

O'AHU

Truly Native

Tucked among the warehouses of Kāne'ohe, something very Hawaiian is going on. Joe and Kristen Souza, owners of Kanile'a 'Ukulele, have created the first-ever all-Hawaiian uke. Except for the ebony saddle, nut and bridge pins, the four-string tenor 'ukulele is made entirely from the deadfall of endemic Island trees: koa, kolohala, 'ōhi'a, even the aromatic 'iliahi (sandalwood). They've named it the Ua Mau Hawaiian Endemic. Ua mau ("everlasting") are the opening words of Hawai'i's state motto, "Ua mau ke ea o ka 'āina i ka pono," usually translated as "the life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness."

The Souzas have been making ukes since 1993, and like most Island luthiers they get much of their wood—mahogany, rosewood, maple—from outside Hawai'i. But they'd always dreamed of making Hawai'i's indigenous stringed instrument truly indigenous—to "find the right combination of tone woods from all endemic woods. That was a challenge," Joe says. To do it, the Souzas bought nearly a hundred acres on Hawai'i Island and began planting native trees, making their company the only instrument manufacturer in the world to grow its own forest for source wood. This also offsets the carbon footprint for their family, their twenty-two employees, their manufacturing and their shipping, so that Kanile'a is completely carbon-neutral—another first for an instrument maker. The Souzas are experimenting with another endemic wood—lama—as an alternative to ebony. If all goes well, the Ua Mau will eventually be 100 percent Hawaiian.

You can't buy an Ua Mau; it's available only as a gift to those who plant one thousand koa trees through the nonprofit Hawaiian Legacy Reforestation Initiative. However, the Souzas recently debuted a second all-Hawaiian uke, the Maoli Nō ("true native"), at last January's National Association of Music Merchants show in Anaheim, the world's largest musical instrument trade show. "It was so well received," says Joe, and not just because it's native and forest-friendly. "It's gorgeous—an earthy, old-school uke—but it's also very playable, and the endemic woods give it a really warm, round tone."

The Maoli Nō goes for \$4,195—a price that includes a koa and an 'iliahi planted on Hawai'i Island (along with their GPS coordinates should the buyer ever want to visit them). But be ready to jam. The Maoli Nō "isn't for exhibit," Joe says. "It's meant to be played."

—Lynn Cook / Photo by Dana Edmunds

kanileaukulele.com