

BARBARA ARGENTO DENNIG

Bruschetta, 2016
Oil on Canvas, 33 x 50 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

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Hawaii's Abundant and Ignored Earth

How people and nature
are intertwined on
the islands

To visit Hana, a small, remote town on the island of Maui, most people wake at the crack of dawn, hop in convertible mustangs, and drive the forty-five miles from the regional airport, returning the same day. The highway sinews along the lip of the Pacific, clinging to a verdant cliff, as drivers white knuckle across fifty one-lane bridges. Maui's dry western and central regions morph into a lush wonderland, with vines dripping off mile markers, ginger flowers abloom along the mountains, albatross skirting the cliffs, and waterfalls gushing into crystal pools. Drivers new to the highway slow every few feet to snap photos of natural pools fed by springs, elongating a drive that could take about two hours to well over four. But for most visitors, the town itself is uninspiring. It sits in one of the poorest parts of Hawaii, where 59 percent of residents are unemployed, and the per capita annual income runs just over \$16,000. But my experience was different.

My journey was the culmination of an interest in island sustainability that had begun some three months earlier in a hotel in Pebble Beach, California. Backed by the setting sun, a cool wind blowing through the lobby, Roy Yamaguchi, owner and head chef of Roy's Restaurants, smiled uncomfortably as he explained that if there were a disaster in Hawaii, the state might last just four or five days before goods would run out. "Eighty-five percent of our food is grown and produced elsewhere," he informed us as he waved to an elderly hunchbacked farmer leaving the luau. "Farmers," he added, "are our rock stars." But, sadly, "the average age of Hawaii's farmers is sixtyish." Yamaguchi built his restaurant empire by honoring the abundance of our fiftieth state. In his restaurants, he threw open the windows, let the sea breeze inside, served fish caught by local fishermen, and showcased the fruits and vegetables of the tropics.

Yamaguchi's desire to bring the farm back to Hawaii's tables was a novelty. Hawaii's food scene in the 1980s orbited plate lunch spots like Oahu's Rainbow Drive-In and fast food chains like Zippy's. Here eaters could score massive plates of roasted meats and gravy (imported from the mainland), two scoops of rice (imported from Asia), and macaroni salad (again, flown in).

Yamaguchi's desire to return to the land is not a concept new to Hawaii. Ancient Hawaiians constructed triangle-shaped growing regions called *ahupuaa*. These