

HONOLULU, HAWAII

by Matthew Wexler

If it's possible to taste a sunset, there's no better locale than Oahu's southeastern coast. Hawaii's capital, Honolulu, bursts with a vibrant culinary scene, fueled by tourists and locals eager to experience everything from traditional island dishes to modern interpretations. The bounty of local fruits, vegetables, and seafood overflow, while slow-roasted kalua pork is a must-have for first-time visitor or returning travelers.

Whether you visit Oahu or one of Hawaii's seven other major islands, ho'okipa (the spirit of hospitality) is just as important as the ingredients required to prepare your meal. This spirit pervades Hawaiian culture, elevating even the most casual grab-and-go meal into the bite of a lifetime.

THE PIG AND THE LADY

According to *World Population Review*, Hawaii is the only state with an Asian majority. Most mid- to late-19th century immigrants were from China and Japan and came to work on the pineapple and sugar cane plantations. The story of chef Andrew Le and The Pig and the Lady has a much different plotline.

Le's mother, Loan (affectionally referred to as Mama Le), fled her homeland with her husband at the end of the Vietnam War. The couple was en route to an Arkansas refugee camp, but Mama Le went into labor on the plane and gave birth to her first son when the plane stopped to refuel in Honolulu. They never left, and another American Dream was born (along with more children).



Photo: Lianne Rozzelle

Pho at The Pig and the Lady



Waikiki Beach

Photo: Elias Bittar

The Pig and the Lady began as a pop-up with Andrew and his mom, then migrated to local farmer's markets before Andrew opened a brick and mortar location in Chinatown in 2013. Sister restaurant Piggy Smalls followed in 2016, followed by a Pig and the Lady Tokyo outpost in late 2019.

A convergence of Andrew's refined Culinary Institute of America training and his mother's homestyle cooking makes The Pig and the Lady a flavor bomb experience with so much heart it's palpable. Pho broths simmer for hours on end, creating an unmatched depth of flavor. The classic banh mi becomes even more decadent with the richness of a fried egg, while Mama's beef chao (ground beef congee, shallots, cilantro and chile sate) is the definition of comfort food. Menus evolve seasonally, but the Vietnamese pizza, layered rice crepes with nem nuong (Vietnamese sausage), crispy shallots, and fresh herbs, is so perfectly constructed it's worth scheduling your trip around.

Piggy Smalls' eclectic menu offers sharable, unique riffs of familiar favorites, such as miso-ganoush, clam frites with spiced coconut and fennel beer broth, and a whole fried snapper with eggplant nam prik and

Vietnamese mac khen pepper. Cool the palate with a grown-up slushie, topped with your choice of tequila, vodka, gin, or rum. *The Pig and The Lady*, 83 North King St. Tel: 808-585-8255; *Piggy Smalls*, 1200 Ala Moana Blvd. Tel: 808-777-3588. www.thepigandthelady.com

KONO'S NORTHSHORE

Fast-casual is the way to go for many travelers preferring to spend their vacation on the beach, in the water, or day-tripping around the island. Kono's Northshore is the ideal location for a quick stop or to pick up the day's provisions. With loads of accolades from television, magazines, and bloggers, it's obvious that the award-winning, 12-hour slow-roasted Kalua pork is a must-eat during any trip to Oahu.

Owner Stan Glander brings more than 40 years of restaurant and hospitality experience to the operation, which currently has three locations, including The Surfing Pig, which offers a more substantive, sit-down dining experience. Whichever location you choose, order the pork.

"We first use our unique blend of seasonings to slather the pork and ensure even coverage," says Glander. "Then we slow roast our award-winning pork every night for 12 hours

Morimoto Asia Waikiki

Photo: Evan Sung



on low heat and, finally, in the morning, we pull the pig apart while it is still hot! Then we have fresh kalua pig for our customers first thing in the morning.”

Pulled pork for breakfast? Absolutely. Kono’s Haleiwa breakfast bomber, filled with pulled pork, eggs, potatoes, shredded jack and cheddar cheese and rolled up in a warm flour tortilla, will fuel you for the day. Arrive for lunch to experience the overstuffed sandwiches like the Old School, stuffed with pulled pork, grilled onions, slaw, and slathered with homemade guava barbecue sauce. If you’re not counting calories (and who is on vacation?), treat yourself to a mud pie milkshake for the ultimate island indulgence. *Various locations.* www.konosnorthshore.com

MORIMOTO ASIA WAIKIKI

A shoulder injury sidelined world-renowned chef Masaharu Morimoto’s promising baseball career, so he turned to a more precise skill, sushi-making, in his hometown of Hiroshima, Japan. He opened his first restaurant by age 24, joined the original Nobu in 1994, and opened his first namesake restaurant in Philadelphia in 2001. Morimoto Asia Waikiki joins the ranks of his global culinary empire.

Morimoto Asia Waikiki serves as the signature restaurant of the ‘Alohilani Resort Waikiki Beach. The dinner-only service offers wow-factor at every angle. Glance outward to take in the gentle breeze, Kuhio Beach sunset, and pedestrians along Kalakaua Avenue. Turn inward, and you’ll be amazed by the flair within the glass-encased exhibition kitchen.

“I love the islands of Hawaii and Waikiki Beach, in particular, has a special place in

my heart,” says Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto. “My menu is like a tour of Asia through some of my favorite dishes, including our extensive sushi menu, mapo tofu, Singapore curry noodles, and Hainanese chicken rice.”

Morimoto’s Pan-Asian dining experience reflects the chef’s travels throughout the continent, including interpretations of dishes from China, Korea, Japan, and Thailand. What the menu lacks in focus, it makes up for in flavor. The lively ambiance is the ideal backdrop for a celebratory meal. And if you and your dining companions have wildly different palates, there are plenty of options on the expansive menu.

First-course highlights include the chef’s famous spicy tuna tacos, served in a wonton shell and garnished with rayu (Japanese chile oil), spicy aioli, red onion, olive, tomato, guacamole, jalapeno and micro cilantro; and crispy pork belly, beautifully balanced with jalapeno, Thai chili, cabbage and an earthy duck salt. For a mid-course, consider sharing a surf-n-turf sushi roll, stuffed with U.S. wagyu beef, shrimp tempura and asparagus, decadently drizzled with goma (sesame) sauce, gochujang aioli, and eel sauce.

There are more than 20 entrée options for the main event, from hand-carved Peking duck served with steamed flour pancakes to a dramatically presented crispy whole fish with papaya carrot slaw and spicy tobanjan (chile bean) sauce. Meat-eaters with deep pockets can enjoy ishiyaki A5 (the highest graded wagyu beef in the world) at \$28 per ounce. But don’t dismiss budget-friendly finds like spicy mapo tofu with miso pork, the signature

dish of Chengdu, China.

The beverage menu spans from sake and shochu to wine, bubbly, and craft cocktails such as the Casual Encounter, prepared with Rain Vodka, Domaine de Canton ginger liqueur and a splash of lemon juice. 2490 Kalakaua Ave. Tel: 808-922-002. www.morimotoasiawaikiki.com

LA MER

If there is one restaurant in Honolulu that represents the island cuisine evolution, it is La Mer, ensconced in the legendary ocean-front oasis, Halekulani. Owner Robert Lewers erected the original property in 1907, which consisted of a beachfront home and five bungalows. Several iterations and owners later, the hotel now consists of 453 rooms, but still retains an air of elegance and intimacy.

La Mer, Halekulani’s signature restaurant, recently received the Five Diamond Award by AAA for the 30th consecutive year, making it one of only five to hold the title for more than 25 years among 60,000 hotels and restaurants spanning the United States, Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean. Chef Alexandre Trancher was appointed Chef de Cuisine in 2012 and brings Michelin-star restaurant experience to the venue with a menu the seamlessly integrates classic French technique with local ingredients and traditions.

Trancher’s seasonally driven menu is an exercise in restraint, relying on the pristine treatment of ingredients and an Instagram-worthy presentation that has diners tasting with their eyes as much as their palates.

A recent tasting menu featured roasted scallop with cuttlefish leaf and orange-scented caviar butter sauce, beef tenderloin with truffle mousseline and Périgueux sauce (a Madeira wine sauce with truffles), and an



Pork and Pineapple Wrap at Kono’s Northshore



indulgent cheese plate consisting of warm petit Basque cheese with pine nuts and shallot vinaigrette.

For a more impromptu experience, consider a respite at Halekulani's recently opened Cattleya Wine Bar featuring Mediterranean tapas-style dishes from chef Christian Testa. The Italian-forward wine menu is brief but includes hard-to-find picks like sparkling Lambrusco from Emilia-Romagna and Tascante, Ghiaia Nera from Sicily, both of which pair beautifully with bruschetta, Stracciatella Pugliese, and Prosciutto de Parma. 2199 Kalia Rd. Tel: 808-923-2311. www.halekulani.com/dining (anticipated reopening, July 2021)

DIAMOND HEAD LUAU

The modern luau, established in 1819 when King Kamehameha II created a more secular and inclusive celebration, continues to be a part of Hawaiian culture and food, and is a bucket list experience for anyone visiting the islands. Oahu boasts a unique interpretation by presenting a farm-to-table luau on the grounds of the Waikiki Aquarium. Diamond Head Luau's intimate stage offers all of the flairs of Polynesian dances and fire acts, but the real star is the thoughtful menu that showcases local farmers and culinary traditions.

The experience begins before dusk with a stroll through the Waikiki Aquarium. The aquarium dates back to 1904 and has become one of the island's benchmark tourist attractions, in addition to its commit-

ment to increase public awareness of the conservation of marine life and reef habitats. More than a dozen exhibits showcase the ocean world with the mesmerizing jellyfish undulating in the Ocean Drifters Gallery, drawing quite a crowd.

Arrive with an appetite because there's plenty to sample among Diamond Head's offerings, beginning with a traditional Mai Tai (ironically, invented at Trader Vic's in Oakland, California). Bountiful fruits and vegetables provide a cornucopia of flavors, with a few notable standouts. The Caprese

salad gets a makeover thanks to Ho'io (Hawaiian fern) instead of basil. You'll want to replicate the smoked marlin dip with taro chips for your next dinner party, as well as the lomi-lomi salmon. Diced and served raw with tomato and onion, the brightly flavored side dish is like a marriage of pico de gallo and poke.

Poi will likely elicit "love it, or leave it?" among your companions, but no luau is complete without the starchy mashed taro root. For most, the taupe-colored paste is an acquired taste. Still, its place among Hawaiian culture runs deep for its nutritional value (high in vitamin A and complex carbohydrates) and easy digestibility.

Meat-eaters will embrace the rustic offerings of rotisserie Huli Huli chicken with a sweet and savory brown sugar-soy glaze, bone-in kalbi short ribs, and Kalua pork, perhaps Hawaii's most famous dish. Traditionally cooked in an imu (an underground oven), the slow-roasted pork may be the most decadent bite of your Oahu getaway. You'll inevitably try to replicate it at home with a slow cooker or Instant Pot, but nothing comes close to eating Kalua pork with your fingers as the sun sets on Mamala Bay. (Tip: If your schedule allows, book for Friday night and enjoy the weekly Waikiki Beach fireworks display, viewable from the aquarium grounds. 2777 Kalakaua Ave. Tel: 808- 926-3800. www.diamond-headbeachluau.com (Temporarily closed at press time. Please visit their website for reopening dates.)



Diamond Head Luau