

#CULINARY #HAWAII

Hawaii feast-o

Beyond its surf and skyline, the Aloha State's fast-developing foodie scene is placing Hawaii firmly on the culinary map of the Pacific.

By Katrina Holden



© HAWAIIAN AROMA HEAD CAFE



© MAUI BREWING COMPANY



© LEE ANNE WONG, KOKO HEAD CAFE



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OPENING IMAGE: Hanauma Bay, on the south east coast of Oahu. OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM LEFT: Acai bowl and a smile at Hawaiian Aroma Head Caffe, Waikiki; Maui Brewing Co., Cuisine by Lee Anne Wong at Koko Head Cafe; visitors drinking pineapple and orange juice at Waikiki Beach.

I

IT'S A BALMY EVENING BENEATH GLOWING string lighting and a setting sun over Honolulu on Oahu island, Hawaii. The rooftop of the Hawaii Convention Center is starting to swell with groups of well-dressed women and men in colourful Aloha shirts, clutching their Riedel glasses as they plan their passage through a series of culinary stations at Swirl – the signature event of the annual Hawaii Food & Wine Festival, founded in 2010. Before long, the Friday-night fireworks over Waikiki pop in the distance, but no-one pays much attention, instead heading for their next gourmet cuisine sample, wine or cocktail.

The streamlined event is akin to something you'd expect to see in cities more well known for fine cuisine – New York, Melbourne or London perhaps. The fact that the Hawaiian Food & Wine Festival is an epicurean calendar event in the Pacific region, attracting more than 150 international chefs, speaks volumes of just how far the culinary scene of

Hawaii has developed in the past decade.

When I tell friends I'm heading on assignment to Hawaii, I'll admit it's not the Aloha State's cuisine that comes immediately to their minds. It's probably fair to say that for a long time, it's been Hawaii's beaches, green mountains, adventure activities, shopping strip and reputation for tropical, laid-back chilling that has resonated with Australian travellers, and families in particular. Hawaii was, after all, the second-most visited US state for Australian travellers in 2018, behind California – and conveniently situated just a 10-hour direct flight from Sydney.

Yet, in the past decade or so, there's been an emerging foodie scene that goes well beyond the high-rise hotel buildings of Honolulu.

At Swirl, I spoke with chef Lee Anne Wong, executive chef of Hawaiian Airlines. The New-York born-and-bred chef has called Hawaii home for the past five years,

following on from an extensive culinary career, working with some of the country's most celebrated chefs, and on hugely popular US TV series *Top Chef* (which won an Emmy Award in 2010). Since 2014, Lee Anne has been running her own cafe on Oahu called Koko Head Cafe.

In recent years, the national airline carrier has significantly upped its investment in onboard cuisine to better represent regional Hawaiian food offerings – reflective of the growing pride that Hawaiians are rightly taking in their diverse dishes.

"I think Hawaii had a really negative connotation in terms of food for the past few decades – and just the change that we've seen in the past five or 10 years. It began with the culinary movement of 12 Hawaiian chefs who formed Hawaii Regional Cuisine back in the early '90s, and now you see the next generation of chefs," says Lee Anne Wong.

"It's a combination of both those mum

and pop joints that have never gotten the appreciation they truly deserve that are now getting their recognition; as well as the next generation of chefs coming in and turning Hawaiian food on its head. There is so much more access and knowledge about available ingredients to work with here. Our community and

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our government are doing everything to help support our small farms and events like this are incredible because they give right back into the community. What you see is that Hawaii just becomes a playground for chefs," says Lee Anne.

Generational change has also no doubt played a role in the rebirth of Hawaii's food scene. On a tour with Hawaii Forest

& Trail, my 27-year old guide Nathan speaks of the vast change in attitudes to being Hawaiian that he's seen within his own family. When his father went to school, he and other students were shamed about their heritage, forbidden to speak the Hawaiian language – openly punished if caught doing so. His father,

he says, dresses very 'western' and would never wear an aloha shirt. By contrast, Nathan, a self-confessed bird-and-plant-loving "geek" wearing red dinosaur socks and sporting a dinosaur tattoo is incredibly proud of his heritage.

While the poke-bowl, an Hawaiian dish of origin, can be found on cafe menus the world-over, other must-try regional

and traditional dishes include poi, lau lau, squid luau and kalua pig. Many tour operators will offer visitors the experience of a Polynesian luau – and while that may be a starting point, the best way to try these traditional foods is to move around, beyond the usual tourist areas.

"People come to Oahu and they think Waikiki is Oahu and I'm like, 'No, rent a car, get on the bus for the day, travel around the island because there is so much more to discover just outside of the commercial tourist areas. It's the same if you have time, get to an outer island,'" says Lee Anne.

"I think every island is very special and has its own distinct personality and has something to offer – definitely get outside of your hotel."

In Waikiki there are, however, some perennially popular experiences for visitors: a mai tai cocktail at the pink The Royal Hawaiian hotel while watching the sun go down; a beachfront meal at Duke's



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TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE
Hawaiian Airlines flies from Sydney daily direct to Honolulu, and three times per week from Brisbane to Honolulu with onward non-stop services from Hawaii to 13 US mainland cities. Within the Hawaiian Islands, the airline operates more than 170 daily flights between Honolulu and Lihue on Kauai; Kahului on Maui; and Kona and Hilo on Hawaii Island. All international flights to and from Australia include free 2 x 32 kg luggage allowance. hawaiianairlines.com

WHEN TO VISIT
Hawaiian Airlines is the major sponsor of Swirl, the signature event in Honolulu of the annual Hawaiian Food & Wine Festival. The 10th festival will run between 2-25 October, 2020. The event takes place over three weekends on multiple islands, featuring more than 150 internationally renowned master chefs. hawaiiifoodandwinefestival.com

STAYING THERE
WAIKIKI, HONOLULU
On Oahu, *Vacations & Travel* stayed at the new Waikiki Beachcomber by Outrigger with the popular Hawaiian Aroma Head Caffe and the Maui Brewing Co. located at the entrance to the premises. waikikibeachcomber.com

For a more self-contained option with fully equipped gourmet kitchens to utilise, and located directly across the street from Waikiki beach, stay at the newly renovated Waikiki Beach Tower astonwaikikibeachtower.com
The newest luxury accommodation in Waikiki is the exclusive Espacio: The Jewel of Waikiki with just nine multi-room suites and Mugen restaurant within the building, serving Japanese-French cuisine. espaciowaikiki.com

MAUI
On Maui, *Vacations & Travel* stayed at Hotel Wailea on the south Maui coastline. The Relais & Chateaux Hotel features The Restaurant at Hotel Wailea. hotelwailea.com



SCAN TO VIEW

With your smartphone's camera program open, simply hover your phone above this QR code to take you directly to our website to read our full interview with Lee Anne Wong, executive chef of Hawaiian Airlines. Or visit www.vacationstravel.com/hawaiian-cuisine-comes-of-age/

Waikiki, named after Duke Kahanamoku, a native Hawaiian swimming and surfing legend, where you can eat cajun fish tacos while sitting on hibiscus floral-patterned chairs; sipping pineapple and orange juice beachside out of a pineapple shell; or simply grabbing a shaved ice dessert from one of the many street vendors.

But venture further outside the main strip of Waikiki, not more than a simple 10-minute taxi ride, and you'll see a completely different side of Oahu. At Koko Head, Lee Anne Wong's Koko Head Cafe has crowds lining up for the Corn Flake crusted French toast, and Ohayou eggs. At Kaka'ako, Piggy Smalls is the newest restaurant from award-winning

ABOVE: The Hawaiian Airlines stand at Swirl, the highlight event of the annual Hawaiian Food & Wine Festival.

Filipino heritage and his Hawaiian roots. On the west coast in Lahaina, chef Lee Anne Wong is currently in the process of setting up her next venture, a fine dining restaurant at a legendary location overlooking the water at the Pioneer Inn, built in 1901 and the oldest hotel in Maui.

Maui is also home to Hawaii's only Relais & Chateaux property, Hotel Wailea. The Relais & Chateaux group is a prestigious worldwide collection of culinary-focused hotels and resorts in

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chef Andrew Le and his team from modern Vietnamese restaurant The Pig & The Lady in Honolulu's Chinatown.

Hawaii's unique microclimate makes it fertile ground for natural foods such as coffee, macadamia nuts, fruits, vegetables and seafood to thrive. To get an understanding of the region's produce, either visit the popular farmer's markets held in several locations; or for a more in-depth experience, take a farm tour such as the 'Farm to Forest' tour with the Hawaii Forest & Trail group.

Visiting another island provides contrasting views of Hawaii – easily accessible through Hawaiian Airlines with inter-island flights. On nearby Maui for instance, highly regarded chef Sheldon Simmeon's restaurant Lineage at Wailea on the south coast of the island features a menu inspired by both his

which prospective member properties must meet rigorous qualifying criteria in order to be members. It's an indicator that Hawaii's culinary scene has firmly entered a new era.

With an over-sized sculpture of an iron corkscrew at its garden entrance, the intimate dining space at The Restaurant at Hotel Wailea is elegant yet relaxed, with tables positioned to overlook brilliant orange sunsets over the ocean. Helmed by chef Zach Sato, a Maui local, he utilises the island's seasonal and island-grown ingredients from Hotel Wailea's own farming operations, as well as working with a group of Hawaiian farmers and artisans.

For the multitude of diverse culinary discoveries to be found on Hawaii's tropical islands, foodies are taking note and saying 'Mahalo'. 🍷



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