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HAWAII'S MELTING POT

It will take more than a can of Spam to foil Honolulu's reputation as a fine-dining destination. Liani Solari meets the people who are growing the culinary movement known as Hawaii Regional Cuisine.

Clockwise from above: The movement known as Hawaii Regional Cuisine has put Honolulu on the map as a culinary destination; Chef George Mavro is a co-founder of the movement; The one food that unites the peoples of Hawaii is fish; RumFire at Sheraton Waikiki prides itself on its innovative pupu (tapas) menu; Hawaii Regional Cuisine has led to the proliferation of farmers markets.



Hollering and chaos – that's what I'm half expecting at 6.30am when I slip into a pair of gumboots, walk through a shallow sanitising bath and enter the chilly bidding room at the Honolulu Fish Auction on Oahu. But there's none of that; nor is there any trace of a fishy smell. Auction manager Brooks Takenaka evidently runs a tight ship.

The auction is a finely tuned process that sees the fishing vessels dock and unload their catch from 1am in order of arrival. By 5.30am each fish has been weighed, tagged, displayed on pallets and kept clean and cold. I arrive in time to see the wholesale, retail and restaurant buyers moving in a packed formation along the neat rows of pallets, bidding, just out of earshot, for the last of the sashimi-quality *ahi* (bigeye and yellowfin tuna) and swordfish harvested this morning from the Pacific Ocean.

I'm here at the auction with Honolulu restaurateurs Chef George Mavro and his wife, Donna Jung, who have offered to introduce me to the people behind the scenes – the harvesters and producers

– of Oahu's burgeoning fine-dining movement. Given that Oahu's balmy year-round climate, rich volcanic soils and oceanic 'farm' provide the ideal conditions for growing and harvesting top-quality produce, the island's identity as a foodies' destination is surprisingly recent.

Before the early 1990s, Hawaii's culinary identity was plagued by low self-esteem and the belief that the local food was mundane, so restaurants that aspired to be up-market would import European chefs and their exotic menus.

"Visitors had their choice of dining in pricey restaurants on frozen, shipped-in, picked-before-it's-ripe food, or in tourist establishments that distorted traditional Hawaiian cooking for Western tastes," wrote Janice Wald Henderson in *The New Cuisine of Hawaii*. "Small wonder that Hawaii had long been regarded as a paradise for beaches but a wasteland for food."

The watershed for Hawaii's food scene was Hawaii Regional Cuisine, a culinary movement founded in 1991 by Honolulu restaurateurs Chef Mavro, >

Chef Alan Wong, Chef Roy Yamaguchi and nine other chefs in Hawaii.

“When we got together we had two goals,” Chef Alan recalls. “One was to develop an agricultural network in Hawaii and the other was to put Hawaii on the map as a culinary destination.”

With the movement gaining momentum over recent years, intrepid palates are now spoiled for choice when it comes to Honolulu’s fine-dining menus that showcase fresh local ingredients and innovatively blend Hawaii’s diverse ethnic flavours, which range from Hawaiian and Japanese to Filipino, Chinese, Latin American and European.

“When guests come to our restaurants we want them to be able to taste Hawaii through the flavours and products we feature on our menus,” Chef Alan says. “It’s about evoking a sense of place.”

The catchcry in this place, I’m quickly realising, is ‘farm to table’, and if there’s one food that unites the peoples of Hawaii, it’s fish, particularly sashimi and *poke* (Hawaiian marinated raw fish, usually yellowfin tuna).

Two nights ago my tastebuds had been treated to Chef Mavro’s *hamachi poke* (yellowtail) and caviar at his eponymous restaurant. It had been a delicious scene starring the cook, the wife, the sommelier and the six-course degustation menu featuring fresh fish purchased from that morning’s auction and organic produce sourced from local boutique farms.

Today, however, I’m dodging fast-moving pallets laden with monster fish, trying to fathom the skill required to transform these magnificent creatures into the delicate, intricate plates for which Chef Mavro is renowned, when he expresses a sentiment I will hear from other top chefs on the island. “I never waste anything. When I buy a fish I always use all of it,” he says, conceding that a good chef must therefore also be a good butcher.

This deep-seated respect for nature’s bounty and the genuine desire to support sustainability seem to be at the heart of Hawaii Regional Cuisine. Sustainable fishing is paramount, Takenaka tells me, adding that Hawaii’s improved longline fishing technology and regulations

have reduced the number of accidental interactions with sea turtles and seabirds.

It’s at our next stop, MA’O Organic Farms in Wai’anae, that I realise there’s nothing faddish or elitist about Hawaii Regional Cuisine. Chef Mavro sources produce from this farm that is priming the next generation of food producers and perhaps even chefs by offering internships to high school and college students. The interns’ energy and enthusiasm is contagious – a by-product of the high level of responsibility they are given in co-managing the farm, planting, harvesting and packing fruits and vegetables for delivery to restaurants and farmers markets, and handling business transactions with top chefs and produce buyers.

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Jon Abell, an intern with a wide grin, shows me around the 6.7-hectare property, proudly pointing out the work they’re doing to transform a former chicken shed into an alfresco chefs’ arena complete with a wood-fired oven that the interns have built by hand. Having sampled their signature ‘Sassy’ mesclun of tat soi, kale, mustard greens, arugula and lettuce, I leave the farm with a spring in my step.

That night, it’s with a clear conscience – and a picture-perfect view of Diamond Head mountain at sunset – that I order the sustainably fished poke on corn chips from the *pupu* (tapas) menu at RumFire, Sheraton Waikiki’s entertainment hub by the water. My culinary explorations then come full circle at The Royal Hawaiian’s Azure restaurant next door when I order the baked *moi*, which the restaurant had purchased fresh that morning from the fish auction. It’s a dish to die for – precisely the threat to commoners who



Clockwise from far left: Hawaii Regional Cuisine co-founder Chef Roy Yamaguchi; Sashimi and poke (marinated raw fish) are staples; Jon Abell and Cheryse Sana from MA’O Organic Farms sell the fruits of their labour at the Kapiolani Community College Farmers’ Market; At The Royal Hawaiian’s Azure restaurant the baked *moi* is a dish to die for; Wholesale, retail and restaurant buyers outbid one another at the Honolulu Fish Auction.



THE ROYAL HAWAIIAN, A LUXURY COLLECTION RESORT

honolulu



Whether they can afford to dine in top restaurants or not, members of the community have access to restaurant-quality fresh produce.

dared to eat this fish once reserved for royalty. Teasing the tender flesh from the crisp skin, I marry a mouthful of moi with the accompanying Sumida watercress in a delectable farm-to-table moment.

I rise early the next day, eager to soak up the atmosphere of the Kapiolani Community College (KCC) Farmers' Market held every Saturday from 7.30am to 11am at Diamond Head. Up to 100 vendors of locally produced foods, from grass-fed beef, sea asparagus and Asian greens to garlic shrimp, fried green tomatoes, Portuguese sausages and sweet tropical fruit salad, set up shop here every week. Students from KCC's Culinary Institute of the Pacific, which is co-chaired by Chef Alan and Chef Roy, are on hand to help market-goers navigate this multicultural feast. "The culinary school is in a unique position," Chef Alan says, "because Hawaii, with its ethnic diversity, is truly the melting pot of the Pacific."

Across the sea of early-rising gourmets I spy some familiar faces running one of

the foodstalls – the interns from MA'O Organic Farms in their 'No panic... Go organic' T-shirts – and it occurs to me that members of the community, whether they can afford to dine in top restaurants or not, have access to restaurant-quality fresh produce via these markets.

As Chef Alan concedes, "One of the most noticeable changes in the food scene in Honolulu has been the proliferation of farmers markets where the public can now buy, direct from the farmers, ingredients that used to be available to them only in restaurants – products such as local beef and abalone, for instance."

The locals, of course, are no slouches when it comes to dining out on Saturday night, but it's unlikely they can keep 'Honolulu's hidden hot spot', Side Street Inn, a secret for much longer. This karaoke and sports bar, with its grungy streetscape, unpretentious decor and relaxed atmosphere, is a favourite haunt of all and sundry, including the island's top chefs, so I have high expectations.

Above, from left: Try the lychee martini at Wolfgang's Steakhouse; Restaurant-quality food is as close as the nearest farmers market; Side Street Inn is a crowd-pleaser.

The food here is served in the traditional local pupu style and is designed to be shared. Our group of 11 orders up big, flouting any high-cholesterol warnings with a decadent banquet that includes spicy chicken (boneless strips battered, marinated and deep-fried), pan-fried pork chops and Chef Colin Nishida's famous fried rice, chased down with fried butter pound cake, brownies and ice-cream.

The next night, I'm sitting at the bar at Wolfgang's Steakhouse By Wolfgang Zwiener at the Royal Hawaiian Center, sipping a pre-dinner lychee martini. I'm salivating at the thought of tucking into a big, juicy porterhouse steak – and that's after I've poked my head inside the restaurant's dry-ageing room, where sides of New York prime beef are developing mould under exact temperature and humidity controls for 28 days to tenderise the meat. You might expect this level of artisanry in a Slow Food village in Italy, not a tourist mecca in the US, which is a further testament to the leap that Hawaii's food scene has made. 

Getting there • Virgin Blue interline partner Hawaiian Airlines flies direct from Sydney to Honolulu every Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. To book your flight visit www.hawaiianair.com.au.