
Spam is for musubi, not e-mail

ED MURRIETA; The News Tribune

On the dormant edge of the asphalt lava flow that is downtown Federal Way, there is a laid-back isle of eating where Spam is served without irony.

Pac Island Grill Hawaiian Style BBQ serves the preternatural pork product that pleases many Polynesians. Slices of grilled Spam are served with eggs and steamed rice; adorn hamburgers; and join with rice, egg and seaweed in musubi rolls.

Opened six months ago in the former space of Lutong Bahay Filipino restaurant (deep in a strip-mall off 320th Street, behind Ivar's), Pac Island Grill is a mom-and-pop and mom-and-pop operation. Sisters Raeleen Smith and Leianna Landon run the front; their husbands, James and David, man the kitchen.

Pac Island Grill serves other Hawaiian specialties that may sound dubious to mainlanders (loco moco is a grilled hamburger patty topped with brown gravy and two eggs, any style) but are more reflective of island eating than "Hawaiian-style pizza" could ever be.

Don't like Spam? Look deeper at the menu. You'll find other homey dishes common throughout Hawaii, Samoa and the Philippines.

My favorite was pork lau lau (\$7.25). A butterfish fillet sat atop salted pork strips. Both were wrapped in tarot leaves, and the whole bundle was wrapped in banana leaves and steamed for six hours. The musky-sweet flavors of the leaves permeated the meat, sweetening the tender pork and enriching the fatty fish, which had the flavor of canned tuna.

Slowly roasted in the oven with sea salt and liquid smoke, Kalua pork (\$6.75) was slightly sweet and slightly chewy.

Nuggets of dark meat inside mochi chicken (\$6.75) were plump and flavorful, marinated in soy and garlic.

The sweet rice flour coating was lighter than I expected from a battered-and-fried dish, but uncooked flour left an unattractively dusty trace.

Adobo (pork \$6.75, chicken \$6.50) had a subtle vinegar kick. I liked the chunks of pork better than the rag-tag cuts of chicken.

Kalua pork, mochi chicken and adobo are also available in Pac Island Grill's combo plates (\$6.50-\$9.75) with slaw or macaroni salad. Get the mac salad: It was creamy and bright, flecked with carrots. Slaw was wet.

If you like your salmon salty, you'll love lomi salmon (\$2.50). Cured in salt for three days, raw chopped fish was combined poke style, with red onions, green onions, tomatoes and a touch of garlic. I love salt, but this mineraled mound was too salty for me.

If you like your burgers with Portuguese sausage and an egg, the Brah' burger (\$5.75) is for you. The grilled patty had a crustily charred surface. Portuguese sausage added spicy depth. An egg fried over easy oozed like a yolky condiment.

Teriyaki glaze gave Spam musubi (\$3.25) extra character, especially handy since it's just Spam sushi.

Loco moco? Not exactly an old family recipe: Pac Island merely doctors industrial brown gravy and ladles it over a burger and rice (\$6.50). You decide how you want your eggs.

Desserts (\$2.50) are equally island.

Haupia pie was a cool, but grainy, slice of coconut pudding atop thick graham cracker crust. Pineapple-mango bread pudding was made with sweet Hawaiian dinner rolls – not cut-up bread or individual rolls, but a sheet of rolls still stuck together, just like they're sold at the supermarket. The sheet of rolls was split in half and filled with fruit. It was an interesting approach to bread pudding, but was little more than fruit and moist Hawaiian sweet rolls.

Passion-fruit cake shouldn't have been served cold: Congealed whipped cream-buttercream filling never tastes good.

Pac Island Grill Hawaiian Style BBQ (3 stars)

2012 S. 320th St., Suite H

Federal Way, 253-529-8667

CUISINE: Hawaiian

ATMOSPHERE: Big and airy, a tropical strip-mall storefront

PRICES: Entrees and combos, \$6.25-\$9.75; appetizers, \$2.50-\$5.95; sandwiches, \$4.50-\$5.95

HOURS: 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sundays

SERVICE: Friendly

BATHROOMS: Nice

ACCESS: No barriers

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