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Isle maker of wooden pens opens up store in the Ilikai

By [Erika Engle](#)

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1 / 2



COURTESY SIMPLY WOOD STUDIOS

Simply Wood Studios has expanded into a third retail location

Aaron Lau spun a burden on his conscience and a passion into a new career, and his businesses are expanding.

The maker of koa wood pens under the Lau Lau Woodworks name, Lau recently opened his third Simply Wood Studios store, his second in Waikiki.

WHERE TO BUY

Oahu

- » Simply Wood Studios: Ilikai Hotel, Royal Hawaiian Center and 932 Kapahulu Ave.
- » Na Mea Hawaii, Kakaako
- » Island Treasures, Kailua

Maui

- » Totally Hawaiian, Lahaina

Kauai

- » The Koa Store, Koloa

Online

- » laulauwoodworks.com
- » simplywood.bigcartel.com

The new shop is in the Ilikai at 1777 Ala Moana Blvd., off the main lobby on the path to Cinnamon's Cafe. Its sister stores are at Royal Hawaiian Center and at 932 Kapahulu Ave., "across from Leonard's Bakery," said Lau. His wares also are available online from his website but also at other retail locations around the islands and in several states on the mainland and in Japan.

Lau's koa pens incorporate other components including inlays of stone, shell and colorful surfboard resin, to name a few. Some designs have grips comprising reclaimed leather. His pens, styluses and letter openers are specially coated to protect them from ultraviolet rays and to preserve their appearance, and range in price from

\$45 to \$211.

While he makes the pens according to his own designs, some aspects of Lau's pens cannot be affordably manufactured in Hawaii. So, with a manufacturer in Taiwan, he started co-designing "a lot of the metal hardware" on his pens. The square-topped upper barrel of his Modern pen line is one of those designs, for instance.

In addition to Lau Lau Woodworks pens of various styles, the shops sell made-in-Hawaii products created by local artisans.

During his craft fair years, "I started to get to know a lot of the artists," he said. "I recognized that artists have to compete globally now," given the Internet, large retailers such as Walmart and other factors, so he dipped his toe into retail with a kiosk at Ward Warehouse, "to get an idea of what it's like to have a retail store."

He then opened his Kapahulu gallery, where his workshop also is located.

Formerly a financial planner, he had started making pens as a hobby. Over time he realized he could make money with the pens, at about the same time activity in his industry was giving him ethical pause.

Lau's financial work soured for him "during the tech bubble and the mortgage bubble, and with all the corruption (he thought), 'This is not an industry I want to be part of,'" he said.

Still needing to make a living, he kept on, and tried his hand at a craft fair.

"I did \$2,500 that weekend," he said. That was 11 years ago.

Lau was making six figures as a financial planner, he said, but seeing what was happening in the industry, "I learned that my integrity is more important than money."

He makes no claim of perfection, though. "I know I personally have my faults ... (but) if you live your life with integrity, you can develop relationships that will last your entire life," he said.

"I pay my artists on time, and I stand by them," he said.

The more than 70 artisans whose work he sells in Simply Wood Studios include jewelry makers, seamstresses, photographers, painters and furniture makers, to name a few categories. "I have a whole gamut of stuff now," he said.

Lau's interest in woodworking was forged during his small-kid years, while being around his grandfather, who let him hammer nails and help with sanding.

As a teenager, Lau created half pipes for skateboarding but said his dad would let him use only a jigsaw, which Lau said is not the most efficient tool for the purpose.

After his grandfather's death, Lau made furniture and boxes, and quickly learned that, one, wood is expensive, and two, he didn't really enjoy either activity.

A two-page how-to article in a woodworking magazine inspired him. "I want to try that," he said to himself. "I bought a lathe, and I started making pens on my own," he said.

“All the other woodworkers” would tell him the koa pens wouldn’t sell because “everybody was importing” pens from places like China.

“Sure enough, I wasn’t selling koa pens, people weren’t buying them.”

He needed a way to differentiate himself, so he started collecting scraps, such as ebony and other types of wood. “Me being Chinese, I didn’t want to waste wood,” he chuckled.

Using the scraps to incorporate inlay into his pen designs was the differentiation that set Lau on his current path. His next project is a trade show in Portland, Ore., where he hopes to make more business contacts.

“Buy Local” each Aloha Friday is about made-inHawaii products and the people who make them. Reach Erika Engle at 529-4303, erika@staradvertiser.com, or on Twitter as [@erikaengle](https://twitter.com/erikaengle).