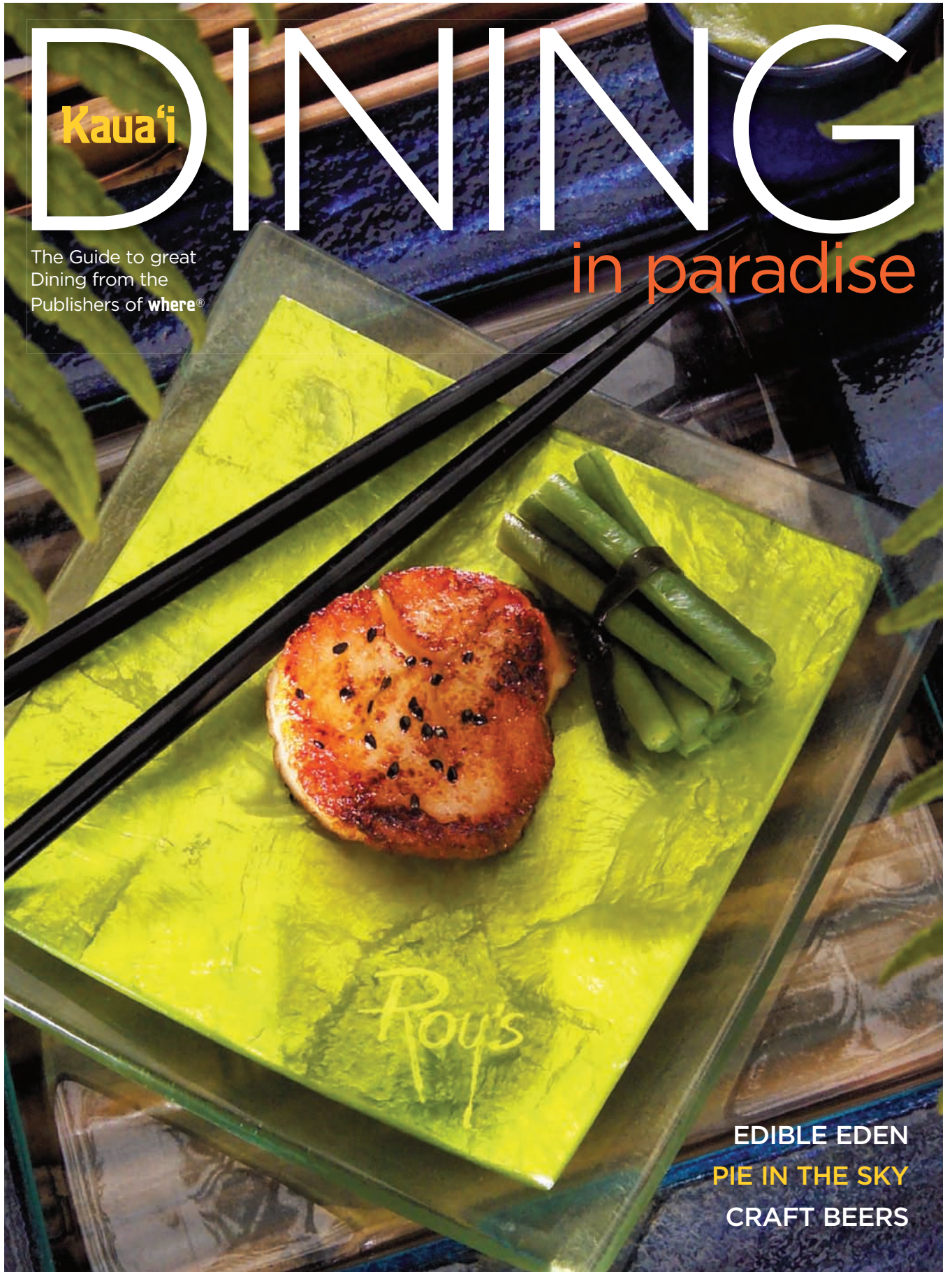


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THE RIGHT SLICE

FORMER WISCONSIN NATIVE LEAVES THE COLD WINTERS OF
THE MIDWEST BEHIND TO PURSUE HER PASSION FOR BAKING.

BY KRISTEN NEMOTO | PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINNY MORRIS





She's been called "crazy," "fussy" and "difficult to work with." At least that's what Sandy Poehnelt, the owner and creator of The Right Slice pie shop, says about herself. Is she crazy for wanting to escape the blistery winters of Wisconsin to the gorgeous sun-filled days in Kaua'i? Is she fussy for not wanting to add preservatives or loads of syrupy gooeyness in her pies? Is she difficult to work with because she adheres to her values of "good wholesome ingredients" and strays away from cashing in on endless freezer burns in Costco? Nope, Poehnelt is just a bit hard on herself. But for good reason, as this year marks the fourth anniversary of The Right Slice in the tight-knit town of Lihu'e.

"I never thought it would get to this," Poehnelt says with a wide smile. "I just wanted to live here and pay rent. I never expected to do what I love to do."

Born and raised in Wisconsin, Poehnelt got a taste of the Kaua'i life in 2009 when her sales job took her out to the island to work for weeks at a time. It only took two trips for her to decide that the next one would be a permanent move.

"I just knew that this was my home," she says. "I didn't think twice about it. I knew this is where I wanted to live."

In July 2009, Poehnelt did just that. She moved and soon found herself going back into what she originally loved to do: Bake.

"I grew up around baking," Poehnelt says. "My grandmothers on both sides were bakers and made amazing pies for Christmas and birthdays ... it brought great memories back for me when I baked."

With some experience as a culinary chef, Poehnelt started working at Hanapepe Café and helped with lunch orders of salads and sandwiches. She soon took over the dessert menu and made her first apple pie.

From there, Poehnelt says business "just took off."

"We started to become known for our pies," she laughs. "I didn't expect it at all but people loved them."

Pies soon became more popular than the lunches and Poehnelt realized the demand was greater than the supply. The market in Lihu'e, however, was unfamiliar with the "pie scene,"

so Poehnelt started selling her homemade goods by the slice at the Hanapepe Art Night Festival. Flavors of mango, lilikoi, guava and mountain apples were devised in the mix and locals started to fall in love. The Right Slice began to grow immensely, but Poehnelt and her team of two couldn't keep up.

Luckily, with the help of a "friend of a friend," Poehnelt was able to share kitchen space with the people from Anahola Granola in Hanapepe. For nearly two years, Poehnelt and her team would wait until Anahola was done with their shift in the late afternoon and then bake until the early morning hours. When business started to snowball, Poehnelt decided to venture out and find a place of her own. After months of searching, an owner of a small shop located in the back of an industrial center in Puhi became interested in The Right Slice's business plan.

"It's such a great location," Poehnelt says. "I couldn't have asked for a better spot. It's a place that you need to know by word-of-mouth but I think that's what makes it special."

Word-of-mouth has become Poehnelt's unofficial marketing campaign. The reputation grew with every fruit-filled, deep-dished pie made entirely from scratch and with locally-grown ingredients. Raving testimonials on Yelp and Facebook made first-time visitors to Kaua'i list The Right Slice as their "must eat" or "take home" stopping ground before heading off to the airport.

Poehnelt was touched by the overwhelming generosity she received from the community. An "amazing response," she says, as she understands her circumstance as an "outsider" could have been another story.

"Locals here didn't have to support me at all," she says. "But everyone I've met — the farmers, locals, visitors, businesses — have contributed in making this shop what it is today. A place where people can come and feel part of a community and have some good comfort food."

Although Poehnelt's dreams have "already come true," she hopes to one day open a shop near her hometown in Wisconsin. But she volunteers her family to take over in the winter.

"It's too cold!" says Poehnelt, breaking out in laughter. "I could help in the summer time but for now I'll be on Kaua'i."

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FORMER WISCONSIN NATIVE SANDY POEHNELT HAS FOUND SWEET SUCCESS WITH THE RIGHT SLICE. HER POPULAR PIE SHOP NOW SHOWCASES A VARIETY OF FLAVORS, FROM TRADITIONAL APPLE TO TROPICAL MANGO-PASSIONFRUIT.

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Gourmet Farmer's Market, Wednesdays,
4-6 p.m., The Shops at Kukui'ula, 2829
Ala Kalamikaumaka, Kōloa.

Hanapepe Art Night, Fridays, 4-9 p.m.,
Hanapepe Town.

The Right Slice retail shop is located
at 1543 Haleukana St. in Puhi, open
Monday through Saturday, 11 a.m.-
6 p.m. For an updated calendar of
where The Right Slice will be, go to
rightslice.com/calendar

