

Eating Local: Nostalgia, Identities, and Japanese American Delicatessens in Hawai'i

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Global cultural flows of foodways follow paths of people, economies, and power. This is nowhere better illustrated than in Hawai'i, which boasts a multicultural, multiethnic population derived from waves of immigrants. The sugar industry and the plantation system that built up around it remained the dominant source of Hawai'i's economy from the 1800s until 2008, when the last sugar mills closed, thus ending an era and way of life. The countries of Northeast Asia have been a main source of plantation-based immigration, dating to the mid-nineteenth century with first Chinese (1865), Japanese (1885), and then Korean (1896) influxes. Among these, Japanese constituted by far the largest



group, so that by the 1930s they comprised 40 percent of the population. Although that proportion has shrunk to 16.7 percent in the 2000s, the influence of Japanese culture in Hawai'i's multicultural mix remains strong.

In this paper I take *okazuya* (Japanese American delicatessens) as a case study for examining paths of people, economies, and power in Hawai'i. I argue that

these food establishments – originally geared to blue-collar workers – have become sites of multicultural, local nostalgia extended to include a white-collar world. Food plays a critical part in encoding contemporary nostalgia for what is symbolized as the plantation era. This paper explores what that means in culinary terms, reflected not only in the food served at *okazuya*, but also in its ways of serving and interpersonal business relations. With Japanese food as its base, the *okazuya* has become a flexible food institution that has incorporated foods from China and Korea within its compass. By doing so, it has made the transition from a Japanese American food establishment to a “local” one, from blue-collar to a mixed-class site. The question remains, however, in what forms *okazuya* will manage to survive twenty-first century challenges of globalization, recession, generational changes, and new immigrant population mixes.



Lecture in English

No prior registration necessary

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