

« Hawaii life, so gooooooood

Foodie fun on Maui

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Shaved Hamakua mushrooms at Mala, Lahaina.

After several long and difficult weeks, my husband and I set out for Maui Thursday where a great deal of fun was had by all. I started the day much too early, flying out while the sky was still streaked with purple and orange, in order to join up with Bonnie Friedman's Tour Da Food culinary tour of Maui (tourdafoodmaui.com; I'm doing a story on culinary tours for The Advertiser Taste section). It was a perfectly wonderful day of discovery and delight -- even if you know a place very well, there's always something new to learn.

Our day ended, after a visit to an amazing shave ice place, with a casual stroll down a street in Waiehu that dead-ends at the beach. We -- Friedman, two San Francisco visitors and I -- were talking casually and watching the whitecaps when suddenly

a whale breached in the distance, slapped its flukes and splashed joyfully. Then another. And another. I have never seen such a prolonged and clear display. These whales were standing on their heads! We all teased Friedman about how she had managed to order up this show for us. I literally jumped up and down with joy.

Next, I went off to my Mom's house and had a wonderful afternoon with her doing girly stuff. My husband was coming in in the evening after work and we had to do something about dinner so she pulled a supermarket rotisserie chicken out of the freezer, I grabbed a can of corn and made a creamed chicken with thyme and other herbs that finished the day very nicely. On top rice, of course.

The next day, we slept in and then drove over to Ka'anapali to join our brother and sister-in-law, who are visiting from chilly Kansas. Boy, are they happy campers to be here (Kansas temps are in the low numbers right now)! We decided to go to Mark and Judy Ellman's Mala for dinner and, to my delight, Mark and Judy were both there. We got to catch up a bit and the food was sensational. Not to mention the hawksbill turtles that obligingly swam up outside this restaurant (which practically hangs out over the water). It was my weekend for waterlife. I'll report more about what they're doing at Mala.

One thing I loved appreciated was that everything was focused on freshness -- crunchy local vegetables, delicate greens, whole grains. A lot of restaurants talk the "local, fresh" talk but they don't follow through. Mala is one of those that does. They do a whole fish (moi or opakapaka the night we were there) that is a delight to all the senses. I have a saying, "This is GOOD food." By which I mean not just good-tasting (heck! McDonald's fries are good-tasting) but the food FEELS good to my body, feels healthful, feels like sustenance in every sense. This was GOOD food. (And we got to have Mark's signature Caramel Miranda dessert with a half-dozen fresh fruits drizzled with caramel sauce and surrounding some great ice cream. Perhaps not GOOD for you, but the four of us, despite being quite replete by this time, cleaned the plate.)

Saturday, we visited one of my old haunts, the Pioneer Inn on the waterfront in Lahaina. Nobody else wanted to go there because it has, as they say, "come down" but I love sitting on the veranda in Lahaina town and remembering my youth (my first job was in that very building). So I persisted and we went. Food was basic breakfast fodder but not bad. People-watching was superior. And they have a charming (though, we were told, carnivorous -- so keep your fingers out of the cage) African gray parrot in the bar. Very talkative. It was great fun to watch him polish off a pecan shell. Wouldn't want to get nipped by that beak!

The others wanted to go on a long drive but I was tired so begged off, planning to spend the day lazing about the vacation home where we were staying. But then the call came that I was needed to work on a story and I spent a 12-hour day chronicling the life of Merrie Monarch executive director Auntie Dottie Thompson. Though tiring, this was most rewarding. She was an exceptional woman.

Dinner was pick-up pizza but we dressed it up. We had brought home a treasure trove from Mala, including these to-die ali'i mushrooms from Hamakua Mushrooms. They shave them thin as pasta ribbons, cook them in clarified butter, grill them so that they have a slightly smoky aspect, positively drown them in garlic and -- oh my!. We put those on our pizza. Plus we had sauteed Brussels sprouts (and if you are not a fan, try them at Mala, you will be converted -- or at my house, mine are pretty fine, too).

By today, Sunday as I write this, we were ready for breakfast at home -- yogurt, fruit, cereal, coffee. Simple pleasures with people you love.

Monday, the cruel real world again and I'll probably have to eat nothing but wheat germ to make up for this sybaritic weekend.