



New Hawaiian Cuisine

Hawaiian cuisine is making a comeback as rising chefs pay homage to the islands' indigenous ingredients and ethnic influences.

By Amelia Levin





university chefs cook Hawaiian

At [Lincoln Memorial University](#), Harrogate, Tennessee, Adam Gould, an executive chef with the hospitality group Chartwells, plays on Kalua pork using tofu for a vegetarian option. To mimic the banana flavor in the classic Hawaiian dish, he roasts slightly overripe bananas alongside tofu marinated in soy sauce, Worcestershire sauce, minced garlic, minced ginger and a little liquid smoke. The tofu is then served with rice and a mango/pineapple chutney spiked with a touch of lemon juice, brown sugar, ginger and cayenne.

At [Tennessee Technological University](#), Cookeville, Tennessee, executive chef Emily Bashore, whose mother was born and raised in Hawaii, goes the classic route with her Kalua pork. She rubs pork butt with fresh ginger, soy sauce, garlic, a little liquid smoke and Hawaiian sea salt. The pork butt is then wrapped in banana leaves or Swiss chard and roasts for 4-5 hours in a low-temperature oven. Bashore serves it with a Maui sweet onion marmalade. Additional Hawaiian-inspired dishes include chicken luau with spinach and coconut milk and *Haupia*, a coconut-milk custard.

For many, Hawaiian cuisine invokes images of Spam and seared ahi tuna, but these days the classics have come far beyond their roots. Young chefs in Hawaii and elsewhere have moved beyond Pacific Rim fusion to reinvent the cuisine through local ingredients and modern techniques while incorporating global influences.

“Traditional Hawaiian food from ancient times is much different from what people classify as Hawaiian food now,” says Noah Hester, Hawaiian native and chef at Blue Dragon Restaurant & Spa in Kamuela, Hawaii.

Indigenous crops include starchy and filling taro, sweet potatoes, bananas and coconuts. Fish was salt-cured and packed in canoes to sustain the natives over longer periods, Hester says. Meat and fish were cooked in underground ovens.

When European explorers settled in the area, they built plantations for sugarcane, pineapple, coffee and other staples. In the late 1800s, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino and Portuguese immigrants came to the area to work, bringing with them their cuisines and foods. During the war, thousands of soldiers brought Spam and other rations to the area. “Spam was similar to Kalua pig, which is very salty and rich, so it caught on,” Hester says.

This melting pot of cuisines became formalized as Hawaiian regional cuisine in the '90s by Roy Yamaguchi, Alan Wong, Beverly Gannon and a handful of other chefs looking to educate the rest of the country about Hawaii's local

foods and fish. Now, chefs are getting more specific than the fusion of the past to highlight the variety of fruits, vegetables, fish and meats available.

Chris Kajioka

owner/executive chef, *SENIA*, Honolulu

Chris Kajioka has won several accolades, including a James Beard award when he was executive chef of Vintage Cave, Honolulu. Kajioka plans to open his new restaurant *SENIA* this spring with former Per Se colleague Anthony Rush. The restaurant is in Kaimuki, Honolulu's historic Chinatown and burgeoning gastronomic scene, where he grew up.

The restaurant features two themes. “We want to create a restaurant that people want to go to all the time and has a sense of place,” says Kajioka of the casual side of the restaurant. Then, a more intimate chef's counter will serve a tasting menu to showcase the chef's talents. *SENIA* is a play on the Greek word “*xenia*”, the idea of guest-friendship that defines the Greek ideology of hospitality.

“A lot is happening in Hawaii right now and it's an exciting place to be,” says Kajioka. “There is a willingness to try more things, and the progression of the dining scene is reflective of that.”

More talented chefs are opening places in Hawaii, too. “We're at the age where we're opening our own places, and our generation of chefs is very close and very supportive of each other,” Kajioka says.

He will pay homage to his Japanese ethnicity, but also to key Hawaiian ingredients and the blend of other cultures in the region while relying on his strong French culinary training.

A favorite local fish of Kajioka's is opah, a colorful moonfish with rich, fatty meat. It is sustainably line-caught and works well in place of the traditional tuna in poke and crudo dishes. A local purveyor has started successfully raising oysters that are "deliciously briny," Kajioka says. And there is farmed abalone, sweet shrimp and other fish caught early morning that fishermen drop off at his back door.

Locally grown hearts of palm is another one of Kajioka's favorite Hawaiian ingredients. "They are versatile and have a sweet, nutty taste and crunchy texture that can be eaten raw, grilled or sauteed," he says.

Noah Hester

Blue Dragon Restaurant & Spa, Waimea, Big Island

A mainstay on the Big Island for the past eight years, Blue Dragon celebrates local Hawaiian ingredients, especially the wide variety of fish available to the restaurant situated across the street from the harbor.

Noah Hester, a native, favors ono, a leaner fish best suited for poaching and gentle preparation methods. Other fresh-caught fish such as mahi-mahi, swordfish and tuna might be served alongside Sriracha mashed potatoes with star anise soy reduction, hamakua mushrooms and a local fern shoot salad. And now, Hester has been sourcing



local organic chickens, something that was once difficult to get in Hawaii because of availability and issues with USDA certification.

Hester is traditional with his Kalua pork, for which he uses local hogs from a farm 20 minutes away. He slow-roasts the salt-rubbed pigs in a pit with banana leaves and rocks, then uses the meat for tacos with refried "poi" made with taro root instead of beans. Hester also makes rice balls stuffed with leftover pork mixed with a starchy poi-based barbecue sauce. He serves it with *lomi-lomi*, a salad of fish cured in Hawaiian salt with tomatoes, onions, chili pepper water and shaved ice.

left: Chris Kajioka.
above: "Everything Bagel" contains hot-smoked salmon, pickled mustard seed, rye crisp and beet with horseradish glaze. Photo courtesy of Chris Kajioka.



Courtesy of Blue Dragon Restaurant

classic Hawaiian dishes

Lau-lau: spiced pork shoulder, chicken or vegetables and salted butterfish wrapped in taro leaves and steamed.

Kalua pork: whole pig typically cooked for several hours until smoky and tender in an imu, an underground oven made with dirt and rocks.

Poke: raw fish salad usually made with diced raw ahi tuna or yellowfish, soy sauce, sesame oil, *kukui* nut and seaweed.

Lomi-lomi salmon: diced raw salted salmon mixed with tomatoes, crushed ice and green onions for a fresh salad or side dish.

Poi: taro root that's been mashed or pounded with water into a pudding-like consistency.

Manapua: Chinese-inspired dish of barbecue pork, sweet potato, sausage or other fillings steamed in sweet Hawaiian bread rolls.

Haupia: sweet pudding-like dessert made with coconut milk, ground arrowroot and sugar that's formed into blocks using gelatin.

Hester is able to get his hands on exotic fruits, as well as such vegetables as kohlrabi, eggplant, lettuces and greens from Blue Dragon's organic farm, 17 miles north of the restaurant. He pairs greens with candied macadamia nuts, sprouts and Ahualoa goat cheese for a salad dressed with *lilikoi* (passion fruit) vinaigrette.

"We're trying to be more self-sufficient in Hawaii by using more ingredients from here rather than the mainland," says Hester. "At one time Hawaii was made of different communities all responsible for different things such as fishing or growing taro or sweet potatoes or fruit that would then be traded. It seems like the natural progression is we get back to that and to the traditional foods we grew up eating."

top chefs go Hawaiian

Ravi Kapur, executive chef at Liholiho Yacht Club, San Francisco, was born and raised in Hawaii. Kapur first opened Liholiho as a pop-up concept before launching the brick-and-mortar space with celebrated dishes such as chili/honey-rubbed opah with preserved yuzu, bok choy and a soy-infused brown butter sauce.

Lee Anne Wong, executive chef at Koko Head Cafe, Honolulu, is a native New Yorker and former "Top Chef" contestant. Wong has had a loyal following in Hawaii since opening her brunch restaurant in 2013 with Hawaiian- and Asian-inspired dishes, such as Auntie Alohi cakes with local banana and guava jam and Koko

Moco—a Maui Cattle Co. beef patty, garlic rice, mushroom gravy, sunny-side-up egg and tempura kimchi.

Ed Kenney, executive chef/owner of Town and Kaimuki Superette, both in Honolulu, was recently nominated for James Beard's Best Chef West award. Kenney has built a regular customer base at Town by blending Hawaiian and Italian influences and now at his brunch/lunch spot Kaimuki Superette. At both restaurants he works with local produce, fish and meats. He recently opened Mud Hen Water featuring inventive Hawaiian cuisine in small plate form, with dishes such as *he'e* (grilled octopus on a bed of tender-cooked taro leaves), *ulu* (breadfruit) and hand-pounded *pa'i'ai* (taro root), which often forms the base for his fish and meat accompaniments.

Wade Ueoka and **Michelle Karr-Ueoka**, chefs/owners of MW Restaurant, Honolulu, were nominated for Best New Restaurant by the James Beard Foundation last year. The husband-and-wife team weaves Hawaiian ingredients and flavors seamlessly and whimsically with such menu items as loco moco meatloaf and butterfish arancini.

Chung Chow, chef de cuisine/co-owner of Noreetuh, New York, is a former Per Se chef who teamed up with Gerald San Jose and Jin Ahn to open the 54-seater in Manhattan's East Village. He blends Hawaii's multicuisine flavors with French and modern American influences in the form of Kalua pork croquettes and poke with



Courtesy of Blue Dragon Restaurant

bigeye tuna, Chinese spicy miso, and tosaoka and oga seaweeds.

Kamala Saxton and *Roz Edison*, owners of Marination Mobile, Seattle, brought Hawaiian-Korean fusion to Seattle's streets with their popular food truck. Now, through their brick-and-mortar locations, they continue to serve sliders with grilled and caramelized Spam dressed with their famous Nunya Sauce (a gochujang-spiked mayo) and crunchy slaw on a soft Hawaiian bun. The Loco Moco, a Hawaiian classic, is a ground beef patty atop white rice with a rich beef gravy and two sunny-side-up eggs.

Andrew Le, executive chef/owner, The Pig and the Lady, Honolulu, celebrates local native foods and flavors from the area such as *liliko'i* (passion fruit) with Vietnamese-inspired dishes that change every few months. The Pig and the Lady was named one of Honolulu's "Best New Restaurants" by *Honolulu Magazine* in 2015, and has received national media attention in such publications as *Bloomberg Business* and *Plate*. ■

Amelia Levin is an award-winning food industry writer, certified chef and cookbook author. Her work has appeared in a variety of restaurant industry trade magazines as well as in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Health* and *Cooking Light* magazines.

left: Roast pork over grilled greens was served at an outdoor farm dinner hosted by Blue Dragon Restaurant, May 2015.

above: Pako and ha salad includes fiddlehead ferns and is often served with grilled meat. Photo by Anna Pacheco.