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THE NATURE OF THE FEAST

BY BRITNEY HOPE

Kualoa Ranch

IT'S A MEAL THAT BEGINS LIKE any other: With a simple blessing.

"E 'ai ana me Ke Aloha," my host, Monica Toguchi, says before we start. "Eat with love."

I'm dining at Honolulu's Highway Inn, staring down at a plank piled with raw onion, *kālua* (slow-roasted pig), and *lau lau* (butterfish steamed in taro leaves). All around me, diners – mostly locals, I'm told – are "grinding" (Hawaiian slang, my menu reads, for "chowing down") on incredible-smelling dishes I don't recognize. It begins to dawn on me how little I actually know about Hawaiian

cuisine outside of pineapples and poke.

Then, someone passes me a bowl of creamy, purple paste I mistake for blueberry yogurt.

"It's *poi*," Monica says, explaining that the starchy staple is made from fermented and mashed taro root – just one of the many "canoe plants" brought to the islands by Polynesian voyagers in the fifth century.

Poi apparently tastes different depending on how long it ferments, but to me, it's sort of sour, much like yogurt. Monica admits that although it's a love-it-or-hate-it kind of food, they'd

never dream of taking it off the menu at Highway Inn, which has been dishing up traditional Hawaiian cuisine ever since her grandparents, Seiichi and Sachiko, opened the doors in 1947; Monica is its third-generation owner.

I mix *poi* in with my *lomi salmon* (diced tomatoes, onion and raw fish), and slice into my butter-soft *lau lau* to reveal its meaty, melt-in-your-mouth filling. For dessert, I try *haupia*, a gelatinous square of coconut milk, sugar and cornstarch.

"In Hawai'i, some will say eating is better than sex," Monica jokes as I extol a particularly exquisite coconut-y



Horseback riding in O'ahu

mouthful. "It's seen as a higher form of pleasure."

While food is a sensory representation of culture in nearly every corner of the globe, there's something special about Hawaiian cuisine. Perhaps it's because every ingredient – save for the fish – has come from someplace else. Or perhaps it's because Hawai'i's history is comprised of many cultures coming together, from its sugarcane and pineapple plantation era of the 19th and 20th centuries, when the Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Portuguese, Filipino and Hawaiian workers shared their meals – and cooking methods – so the stories go.

Jim Gusukuma, the owner of Honolulu's Rainbow Drive-In and its new sister spot, Hawaii's Favorite Kitchens, knows all about it. His grandparents worked on those plantations before opening the now-iconic Rainbow Drive-In in 1961.

"The workers needed high-energy meals," he says during lunch on day two of my visit, handing me a styrofoam container the size of a shoebox. "And so, the plate lunch was born."

He's ordered me an HFK Mixed Plate, which turns out to be a stunning combination of macaroni salad, beef teriyaki, Huli chicken and poke, arguably weighing more than a newborn baby.

As I tuck into the multicultural medley, Gusukuma explains that his grandparents' vision was to provide the working person with generous portions of hearty food at a reasonable price. But the Rainbow Drive-In is more than just a great place to grab a classic plate lunch; to some locals, it's a lifelong institution – and customers have been returning for generations.

Formerly an independent nation until it was illegally annexed by the U.S. in the 1890s, the Hawai'i of today represents generations of cultural evolution – and its

cuisine tells that story. But the state also struggles with food security; O'ahu imports 90 per cent of its fare, and the issue of sustainability versus land development has become a hot topic on the island.

"It's a tough sell to choose agriculture over real estate here," Taylor Kellerman, director of diversified agriculture and land stewardship at O'ahu's Kualoa Private Nature Reserve, as we climb aboard a bus to the 1,617 hectare reserve's working ranch. "So local food production has suffered somewhat."

Kualoa has long been a place of fascination for the outside world, and it's no wonder; made of three stunning mountainous valleys, the region is considered one of the most sacred places on O'ahu. It's also popular with tourists, having appeared in Hollywood classics such as "Jurassic Park."

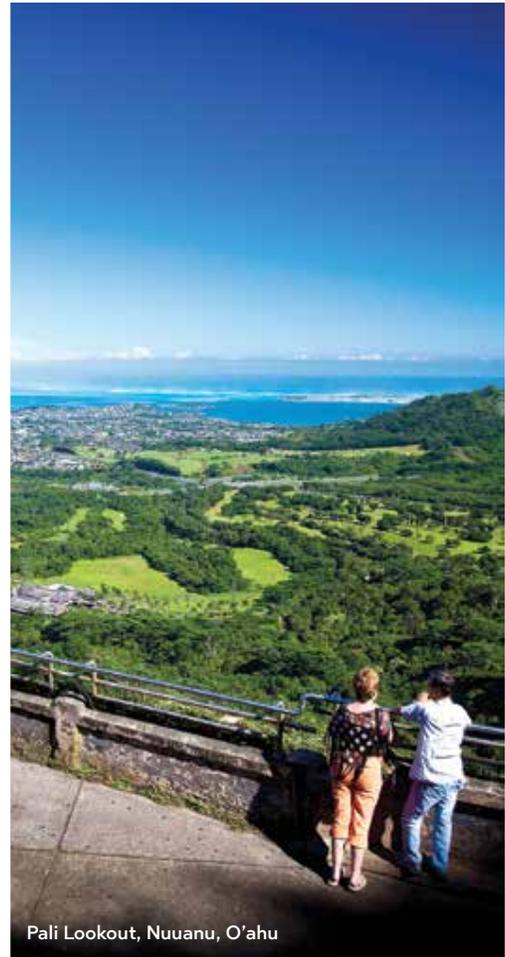
Taylor, however, has found other uses for the land, or *'āina*, as he calls it. Using Kualoa's abundance of natural resources, he and his team have been steadily working toward sustainable food production by way of agriculture, aquaculture and livestock, with some success: Kualoa is the largest grass-fed and finished beef producer on O'ahu, cultivates its own shrimp, and continues an 800-year-old Hawaiian tradition of oyster aquaculture. Now, with the introduction of a new Taste of Kualoa tour, he is hoping to parlay those successes into agritourism.

"How do we preserve open space? How do we feed our friends and neighbours?" Taylor rhymes off his most pressing concerns as we drive by orchards of pineapple,

papaya and banana. "[Prioritizing] things with a small footprint allows guests to enjoy what the land really is."

In the distance, Black Angus cattle gaze at us from their grassy pastures in the cradle of Hakipu'u Valley. Chickens forage freely in the grass. We stop by the oyster farm, where the mollusks are harvested from a tree-rimmed pond. We sample raw cacao, which tastes like persimmon. We visit fields of taro and breadfruit, or *'ulu*, which Taylor says is a complete source of nutrition – a good comestible to have on an island dependant on container ships.

The tour concludes on a quiet patio overlooking a mountain ridge, ►



Pali Lookout, Nuuanu, O'ahu



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where we're able to taste the fruits – and oysters, shrimp, 'ulu and beef – of Kualoa's labour. It's the perfect complement to a crash course on holistic horticulture, and although the seven-course meal appears effortlessly elegant, every bite is significant: the product of hundreds of hours of tenacity, toil and revitalized tradition.

"It's a labour of love," Taylor admits. "But it's possible to revitalize our ag industry this way."

After "grinding" my way through O'ahu's indigenous cuisine, plantation-inspired lunch plates and sustainable fare, I feel I have a better understanding of Hawaiian identity – beyond the luau-laden tourist perspective. En route to the Four Seasons O'ahu, I'm dubious about whether a luxury hotel can offer truly authentic cuisine, as its clientele likely expect more than a "plate lunch."

Then I meet Jared Chang, a former bus boy-turned-fish sommelier for the hotel's new restaurant, Mina's Fish House. Based on his lifelong background in fishing, Chang is using what he calls the "whole fish experience" to educate guests on sustainable fishing principles.

"Whole fish is the heart and soul of our menu," Jared says. As a fish sommelier, he works directly with local fisherman to supply the restaurant, then advises guests on dishes according to their flavour, texture and preparation preferences.

"We prepare the fish with the head and tail on, we filet it tableside, we tell them where it came from, who caught the fish – all of it," he says, adding that this engaging dining experience conveys the importance of O'ahu's fish – and the conservation of their habitats – to a major source of income and influence for the island.

The Kampachi that Jared is cradling as we speak serves as my final dinner on O'ahu. As he filets and carves it before me, it's impossible to ignore the weight of the meal's meaning. Of course, it has, as Chang promised, "a rich, savoury flavour that pierces the palate like an oaky wine," but it's also resonant of something deeper. It's a modern reflection of taking from the *āina* with awareness and gratitude, of connecting to and respecting the efforts of others – and, of course, of eating with love. 🌿



Fish sommelier, Jared Chang

When You Go

FEATURED ITINERARY: Modern American lifestyle meets Polynesian seafaring tradition on Trafalgar's **Hawai'i Four Island Adventure**. This epic adventure across Hawaii's picture-perfect islands where you'll discover Pele's volcanic landscapes, tales of World War II bravery and share crystal clear waters with green sea turtles and water-sports enthusiasts – all on Hawaiian time, of course.

WHAT TO DO: History buffs can learn about the lives of Hawaiian royalty by visiting **'Iolani Palace**, while art and bean fiends will love the artisanal coffee and graffiti scene at **SALT at Our Kaka'ako**. Travellers in touch with nature should take an ATV and horseback tour through **Kualoa Private Nature Reserve's** epic natural landscapes.

WHERE TO STAY: For an affordable oceanfront spot steps from Waikiki, **New Otani Kaimana Beach Hotel** is a classic option with unbeatable views and a fantastic breakfast patio.

WHERE TO DINE: The Portuguese malasadas at the legendary **Leonard's Bakery** are a to-die-for decadence,

while foodies can treat themselves with high-end haute Hawaiian cuisine at Chef Mavro. Meanwhile, **La Hiki Kitchen** at the **Four Seasons O'ahu** is serving up some incredible Caribbean-inspired farm-to-table brunch action, courtesy of Bahamian-born Chef Simeon Hall.



Britney Hope, Hawaii Tourism Authority (HTA) / Tor Johnson