advertisement | your ad here



Maui eating places the tourists often overlook

John Flinn, Special to The Chronicle Sunday, February 28, 2010



"Don't ask," says Bonnie Friedman. "Just taste it."

We're standing in the parking lot of a mom-and-pop store, far from the sun-kissed beaches and resorts, and she's unwrapping the dubiously looking and uniquely Hawaiian snack she's just purchased inside: Spam musubi.

It looks like an enormous piece of sushi, but where you'd expect to find a pink sliver of raw tuna or salmon there's a slab of Monty Python's favorite mystery meat. With added teriyaki flavor.

I really don't want to, but to humor the food critic and cookbook writer I take a cautious bite. Then a big, enthusiastic bite. And another. It's really good.

Maui, like all the Hawaiian islands, has two very separate and distinct cuisines: What the tourists eat - grilled mahi mahi, coconut prawns, teriyaki chicken with pineapple rings on top, etc. - and what the locals

eat.

"Ono grinds" sounds like something you *really* didn't want to see at Studio 54 back in the 1970s, but it's just Hawaiian slang for "good food."

I'm taking Friedman's Tour da Food to get a taste of it. And as I consider grabbing another Spam musubi for later, I'm discovering that this eating-local quest has some wonderful side benefits: Not only is the chow decidedly less expensive than what they serve in the resorts, it's an edible microcosm of Hawaii's history - and it's taking me to some beguiling parts of the island tourists rarely visit.

"As gorgeous as the resorts are, if people only eat in those restaurants," says Friedman, "they're missing Hawaii."

She starts me off with a malasada, a hole-less Portuguese doughnut. They come from the Home Made Bakery in Wailuku, which will sell them only straight-out-of-the-oven hot: between 5 and 10 a.m., and from 4 to 10 p.m.

"The Portuguese arrived here from the Azores in 1878 to work as cowboys, and also on the sugar plantations, and they brought these with them," Friedman explains.

"Mardi Gras is called 'Malasada Day' in Hawaii because traditionally they needed to get rid of all their sugar and butter before Lent. They'd make up a big batch of malasadas and take them out to the cane fields to share with the Japanese and Filipino workers. That's how they became ubiquitous in Hawaii."

This sharing of food in the cane fields led to another uniquely Hawaiian cuisine: the plate lunch. Traditionally, it's a serving of some sort of protein - it could be Hawaiian kalua pig, or Filipino adobo, or Japanese teriyaki beef, or Korean Kalbi ribs - accompanied by a big scoop of macaroni salad and two scoops of rice.

"It's the story of Hawaiian immigration served up on a plate," said Friedman.

Another Hawaiian belly buster you see on menus is Loco Moco - a mound of rice topped with hamburger patties and eggs, and smothered in gravy. Locals eat it for breakfast.

"People in Hawaii love to eat, and they're totally unapologetic about it," said Friedman. "They say that people here don't eat until they're full - they eat until they're tired."

Our quest begins in Wailuku, Maui's administrative capital, a place most visitors pass through only on their way to the Iao Valley. But it's refreshing to visit a place not entirely given over to the care and feeding of tourists, and this colorful old plantation town is full of intriguing and inexpensive eating places.

Some require serious sleuthing to find. One of our stops, for example, was the Wailuku Industrial Park, where Friedman led me into TJ's Warehouse, located in the Maui Chemical and Paper Products building. Inside sprawled a vast Asian market with a huge selection of bento boxes and an okazu, a Hawaiian deli. Behind the sneeze guard was everything from Kinpira gobo (Japanese braised burdock root) to corned beef hash.

Friedman went straight for the misoyaki butterfish. "This is what Nobu makes for \$45 a plate, and here it costs \$3," she said. "And I think it's just as good - maybe better."

To be fair, Nobu Waikiki, the celebrated Japanese restaurant, currently has it on the menu for \$23; it's called Black Cod Saiykyo Miso there. But as we carry our Styrofoam boxes out to a concrete picnic table in the parking lot, I understand Friedman's basic point: At the fancy tourist restaurants you're paying mostly for ambience and location.

Later we try out a small, family-run Japanese restaurant with its entrance inside a parking garage (see below) and a shave ice stand built into a coin laundry. (While the location was exceptional, the shave ice was decidedly not.)

Shave ice, President Obama's favorite snack, is sort of like a snow cone - in the same sense that pate de foie gras is sort of like liverwurst. In the Hawaiian version, the ice is shaved into a super-fine powder, like newly fallen snow, and, at the best places the syrups - everything from pineapple to lychee to passion fruit - are homemade.

Alas, the place Friedman believes has the best shave ice on Maui - Tom's Mini Mart in Wailuku - was

closed on this day, which is how we ended up in the laundry. I suppose it's handy if you spill some on your shirt.

The next day our quest took us to Upcountry, the collection of farming communities on the lower slopes of the volcano Haleakala. The fertile fields here supplied the cotton for Union uniforms in the Civil War, and today are largely covered with sugarcane. Winding back roads took us past small ranches, lavender farms, roadside fruit stands, a rodeo ring, art galleries, mom-and-pop stores with warped wood plank floors and little churches with services in the Hawaiian language.

In the tiny town of Keokea, Grandma's Coffee House has been growing and roasting its own organic Arabica beans on Haleakala since 1918; some is grown right out back. They also serve up taro burgers and coconut muffins. It's a few minutes' detour off the road to the top of the volcano. Alas, it doesn't open until 7 a.m. - too late for the sunrise-watchers - but it's a great place to warm up and wake up on the way back down.

Down the road, in Kula, the Kula Country Farms produce stand looked like something you'd see along the highway in California's Central Valley - except for the kind of sweeping ocean views that automatically add a million dollars to the property values.

Here they sell produce from growers in the area, much of it organic. Talk about buying local: from ground to market, the strawberries travel approximately 25 feet. When a customer asked about fresh basil, Meredith Sealey, the owner's sister, walked a few steps and pulled a bunch out of the soil.

It occurred to me that if you're staying in a condo, as a large share of Maui's visitors are, you could load up here on produce that the deep-pocket buyers at Whole Foods can't obtain at any price. Avocados here are the size of grapefruits. Everything - "Kula Dave's" tomatoes, the papayas, mangoes, eggplants, green onions and spinach - looked almost ready to explode with flavor.

I paused at bin full of onions - sweet Maui onions. I've often heard it said they're so sweet you can much them like an apple and I'd always assumed that this was a bit of hyperbole. I picked one up, holding it like Hamlet with his skull, and considered putting it to the test: to bite, or not to bite?

In the end, I chickened out. Better, I thought, to save room for some more Spam musubi.

If you go

Where to stay

On my latest couple of visits to Maui I've been exploring accommodations away from the west-side resorts. Here are a few of my favorites:

Old Wailuku Inn at Ulupono: 2199 Kaho'okele St., Wailuku; (808) 244-5897; www.mauiinn.com. A throwback to the plantation days of the 1920s, this historic home features seven guestrooms, all with private baths, and gorgeous common areas filled with Hawaiian art. The breakfasts are sensational. With the perfect mix of privacy and conviviality, it's a B&B for people who don't particularly like B&Bs. It gets a

lot of repeat business. Rooms \$150 to \$190 a night, including breakfast.

Paia Inn: 93 Hana Highway, Paia; (808) 579-6000, www.paiainn.com. In the heart of Paia, a lively little prayer-flags-and-wind-surfing town on the way to Hana, this is a hip, moderately priced boutique hotel with a tin roof above and free Wi-Fi inside. Perfect for those who want to take advantage of Paia's nightlife - including Charlie's Restaurant, a frequent hangout of Willie Nelson. Ask the front desk clerk to show you the hotel's private access to a stunning and curiously underused beach. Rooms start at \$189 for a double bed, \$219 for a queen.

Inn at Mama's Fish House: 799 Poho Place, Paia; (808) 579-9764, www.mamasfishhouse.com. "Steps from the beach" is one of the most abused phrases in Hawaiian hotel marketing, but in this case it's appropriate. I counted: My door was 16 steps from a gorgeous but little-used beach where I could watch some of the world's best windsurfers and kiteboarders. Adjacent to Mama's Fish House (see "Where to eat"), these cottages feature full kitchens, wicker furniture and other amenities. Mine had a nifty walk-in shower. From \$175 a night for a 450-square-foot studio garden cottage to \$575 for an 850-square-foot, two-bedroom beachfront cottage. Guests get 15 percent off at the restaurant.

What to do

Bonnie Friedman's Tour da Food runs Tuesday through Thursday, 9:45 a.m. to approximately 12:45 p.m. Tours focus on Wailuku, but customized tours of Upcountry are also available. Lunch and several snacks included. Cost is \$280 for two people, \$375 for three and \$440 for four. (808) 242-8383, www.tourdafood.com

For more information

Maui Visitors Bureau: (800) 525-6284,

www.visitmaui.com.

John Flinn is the former editor of the Travel section. E-mail comments to travel@sfchronicle.com.

This article appeared on page M - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle