

Raising Cane

December - January 2016 by Bonnie Friedman

Executive chef David Viviano makes a grand entrance at Montage Kapalua Bay's premier restaurant, Cane & Canoe.

The restaurant's name suits on many levels. Cane & Canoe is a masterfully crafted study in well-balanced contrasts. Some aspects, like the space, are soaring. Others, such as delicate micro shiso and bright, miniature nasturtium-and-borage-flower garnishes, are subtle. The most delectable facets are the abundance from the land and the bounty from the sea—all brilliantly prepared and presented. An evening meal glides seamlessly from breadbasket to dessert. Try to refrain from being lulled into complete-and-complacent relaxation. For then, the details will sail past you, and that would surely be a shame.

"Grand" is really the only word to describe the space. The architecture is a huge, contemporary take on a traditional Hawaiian longhouse. The dining area itself—all of it open—has an air of intimacy, rather than largesse. Canoe paddles, contemporary Hawaiian art, stone accents and particularly comfortable furniture complement the bigger picture: the view. Every table is the best seat in the house. Tall palms guide the eyes down: down to the sea and the sunset. On a recent evening, Joseph Chee Jr.'s guitar and beautiful, lyrical voice provided ideal accompaniment.

And then there's the food. Prepare yourself. Executive chef David Viviano, though relatively new to the islands, has given the menu an enjoyable local food/Hawai'i regional vibe.

Consider two of the signature appetizers. Goat Cheese Tempura is lighter than expected with an appropriate ratio of cheese to tempura crust—making for exactly the right proportion of crunchy to creamy. Add a little peppery arugula, sweet-citrus orange sections and floral, acidic liliko'i, and you have a perfectly balanced plate.





◀ Back

Picture 1 of 5

Next ▶

Crispy pork belly and grilled octopus with house-made kim chee purée, mango, Moloka'i purple potato, watercress and pickled onion.

Chow fun is a staple here in Hawai'i, of course ... But chef David's Calamari "Chow Fun" takes this ubiquitous island comfort food to a whole new level: no noodles. The calamari is thin and cut into short, noodle-shaped pieces that through some sort of kitchen magic take on the texture of chow fun noodles. And those are tossed with thin disks of chewy lap cheong, crunchy bean sprouts, charred scallions, kale and a bit of chili flake to give the dish a spicy kick.

I am unable to resist when the words "pork belly" appear on a menu. Here it is crispy and combined with another irresistible ingredient: grilled octopus. Arranged like a lei on a plate, the rest of the ingredients are house-made: kim chee purée, mango, Moloka'i sweet potato, watercress and pickled onion. If it reads as if it's just too much, or that the flavors and textures might fight each other, neither is true. Chef performs like a gold-medal gymnast on the balance beam.

Viviano is also an enthusiastic, active "farm-and-sea-to-table" learner, making his way through the network of local purveyors. In the meantime, he certainly knows his local fishes and how to prepare them. My friend raved about his hamachi poke after trying it an event a few weeks prior to our dinner. She was hoping it would be on the menu. And there it was. It's luscious, combined with velvety-smooth avocado, salty caviar and crispy taro chips.

“Hawaiian Snapper” is always enticing. Being able to confidently send out an absolutely perfectly cooked piece of fish is, perhaps, the truest test of any restaurant in Hawai‘i. On this evening, the snapper was onaga and it was, indeed, cooked exquisitely: skin crisp, moist flesh. A slew of excellent accompaniments completed this standout entrée: creamy corn custard; citrusy calamansi beurre blanc; bright, crunchy dashibraised radish; and thick asparagus spears.

And finally—except for dessert, of course—something completely different: pappardelle with duck confit. The fat, flat al dente pasta noodles and chunks of rich duck meat are familiar, but the rest of the dish represents a unique departure. Stewed grape tomatoes sans skin bring a little welcome acidity to the party, while Swiss chard adds an herbal note and a bit of bitterness. But it is the black cardamom duck sauce that raises this pasta entrée to new heights.

If you exhibited enough self-control to resist a second (or third) buttery sweet potato roll when you first settled in to your seat, you may reward yourself with dessert.

I think you can often tell whether a pastry chef is a man or a woman by the way his or her work looks. Sorry, men, but in my opinion, women usually exhibit a greater degree of finesse in the pastry domain. Pastry chef Tomoko Nohina has a light touch and an obviously refined palate.

My friend chose lemongrass ginger crème brûlée. This lighter-than-air brûlée, topped with even lighter Maui pineapple foam and a few impeccable bite-sized sugar cookies, won me over.

In addition, the roasted pineapple “Napoleon” intrigued me. The description below the name reads, “chiboust crème, oven-roasted Maui pineapple, puff pastry disks and pistachio.” What the menu doesn’t say is that it’s a DIY dessert. Constructing one’s own Napoleon with an out-of-this world selection of ingredients was certainly an entertaining way to end an outstanding meal.

Additional details merit mention: The wine list is global with even “orange” wine represented—very au courant, although the technique of fermenting white wine like a red, with skins and all, is ancient.

Classic cocktails share space with contemporary concoctions on the drinks menu. My benchmark is often a Manhattan; it was exquisite. My friend’s Kamuela Fizz was sparkling and tropical, just right for a very warm West Maui evening.

A noteworthy addition to Maui’s growing roster of restaurants, Cane & Canoe tenders a classy, comfortable, well-balanced ride. Just like in a masterfully crafted canoe.

Cane & Canoe, Montage Kapalua Bay, 1 Bay Drive, Lahaina, (808) 662-6600 or montagehotels.com

All photos courtesy Montage Kapalua Bay