainly rural areas, and Aunty Vani is one of them.

Together with Mac, the two attended this year's Limu Hui in March. Speaking of past events, she says, "It's interesting you know, cuz everybody wants to learn the culture. And it's amazing how many people have different ways of doing things. We share. You see, I don't believe in keeping it to myself. I want the children to learn their culture. It's so important that they know how we do our thing."

So, the younger generation have a willingness, a desire to learn about traditional practices? "… they want to because I think they just ready, ripe for culture," Aunty shares. "So I'm willing to teach them. I guess now they're proud they're from Hawaiʻi. It doesn't mean that you gotta be Hawaiian to know. As long as you live in Hawaiʻi, you want to learn the culture so you can say, 'I'm from Hawaiʻi, I can talk about what the living is like.' So they willing to learn. It's like a hands-on thing … they want to learn. They willing to ask questions."

She recalls the time when one of her sons came to her and said he wanted to learn how to clean and prepare limu. She said, "Okay!" then told him to find other boys who wanted to learn as well.

" … we went and picked. We had sooo much limu. Plenty! Plenty! Plenty!" she exclaims. "All of them were cleaning — it was really nice you know, to see these men doing

it! I asked him, 'Why you want to learn how to do limu?' He told me, 'I married haole, mom. She ain't going pick me up limu!'" Aunty laughs and continues, "'She not going make limu for me. So I gotta go get my own!'" More laughter.

After talking about limu ʻeleʻele, Aunty wants to show us what it looks like. We walk a few steps down to the shallow waters skimming the shoreline. To the left we see Aliʻi Fishpond about a mile away; to the right sits Kalokoʻeli Fishpond. Both are being restored by Ka Honua Momona, of which Aunty Vani is a board member.

Aunty hums to herself as she goes to check on her limu to show us a specimen. "Here, this is one. Yeah, get plenty, but these are all old already," she says, eyes scanning the water. I ask how does she know it's old. "Ah, kinda brownish looking.

"See that right there? See those rocks there?" she points to some rocks barely breaking the surface. Walking toward them, she explains, "We put that rock in there to grow the limu. And then like this, this is what it looks like. See?" She plucks a patch of vibrant green, grassy-looking seaweed.

"This is limu ʻeleʻele. When you pick, you pick like this, and then you pluck the end. You pluck the end so you get the roots out. And then you accumulate all like this, get pans of it, and clean. You rinse it under the water, then massage it. And it comes all silky afterwards, once it's clean. See? Interesting, huh?

"It'll be even better once you get plenty and you rub and rub and rub. And the thing, when you pick ʻum up, just so-o-oft, silky, good when you eat ʻum with salt!" We all break into laughter.

"But you see, all this is gorilla ogo," she says, pointing to an accumulation of the invasive species beached at the high water mark.

Gorilla ogo was introduced to Hawaiʻi for aquaculture research to produce agar used to make a vegetarian gelatin or thickening agent. According to the DLNR, it prevents young corals and seaweeds from attaching to the ocean floor to grow and doesn't allow larger animals to access holes and crevices, thus changing the ocean floor habitat.

But Aunty has found that gorilla ogo can be delicious too. "When you prepare it, it's good!" she says. "You just gotta blanch it longer. They tough, yeah, I noticed when I used to not blanch it long enough, it was tough. But if I blanch it long, kinda cook it, it comes out really good. Come just like regular ogo. But they so invasive!"

Continuing to scour the water and hum to herself, Aunty finds another limu. "This is one that looks like cabbage, yeah?" she says, picking a bright green limu with flat branches. "This is pālahalaha; it's like nori. But this, you cut ʻum up with what we call huluhuluwaena; it makes beautiful, edible limu. This is ʻono. You know what I usually do with this one? I tell you, pick it up, take it home, rinse it out, wash it, and all you do is chop it up and throw ʻum in your omelet. Oh, it's good!"

In a moment of reflection, she says, "When I was in my prime, everyday I would be down at the ocean out there, looking for different kind of limu. You cannot find too many that my dad used to use to make with the raw squid, you know. Used to have the līpeʻepeʻe and all that. You no can find those anymore because of this invasive limu. It's sad.

"That's the reason why I like to investigate when I go down the beach, look, you know, see what kind get. And try make different type of limu, how to prepare it …"

We stand on Aunty's patch of beach bordered by ancient fishponds the community is endeavoring to bring back. In this place seemingly untouched by technology, urban growth and human impact, they still affect Molokaʻi's environment.

And so Aunty Vani does what she can to give back to her community, sitting on five different boards, and is still busy today, sharing her limu secrets and philosophy with a younger generation who are ready to listen and learn.