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Maui's little-known eateries come to light

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Bonnie Friedman, owner of Tour Da Food Maui, was an adult before she knew cake mix existed. She grew up in Brooklyn, N.Y., in a family that enjoyed preparing good food from scratch as much as they enjoyed eating it.



COURTESY GILL BROOKS

Participants on the Tour Da Food Maui tour sample ono local favorites, which may include a plate lunch.

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"I remember watching my grandmother move around her small kitchen, cooking holiday meals for the entire extended family," Friedman recalled. "My mother also was an excellent cook and baker. She made the most delicious cookies, cakes and breads, and I helped her from the time I was 5 years old. She baked date-nut bread in empty tin cans with the tops and bottoms cut off, and I still make it that way."

In 1946 Friedman's uncle opened JoMart Chocolates, a chocolate factory and retail store in Brooklyn that's still owned and operated by family members. One of her favorite childhood memories is sitting in the factory beside her grandfather with a pot of warm chocolate and a lollipop stick, putting sugar eyes on Easter bunnies with "chocolate glue."

Friedman loves everything about food, including shopping for ingredients. "I'd rather go to a good farmer's market or grocery store than to Neiman Marcus," she said. "I don't remember a time when I didn't feel that way."

Given her passion, starting Tour Da Food Maui in May 2008 was a long time coming. The seeds for the business were planted when her good friend Kelii Brown, director of public relations and promotions for the Maui Visitors Bureau, returned from a trip to New York City, raving about a walking tour of Chinatown eateries that he had taken.

Brown was convinced such a tour would work well on Maui and that Friedman would be the perfect guide, given her experience and reputation as a food writer, cookbook author, restaurant publicist, certified pastry cook and former owner of chocolate manufacturing and gourmet catering companies.

TOUR DA FOOD MAUI

Meeting place: Heritage Gardens Kepaniwai Park, at the entrance to Lao Valley, Maui

Times/days: See accompanying sidebar.

Cost: \$260 for two people, \$365 for three people and \$420 for four people, including tax. Prices will be going up to \$280, \$375 and \$440, respectively, on Jan. 5. Custom tours for one or two guests can be arranged. Inquire about rates for these.

Phone: 242-8383

E-mail: mauigp@aol.com

Web site:

www.tourdafoodmaui.com

Notes: Every tour includes transportation from and back to the central meeting place, one main meal, snacks, a goodie bag and a list of additional off-the-radar eating places.

Children are welcome on the tours if they're at least 13 years old. Certain dietary restrictions can be accommodated; please make a note of them when you book. Reservations must be made at least 10 days in advance; billing is done via PayPal when the reservation is confirmed.

"Kelii really encouraged me," she said. "I thought about it and conducted extensive research for 10 months before deciding to go for it. We figured there was a segment of the visitor market that would appreciate real local food, and we were right!"

Tour Da Food Maui offers three tours, two focused on Wailuku, Maui's county seat. According to Friedman, most visitors overlook Wailuku even though it's home to fantastic, hole-in-the-wall ethnic restaurants. The only option that's set in stone is Tuesday's Breakfast at the Old Wailuku Inn at Ulupono; the schedule for the other two tours can be adjusted according to guests' preferences.

Friedman has developed close relationships with chefs, restaurateurs, farmers and food producers throughout Maui. Tour Da Food participants meet many of these successful entrepreneurs during their visits to cafes, bakeries, markets, snack shops and an ice cream factory. They sample something ono (delicious) at every stop, the final palate pleaser always being the refreshing "snow cone" known as shave ice in Hawaii.

"When I started the business, I assumed my customers would be big-city gourmets, but, boy, was I wrong," Friedman said. "I've hosted many people from small towns across the country. They're curious about all aspects of life on Maui, and they don't mind exploring side streets to try different kinds of food. They say they never would have discovered the places we go to or the food we eat if they hadn't taken the tour."

Friedman's narrative includes descriptions of the food traditions of the many ethnic groups who've settled in Hawaii. From malasadas (Portuguese doughnuts) to mochi (Japanese rice cakes) to manapua (Chinese char siu-filled buns), these treats are part of the wonderful smorgasbord that's now known collectively as "local food."

"By learning about different cuisines, visitors gain a deeper understanding about Hawaii's history and multicultural community," Friedman said. "Since I'm wildly enthusiastic about food, I enjoy hearing other people's food stories, too. One young couple from New York City told me they always go to L&L Hawaiian Barbecue there. They love local food, and couldn't wait to try Spam musubi. Here's something interesting: Every guest but one has liked Spam musubi."

Friedman believes food is a key component of a destination's sense of place. "I do a lot of 'food research' whenever and wherever I travel, so much so that I sometimes drive my friends nuts," she said. "I rarely, if ever, go for the 'big names.' I'd much rather eat like a local, which is exactly what visitors do on Tour Da Food Maui."

ABOUT THE TOURS

Breakfast at The Old Wailuku Inn at Ulupono
Tuesdays: 8:45 a.m.

Innkeeper Janice Fairbanks prepares a family recipe and talks about her Japanese/Filipino heritage and foods she enjoyed growing up in Lahaina.

Lunch Like a Local, Maui Style
Wednesdays and Thursdays: 9:45 a.m.

There are many wonderful off-the-beaten-path restaurants in Central Maui. You'll decide whether you want to have a picnic lunch or "eat in." If you prefer a sit-down lunch, the ono options include Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai and Vietnamese eateries.

Upcountry Maui

Available Monday through Thursday for one to three guests

Verdant Upcountry Maui is where most of Maui's best produce is cultivated. Culinary treasures await in Pukalani, Makawao and Kula.