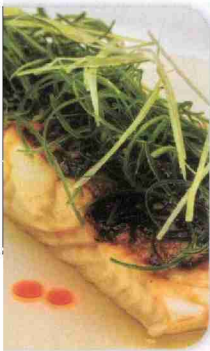


Hawaiian poke, Oahu



PHOTOS (ABOVE & TOP RIGHT): Morimoto Waikiki

New Tastes of the Tropics

Chefs fire up island culinary choices

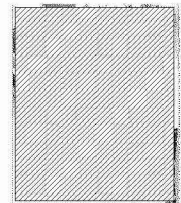
After shifting into high gear more than a decade ago, the Hawaii Regional Cuisine (HRC) movement is cruising right along as hot new restaurants come on the scene. Many are additions to the local empires built by celebrity chefs, including such HRC icons as Alan Wong, Peter Merriman, Bev Gannon and Chai Chaowasaree.

No longer about tasting poi at a luau, Hawaii's cuisine is now a key attraction for visitors, including meeting attendees, says Lisa Nakamasu, director of sales for the Kauai Visitors Bureau.

"Planners are specifically asking us about cuisine options—and we're proud to say we've really moved the needle up on this," she says. "Years ago we didn't have much to hang our hat on. But now there are wonderful restaurants everywhere, as well as the chance to try fruits you've never tasted before."

The explosion in new restaurant choices on all the major islands is making dine-arounds much easier to plan than in years past, notes Frank Robinson, owner of Island Events Hawaii, a local DMC.

"There are now so many great restaurant choices within a few minutes of each other,



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not just in Waikiki but in places like Wailea in south Maui, in the Kona area on the Big Island and at Poipu in Kauai," he says. "You can combine a mix of restaurants in the resort hotels as well as stand-alone places."

Among Robinson's favorite new choices for dine-arounds and small groups is Amasia, opened last year at the Maui Grand Wailea by Alan Wong, who also owns the acclaimed Alan Wong restaurant in Honolulu. The restaurant is tucked inside the resort's Japanese garden surrounded by 800 tons of rock from Mt. Fuji and a pond filled with koi and turtles. With menu items that range from a Maui "cowboy" ribeye steak to chili-garlic Dungeness crab and robata grill items, the restaurant offers private tatami rooms as well as a formal dining area.

Another HRC chef who is expanding his presence in Hawaii is Peter Merriman,

capabilities.

Bev Gannon, who rose to national acclaim with the Haliimaile General Store in upcountry Maui, now has three restaurants, including the group-friendly Gannon's in a spectacular location at the Wailea Resort. The restaurant offers a variety of event locations, including outdoor space for large groups. Menu highlights include ginger and hoisin-braised short ribs and paella with local shellfish.

A highly anticipated addition to the Hawaii food scene from *Iron Chef*-winner Masuharu Morimoto is Morimoto Maui, scheduled to open this fall at the new Andaz Maui at Wailea hotel. The restaurant will be the second Hawaii venture for Morimoto, who also operates Morimoto Waikiki at The



Monkeypod Kitchen, Maui

Modern hotel on Oahu. Serving cuisine that is a blend of Japanese and Western styles, the ocean-side restaurant will offer both indoor and outdoor seating.

Off-Site Options

While not all Hawaii restaurants are suitable for group dining, meeting attendees can still enjoy the destination's gourmet culinary bounty at off-site venues. Many top chefs, including Merriman and Gannon, also have extensive catering operations.

"We recently did an event at a private estate that was catered by Bev Gannon and it was every bit as creative as being in a restaurant," Robinson says. "We had bento boxes with different items in each tier. Not every restaurant can serve 90 people, so this is a great option." *mi*



Morimoto Waikiki

owner of Merriman's restaurants in Oahu, Kauai and Maui. His newest, more casual venture is Monkeypod Kitchen, which has locations in Wailea, Maui and Ko Olina, Oahu. The restaurants feature wood-oven pizzas, locally sourced entrees served family style and a wide range of beers on tap.

"Monkeypod is great for dine-arounds—groups really take to the casual decor," Robinson says. "They have a surf-shack ambience with bright colors that is really engaging. And the food is fantastic."

Soon after Chai Chaowasaree, another iconic HRC chef, closed his popular Chai Island Bistro, he resurfaced in another Waikiki location with Chef Chai. His new restaurant offers a blend of Hawaiian and Thai flavors, evident in such locally sourced dishes as fresh ahi katsu with mango tomato salsa and a poached pear-rainbow salad made with brightly colored cauliflower from the Big Island. Located in the Pacific Honolulu tower, the restaurant includes a sleek private dining room with audiovisual

Bottled Breaks

Rum and vodka production are putting the latest twist on Hawaii's venue options and F&B experiences for groups.

Located on the slopes of Maui's Mt. Haleakala, **Ocean Vodka Organic Farm and Distillery** (www.oceanvodka.com) opened its doors for public tours in April and can also host catered events. The 88-acre, solar-powered farm, which produces vodka made from organic sugar cane and desalinated ocean mineral water, offers breathtaking views of both the north and south shores of Maui. It includes a visitor's center, a craft distillery and a Martini Garden planted with Kula lavender, citrus, passion fruit, pineapple and strawberries. "Ocean vodka is a great new option for large and small groups on Maui," says Frank Robinson, owner of Island Events Hawaii, a local DMC. "We've done farm tours and then hosted dinners on the property."

On Kauai, the **Koloa Rum Company** (www.koloarum.com) began distilling and bottling rum from local sugar cane in 2009 when it also opened its Tasting Room & Company Store in the **Kilohana Plantation** (www.kilohanakauai.com). The company offers complimentary tastings of its Koloa Rum as well as rum cake and rum fudge sauce. A 60-minute Rum & Dining Experience includes tasting, an explanation of the rum making process, a brief history of Hawaii's sugar plantation era and the chance to make a Mai Tai cocktail from sugar cane and vanilla grown on the property. Groups can easily combine a Koloa Rum visit with other activities at Kilohana, a 1936 plantation estate offering private dining and event space at Gaylord's restaurant, a luau show, a train ride through the grounds and retail shops.

Local beverages are also showcased at **Tedeschi Vineyards** (www.mauiwine.com), a winery shaded by 150-year-old trees in upcountry Maui. The winery, which makes wines from grapes as well as local pineapple, has a tasting room in a former guest cottage that once belonged to King Kalakaua, Hawaii's "Merrie Monarch." Groups of up to 75 people can be hosted for private tours and tastings.



PHOTOS (TOP, BOTTOM): Ocean Vodka Organic Farm and Distillery, Koloa Rum Company