

RESTAURANTS

Behind the scenes at the “fancy restaurant” of Maui Community College’s Pa‘ina culinary arts facility

A classier act

BONNIE FRIEDMAN

I started lunching at Class Act almost 20 years ago. The four-course meal was—I think—six or seven bucks back then. (Faculty members dispute this but I remember it clearly...I think.) The food was delicious, especially considering it was cooked on equipment as old and obsolete as a horse-drawn carriage. The service was nervous but perfectly adequate keeping in mind these were students. You could bring your own wine, and you better have remembered to bring a corkscrew, too. I also remember dining al fresco (and I use the term extremely loosely) in molded plastic chairs, hoping that no “Maui snow” would land on the entrée. In short, I don’t know that it was “classy,” but it was good fun.

Two years ago, the restaurant moved into Maui Community College’s Pa‘ina Building, a \$17-million state-of-the-art culinary arts facility. Now the name makes sense.

The dining room—complete with harbor view—is as lovely and finely appointed as just about any

restaurant on Maui. The kitchen crew is a cooking class; the servers are (duh!) a service class. Diners get to grade them all. The whole deal fascinates me so I was happy when Chef Instructor Tom Lelli agreed to let me hang out behind the scenes—he even let me get my hands dirty, so to speak.

Monday, April 4

8AM: Lecture
“Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Meat.”

10:30AM: Task and menu sign up

The day’s menu: Caramelized leek and goat cheese strudel with smoked tomato coulis, warm shellfish salad with lemon citronette, braised beef short ribs with creamy polenta and roasted root vegetables, rosemary-crust pork tenderloin with vanilla-spiced Granny Smith apple sauce, roasted vegetable crêpe with pesto and smoked mozzarella cheese. Dessert provided by chef instructor Teresa Shurilla’s advanced baking class.

“Who wants to be sous chef?” calls out Chef Tom. “Don’t make me pick someone.” Brandon Ideta “volunteers” to be second-in-com-

mand, helping to oversee the six women and eight other men in his class.

The shellfish salad is quickly snapped up by Cody Alexander, Joe Sado and Tyler Putman. “Ooh, we wanted that,” croon Janessa Ollero and Brittany Farnham. They settle for the short ribs, lamenting that they “did the entrée last week and wanted to try something new.”

Only Herval Neto had signed up for the strudel and I thought, well, I should be able to handle that. I think he was less than thrilled to have a “non-student stranger” partner but I immediately took on the least appealing of the prep tasks—cleaning the leeks. If you have never worked with leeks, they are often dirty buggahs and need to be washed well, sometimes more than once, before slicing or julienne-ing or whatever-ing.

By the way, a student who misses the lecture is almost always signed up by classmates for what they consider the worst job of the week—staff meal and dish machine.

Chef Tom goes over the menu details then takes a few minutes to demonstrate how to work with phyllo dough and how to trim short ribs



Storm before the calm: Servers get ready for game time

and pork tenderloin. “You guys know how to clean lettuce properly?” “Yeah, put it in the sanitizer.” There’s a smart ass in every crowd.

Now it is quiet—except for the sound of knives against sharpening steels and pens scratching out “to-do” lists.

Ingredients are brought up from purchasing, out of the freezer, the walk-in. “Part of the learning process is to utilize what we have,” explains Chef Tom. “This is like any restaurant, we don’t waste.”

New sounds—dicing zucchini, calling for help from chef, laughter. Laughter is good.

I have cleaned the leeks, sliced the leeks and sweated the leeks. My work is done.

Wednesday, April 6

8:30AM: Game Day

Janessa and Brittany are grating Fontina blue and Parmesan for polenta. Robert is making the sauce for the short ribs. Cody is julienne-ing the incredible neon-bright garnish

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Bone yard: Chef instructor Tom Lelli reveals the finer points of cutting short ribs

for the warm seafood salad—magenta and yellow watermelon radish (I've never even heard of this!) and carrots.

Kawai—yes, she was the one who missed class—is getting the staff meal together. Every restaurant in America serves “staff meal.” This day it is enchiladas, Spanish rice and roasted vegetables, which are as tasty as the “gourmet” stuff the guests will get.

Sous chef Brandon has to take over from the guy who was supposed to do the amuse bouche—he didn't show. “As in real life,” says Tom, “the boss has to do it.” In this case, it is frying dozens of won ton skins on which a tiny roll of gravlax, lemon relish, microgreens and wasabi aioli will perch. Brandon arranges the morsels at a tiered cart in the dining room and offers them to guests just after they are seated.

The pace quickens—it's almost 9 AM—the tasting takes place at 10:30; service begins at 11. There is clattering in the “dish pit.” No glamorous prima donnas here, everyone washes his own bowls, pots, pans.

Servers dressed in black and white begin arriving. At 9 AM, instructor Juli Umetsu, Chef Tom's “professional other half,” starts her class on front-of-the-house skills. Someone's sister put his silk tie in the washing machine—is this the food-service equivalent of “my dog ate my homework?”—so Juli talks about the care of silk ties for a moment. Then she tells her class they have 60 reservations on the books—“where we want to be today.” She talks about the place setting—how

many app forks, entrée forks, knives, spoons. Then...the Napkin Fold. This day, the Bishop's Hat—“In honor of the Pope, yes,” says Umetsu. “Even if we're not Catholic, it's nice to show a little respect.” The servers catch on quickly. Next are the assignments—host, servers, back waiters, bar, seater. Uh, oh. The seater is missing. This will now fall to Umetsu herself, her assistant Jeremy, and today's host, Ho'oikaika. Things seem to be just fine out here. Back to the kitchen.

9:30 AM: It is remarkably calm and quiet. Everyone is moving through the tasks, setting up stations. Chef will be around in a half hour. In the back kitchen, Jessie and Cole are deep into the lemons and the Parmesan. Ah, the glories of garnish.

Okay, coming up to 10 AM. “Chef, chef.” “Grab your short ribs.” “Where's the sauce?” “What sauce?” “You guys remember, 10:30, I need samples!”

The pace picks up in the back and the front of the house. How many chefs does it take to decide how to plate the dessert? Apparently *four*. An ultraserious discussion among Chef and three students. Cold plates and doilies? Ice cream on top of cobbler? Ice cream beside cobbler? What happens to the paper doily when you put ice cream on it? What about the cookie? Stuck in the ice cream? The final answer: Ice cream on top of the cobbler and the tuille in the ice cream. “But that's not what Chef Teresa told us,” balk the student chefs. “Sometimes,” says Chef Tom, “there's a better way.” The decision stands (as does the tuille...in the ice cream).

10 AM: The kitchen is filled with the fragrance of a gourmet meal being cooked.

10:30 AM: The servers position themselves behind the counter facing off (not really) against the chefs inside their exhibition kitchen. They have plated two of everything—exactly as the dishes will be presented to guests. The chefs explain. The servers taste. Okay, okay. I tasted, too. Every thing I put in my mouth was fabulous. The strudel was so good because I, obviously, did such a good job washing, slicing and sweating the leeks. The most outstanding taste sensation was the vanilla-spiced Granny Smith applesauce that accompanied the pork tenderloin. The dried chiles, cinnamon stick and vanilla bean were the ingredients that made the difference. Very easy to make, too.

11 AM: It's show time.
11:20 AM: Six tables, 17 guests are seated, all is going smoothly. The guest mix at Class Act has always,



Brandon Ideta slices gravlax

frankly, baffled me. It seems visitor/part-time resident-heavy and I wonder why more local folk don't come here, especially for special occasions and business lunches.

I side up to Table 21, a two-top at which two local businesswomen are enjoying their lunch. It is Agnes Hayashi's first time. Gwen Ueoka has been coming for years. They both proclaim the food very good, the service impressive if a bit unpolished, the ambiance nice and comfortable. “Everyone always says how wonderful it is and how much you'll enjoy lunch here,” says Agnes. Everyone is right. ■

Bonnie Friedman is the co-author of D.K.'s Sushi Chronicles from Hawaii: Recipes from Sansei Seafood Restaurant & Sushi Bar. She lives in Kula.

Class Act

Mau'i Community College,
310 W. Ka'ahumanu Ave,
Kahului (808-984-3280),
www.hawaii.edu/maui/mca/index.htm

Hours: Wed & Fri during school year, 11 AM–12:30 PM

Price: Four-course prix-fixe lunch: \$25 (includes iced tea, coffee and amuse bouche)

Payment: MC, V
Reservations required and may be made up to seven days in advance. Seats at the Exhibition Kitchen counter for “walk-ins” on a first-come, first-served basis. Private dining room seats up to 16, please make reservations well in advance.

Pa'ina Food Court

Summer hours: Mon–Thu
8 AM–2:30 PM, Fri 7 AM–2:30 PM
School year hours: Mon–Thu
7:30 AM–5 PM, Fri 7:30 AM–2:30 PM



Sweet scents: Lavender accents