

Midweek

Don't miss your chance!
Advertise your business
in Oahu's only official
telephone directory!

Call
275-3992
today!



TONY TAKITANI AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY

The Willy Wonka of Hawaii, Hawaiian Host chairman of the board Tony Takitani carries on a family tradition that began 80 years ago. He's definitely the Islands' candy man

200 Million Pieces Of Happiness

That's the number of pieces of candy annually produced by Hawaiian Host, the company Tony Takitani's family established 80 years ago

By ALICE KEESING

In small-kid times, Tony Takitani remembers watching his auntie and a handful of other women sitting around a table at his uncle's Maui candy store, dipping macadamia nuts in melted chocolate.

Those were the early days of Hawaiian Host, the Islands' iconic candy company. This year Hawaiian Host is celebrating its 80th birthday and Takitani, now all grown up, is chairman of the board. These days the company is based in an Iwilei factory where the women around the table have been replaced by hordes of hair-netted employees and a glistening, high-tech conveyer belt turning out chocolates in quantities that those ladies could never have dreamed of. Things have changed, but Takitani is still fascinated by the chocolate-making process.

"I never tire of watching this," he says as the conveyer belt glides row upon row of chocolates toward a group of workers who deftly pack them into trays ready for the ubiquitous brown-and-yellow tiki box.

Hawaii's Willy Wonka tradition started in 1927 when a sweet shop called Ellen Dye Candies opened its doors on a small street corner in Honolulu. The store made the first docu-

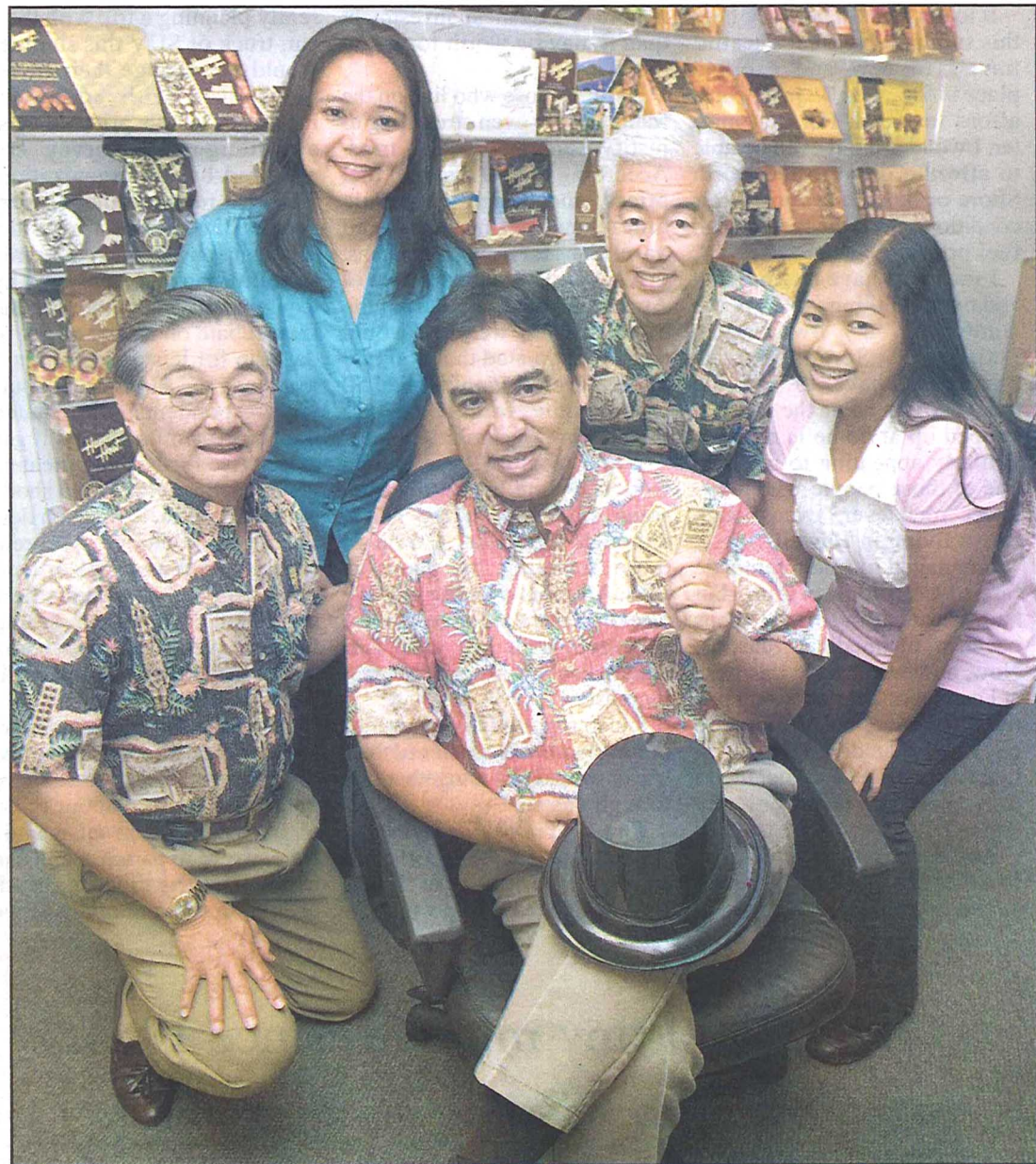
mented chocolate-covered macadamia nut.

Some time later, over on Maui, Mamoru Takitani was working on his own version of the candy. After putting in a day's work at the family company, Star Ice and Soda Works, Takitani and his wife, Aiko, headed to the attic and experimented with different blends of chocolates. Finding a taste they loved, they started dipping mac nuts — a whole and a half per candy — into this secret blend.

In 1960, Mamoru Takitani bought Ellen Dye Candies and renamed it Hawaiian Host. Their goal was to make 100 boxes of chocolate macadamia nuts a day. Now, Hawaiian Host produces an average of more than 4,000 boxes a day — or 200 million pieces of candy a year. The company employs more than 200 people, has a second chocolate-making plant in California, a distribution company in Japan and two nut-cracking plants on the Big Island. And it still uses that secret chocolate blend developed in the attic.

"It's locked in the vault," says company president Keith Sakamoto with a laugh. Then he adds — sadly — that he'd have to shoot you if he divulged the recipe.

Mamoru passed away in 1988 and Aiko in 2006, but now



Hawaiian Host is offering a Wonka-like contest to find Golden Tickets such as those held by Tony Takitani. With him, from left, Dennis Teranishi, Rosalie Romo Char, Keith Sakamoto and KC Alonzo

there's a Takitani back in the Hawaiian Host mix again. After those early years on Maui, Tony Takitani had nothing else to do

with his uncle's company until 2004, when then-chairman Colbert Matsumoto asked him if he'd be interested in serving on the board. It's just a natural fit for Takitani to become chairman, Sakamoto says.

A former state representative, Takitani's "real" job is as a personal injury attorney on Maui, where he lives with his wife and two children. Over

the years he has volunteered his time with numerous causes from the Maui Arts and Cultural Center to the Domestic Violence Clearinghouse Legal Hotline.

But it doesn't take long to figure out that this is someone who is always up for a bit of fun. He likes to go karaoke sometimes ("He's an amazing singer," Sakamoto chips in) and he loves to play guitar. He insists that he does so badly, but he does have something of a collection, including two vintage Martins, one of which sounds so sweet that his buddy Willie K wants to record with it.

Takitani gained an unusual sideways kind of fame recently with the release of the movie, *Tony Takitani*. That is his name, Takitani explains, but the story has nothing to do with him.

The whole thing got started when acclaimed Japanese writer Haruki Murakami was on Maui and bought one of Takitani's old

political campaign T-shirts.

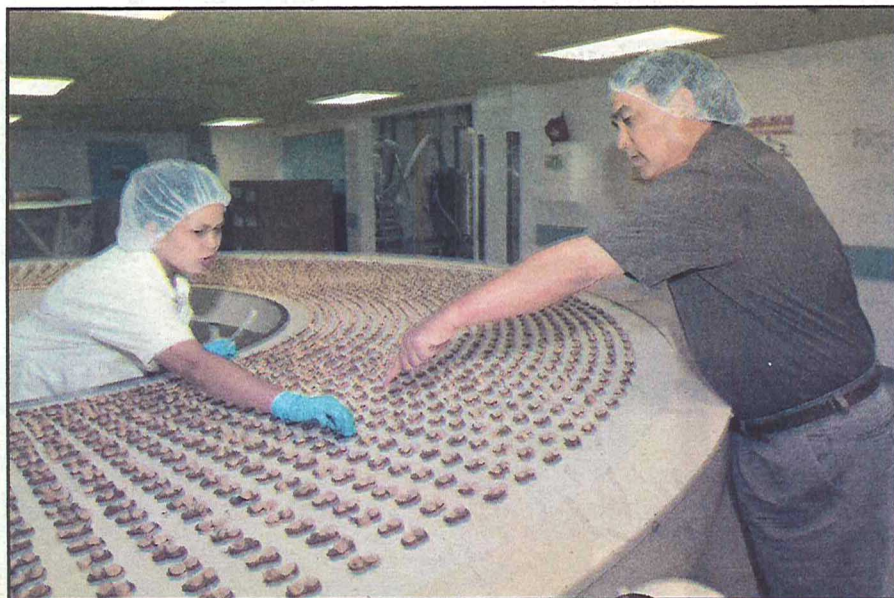
"I just got information over the years as to how this happened," Takitani explains. "But he said that every time he wore the shirt the name screamed for a story."

When the movie was released in 2005, Takitani and his friends had their own celebration.

"We had fun with it; we had our own gala with a red carpet," he says laughing and describing a 2-square-foot section on the floor.

Takitani also loves the time he spends with the people at Hawaiian Host. This is a place, he says, that lives up to its stated values of working with aloha.

Mamoru and Aiko Takitani never had children of their own, but they touch the lives of hundreds of children in Hawaii through the Mamoru and Aiko Takitani Foundation. Every



Tony Takitani tells Mely Pacheco about the old days of hand-dipping macadamia nuts

Tony Takitani & The Golden Ticket

FROM PAGE 34

year since 1993 the foundation has granted scholarships to a senior at nearly every high school in the state. To date, the foundation has given out nearly \$1 million, and Takitani wants to see that effort continue to grow.

“The more we can do for students, the more satisfying it feels,” he says.

Along with that good work, Takitani and Sakamoto also like to think that they deliver 200 million pieces of happiness to people all around the world every year. That distinctive tiki box can be found in 24 countries from Brunei to China to the Philippines.

Along with the macadamia nuts, Hawaiian Host turns out candies with the tastes and textures of butter-glazed popcorn, caramel, crispy rice, sweet tof-



Hawaiian Host top leadership, from left, Mark Yamada, Dennis Maeda, Dennis Teranishi, Tony Takitani, Keith Sakamoto and Ahmad Yu

fee, almonds, Hawaiian honey, Kona coffee ... not to mention the organic and sugar-free offerings.

What's Takitani's favorite? “I love all our products,” he says happily. “But, really, I still prefer the original — it's a great piece of candy.” That original whole-and-a-half that the ladies used to sit around the table dipping in that special blend of melted chocolate way back when on Maui.

To celebrate the 80th anniversary, Hawaiian Host is offering a Wonka-life Golden Ticket contest.

Sixty thousand golden tickets have been placed in various products in Hawaii, each with a number. Enter it at the company's website to find out if you're one of 80 finalists to win a trip to Australia for two, and a tour of the chocolate factory with four friends.

Nathalie Walker photo nwalker@midweek.com