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HONOLULU MAGAZINE / NOVEMBER 2012 / THE HAWAIIAN PLATE EXPLAINED / HAWAIIAN PLATE: A 20TH CENTURY INVENTION

A 20th Century Invention

Just how old is the Hawaiian plate, anyway?

Hawaii is in many ways a place frozen in time. The architecture reveals exactly when our building booms happened. Visitors know Hawaiian culture primarily through old arts like hula and lei-making. What we think of as Hawaiian food, it turns out, is no different: a time capsule from the '40s, when most of our Hawaiian food institutions were established.

Monica Toguchi, the third generation running Highway Inn, says, "What we do is whatever Hawaiian food was considered to be in the 1940s, when my grandfather started the restaurant and how he understood it." Back then, she says, decades before the Hawaiian Renaissance, there wasn't a strong sense of what was Hawaiian and what wasn't—people didn't speak Hawaiian; they didn't identify with being Hawaiian.

So, in 1947, when Seiichi Toguchi opened Highway Inn and put lomi salmon on the menu, he didn't think about whether lomi salmon was really a Native Hawaiian dish—he just knew it tasted good with kalua pig and poi, probably in the same way Americans have co-opted hot dogs and rarely think of their German origins.

The legacy: Whatever is classified as "Hawaiian" food now was codified in these postwar restaurants. The subsequent generations that have taken over the restaurants have proven reluctant to change the menu, creating a time machine for the nostalgia hungry.

If you had to bring someone who had just awoken from a 60-year cryo-sleep somewhere that would induce the least shock, Helena's Hawaiian Food would be a good place, where the food and dishes—the actual dishes—would be familiar. The original Melmac dishes—popularized after World War II—are long gone, but in their places are replicas, the little bowls that we now associate with our Hawaiian food restaurants. (But, of course, they don't make 'em like they used to: "The old ones were supposed

to last forever; the new ones break," says Elaine Katsuyoshi, who helps her son, Craig, run Helena's.)

Elaine recently dug up a menu that she thinks is from the '50s. It's remarkable how little the menu has changed. It was one page, as it is now, with a laulau plate and a kalua pig plate and familiar a la carte items like lomi salmon and pipikaula. Nothing's been added: What's been dropped are the funkier dishes—ake, raw beef liver, *naau puua*, a luau leaf and pig intestine stew. (Also missing from the menu: the line "We use Island meats, fish and poultry." There's no longer enough of a supply of Island pork and chicken.)



A fully-loaded Hawaiian plate from Haili's Hawaiian Food.



Bobby and Monica Toguchi, father and daughter of Highway Inn.

So what's the future of Hawaiian food? Will it evolve? Or will it remain a postcard sent from 1946?

As Melmac has proved, nothing lasts forever. Daniel Young, the third generation running Young's Fish Market (and, at 26, the youngest person I talked to at the Hawaiian food restaurants), says, "When I go out with my friends, we don't go to places like this." He wants to modernize the cuisine Young's serves, "different twists on the established Hawaiian food and bring it up from the plate lunch." He's not exactly sure what this haute Hawaiian plate might look like, but, while his dad (60 years young) still has a say, change may be a while coming anyway.

For others, the future of Hawaiian food could be in the deeper past. Just as heirloom tomatoes and other fruits of yesteryear have captured the nation's imagination, at Highway Inn, Monica is interested in reviving other native taro varieties that have given way to the more ubiquitous lehua taro, which makes up most of the poi that we eat. Once a week, she works with Anthony Deluze, a taro farmer, to mill poi that might contain up to seven varieties of taro (it's available Fridays at Highway Inn).

Going back to the roots of poi, Daniel Anthony has suddenly brought traditional hand-pounded poi to the forefront of Hawaii cuisine: he recently pounded poi with his *papa kui ai* (board) and *pohaku* (stone) at the Hawaii Food and Wine Festival, serving pai ai alongside national celebrity chefs' plates of foie gras and abalone. Poi! The food formerly likened to wallpaper paste was suddenly one of the most buzzed about dishes at the \$200 event!

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