

A Taste of Paradise

Its cuisine was once synonymous with Spam and luau dishes. But thanks to a growing community of local chefs, restaurant owners and food producers, Honolulu is poised to be the next hot dining destination.

By **Sasha Gonzales**

Mention Hawaiian food and the last thing you think of is world-class cuisine. But that perception is about to change. Poke (pronounced poh-kay)—a quintessentially Hawaiian dish made from cubes of raw fish dressed with shoyu (Japanese soy sauce)—has been called the hottest food trend of 2016. Exotic tiki cocktails have also been making a revival in bars across the globe.

The multi-ethnic city of Honolulu is home to nearly half a million people who take their food seriously—you can't go anywhere without coming across upscale dining establishments, trendy coffeehouses, old-fashioned diners and food trucks, sometimes all in the one neighbourhood.

More and more people are also starting to recognise the importance of "eating local"—food that has been produced by the land or made from locally sourced ingredients. But it wasn't always this way.

CULTURAL MISH-MASH

You can't talk about Hawaiian cuisine without referencing what the Islands' first settlers ate. Prior to contact with Europeans and Asians, early Polynesians subsisted on a diet of yams, coconuts, breadfruit, kukui nuts, pork, seafood, a type of seaweed called limu, and taro, which they blended into a paste they called poi.

The end of the 18th century saw the arrival of American

and European missionaries and whalers, who introduced their own cuisine to the Islands. Immigrants from China, Korea, Japan, the Philippines and Portugal followed in the mid-1800s and early-1900s to work on the new sugarcane and pineapple plantations; these groups brought with them foods like Portuguese doughnuts and sweet bread, kimchi, *char siew bao*, *chow mein*, tofu, sushi and adobo-style meats.

The iconic Hawaiian "plate lunch" (similar to a Japanese bento), spam topped musubi rice blocks, and gravy soaked loco moco breakfasts are the culinary embodiment of these Polynesian and immigrant cultures.

GROWN HERE, NOT FLOWN HERE

As the Islands' population increased over the decades following statehood in 1959, so did its dependence on imported food. In the mid-1800s, the locals managed to survive on what they could get from the land and sea; but then big agricultural companies moved in and took over much of the local agricultural system (called *ahupua'a*) for their sugarcane and pineapple plantations and cattle ranches.

In the 1960s, as air travel became widespread, more tourists started arriving in Hawaii, triggering a greater demand for imported food. At the time, dining out in



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1. Pineapples at a local market.
2. The iconic Hawaiian plate lunch.
3. Farmlands
4. Cacao pods from Hawaii.
5. Madre Chocolate

Hawaii was nothing to write home about. Hotel chefs, who were usually European trained, were limited by what was available. More often than not, a meal at a restaurant would consist of ingredients that had spent weeks on a ship to get to Hawaii, and a token slice of pineapple to jazz it up.

It's no surprise then, that Hawaiian cuisine was largely viewed as uninspiring. But thankfully this is slowly starting to change. At the forefront of the movement is the Hawaiian Regional Cuisine (HRC), a concept that reflects Hawaii's ethnic culinary influences, but uses locally produced ingredients, incorporating them into contemporary dishes.

HRC was conceived by 12 prolific chefs

—Sam Choy, Philippe Padovani, Roger Dikon, Gary Strehl, Roy Yamaguchi, Alan Wong, Amy Ferguson, Jean-Marie Josselin, George Mavrothalassitis, Beverly Gannon, Peter Merriman and Mark Ellman—in the early 1990s. The group's main goals were to popularise Hawaiian cuisine internationally, reduce the state's reliance on imported food (and in turn minimising its carbon footprint), and give local farmers, ranchers and fishermen a platform to showcase their best produce.

MEET THE LOCAL FOOD PRODUCERS

Today, Hawaii's locavore movement is strong, but the state still imports about 90 percent of what it eats. With farmable land scarce

and expensive to lease, and farming essentials like fertiliser and energy costly – since even these have to be imported – growing more food on this fertile land is not as easy as you'd imagine.

Yet, these challenges haven't stopped Kolea Farm and Mohala Farms (both in the North Shore of Oahu island) from producing fruit and vegetables like ginger, watermelon, okra, eggplant, carrots, kale, sweet potatoes, taro, herbs, green beans, radishes and tomatoes.

You may be surprised to know that cacao grows well in Hawaii, too. Some of the best chocolate you'll ever taste is made in Kailua, just 45 minutes out of Honolulu. Nat Bletter, co-founder of the award-winning Madre Chocolate (20A Kainehe St, Kailua, tel: +1 808 377 6440, madrechocolate.com)

shares what makes his chocolates so special: "Hawaii is the only truly tropical part of the US that has enough rainfall and warm enough temperatures to grow the Amazonian native cacao tree. In addition, the volcanic soil and interesting variations between each valley lead to a wide range of unique flavours that we can select from, to give you pineapple notes or black pepper and Brazil nut flavours in the chocolate."

And of course, what's Hawaiian cuisine without seafood? Much of the Islands' supply comes from the Honolulu Fish Auction, which takes place every morning, six days a week, at Pier 38.

At about 1am, fishing vessels



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start unloading their catch. The fish are then weighed, labelled, and displayed on pallets of ice. Once the bidding starts at 5.30am, Pier 38 transforms into a hub of activity, which only ends at 9am when the last fish is sold. Chef Shaymus Alwin of the award-winning Azure Restaurant (*The Royal Hawaiian Hotel, 2259 Kalakaua Ave, Honolulu, tel: +1 808 923 7311, azurewaikiki.com*) gets his fish from the auction, turning them into dishes like Hokkaido Scallop & Foie Gras and Auction Block Sashimi.

A NEW CULINARY LANDSCAPE

Modern Hawaiian Cuisine probably best reflects all the culinary styles going on today, with a heavy emphasis on local ingredients.

12th Ave Grill (*1120 12th Ave, Honolulu, +1 808 732 9469, 12thavegrill.com*) is one of the best places to experience this new style of cuisine. In fact, just this October, the restaurant picked up the prestigious gold medal for the 2017 Hale Aina Award for Best Farm-to-Table Restaurant in Hawaii.

"We make everything in-house from scratch, using as many locally sourced ingredients as possible," says 12th Ave Grill chef and owner, Kevin Hanney. "All of our beef, for example, comes from Maui Cattle Company; our lamb, from Makaweli Meat Company; our oysters and shrimp, from Kualoa Ranch; and our figs, cinnamon sticks and calamansi limes, from Adaptation Farms." Hanney transforms these ingredients into heart-warming dishes, like Grilled Maui Cattle Co. Beef Tenderloin, served with local greens and tomatoes and crostini topped with locally made goat cheese.

This April, local restaurateur and chef Ed Kenney opened Mahina & Sun's (*Surfjack Hotel, 412 Lewers St, Honolulu, +1 808 564 7608, surfjack.com*), which uses fresh, local, sustainable fish like opakapaka (pink snapper), uhu (parrotfish) and a'u ku (broadbill swordfish), oysters from Kualoa Ranch, and local fruit and vegetables, like passion fruit and sweet potatoes.

Kenney is widely regarded as a hero of the city's "field to fork" movement, but this isn't the first time he's taken island cuisine to the next level. He also owns three other restaurants: Kaimuki Suprette (*3458 Waialae Ave, Honolulu, +1 808 734 7800, kaimukisuprette.com*), a cafeteria-style spot serving locally sourced breakfasts and



6. Fresh island caught fish.
7. Honolulu Fish Auction.
8. Kevin Hanney, chef and owner of 12th Ave Grill.
9. 12th Ave Grill's pork chop with baked apple chutney.
10. Azure Restaurant procures seafood from the Honolulu Fish Auction for making dishes like the Hokkaido Scallop & Foie Gras.



seasonal veggies; Town (*3435 Waialae Ave, +1 808 735 5900, townkaimuki.com*), the original "locavore heaven" that showcases Hawaiian ingredients in their purest form; and Mud Hen Water (*3452 Waialae Ave, Honolulu, +1 808 737 6000, mudhenwater.com*), which serves dishes based on the food Kenney grew up with in Hawaii. On the latter's "hyper local" menu, you'll find treats like Tilapia Skin Salad (with silken tofu, Maui onions and yuzu), Baked Banana (with curry butter, chopped eggs, peanuts, bacon and coconut), and Warm U'ala Doughnuts (with coconut-rum icing).

Don't expect the locavore movement to come to a halt anytime soon. Says chef Alwin of Azure Restaurant: "Putting the best on our diners' plates is our priority, but, when you're living in the world's most isolated island archipelago with limited resources, it becomes even more important to forge close relationships with local food producers." **lj**

