

Two at Turtle Bay

There's more to eat on the North Shore than shave ice and shrimp-truck lunches.

JOHN HECKATHORN

I am in such a North Shore frame of mind, I can barely write. If you go to Turtle Bay Resort's Web site, you hear, in the background, the sound of the surf. It's making me so relaxed, I think I'll just ... *ZZZZZZ*.

No, no. Duty calls. Fortunately, duty called me to spend two days at Turtle Bay this month. I picked up a slight tan, and some restaurant news.

Outside of the shrimp trucks, which now seemed parked every 100 yards in Haleiwa town, the North Shore has not been a place you'd go to eat—especially now that Kua Aina has brought its burgers to town. However, Turtle Bay, that often embattled country cousin of Oahu's tourist industry, turns out to have not one, but two, restaurants worth a visit.

Ola at Turtle Bay Resort

57-091 Kamehameha Highway, Kahuku // 293-0801 // Breakfast daily 8 to 10:30 a.m.; lunch 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., pupu 3-10 p.m. // Validated Parking, Major Credit Cards // www.olaislife.com

I miss chef Fred DeAngelo in town. He was the chef who got both Palomino and Tiki's off to a rollicking start, before departing for the North Shore—and his own restaurant.

DeAngelo and wife, Cheryl, opened Ola in December 2005. At that time, I promised I'd come up and try it. That promise was approaching its "sell by" date by the time I braved the 60-mile journey from Hawaii



Island soul food: five-spiced, braised short ribs on corn mashed potatoes.

PHOTO BY OLIVIER KONING

Kai.

Rather wish I'd gone earlier.

Short of a beach picnic, Ola is one of the few places you can eat with your feet in the sand, literally, at the beach along Kuilima Cove. You cannot build a Hawaii restaurant that close to the water anymore. What the resort did, before leasing the property to DeAngelo, was expand its beach concession. It couldn't build an enclosed space, so what went up, with some help from Wimberly Allison Tong & Goo, was an open-air pavilion that looks simple and rustic, but no doubt cost a fortune.

A high-tech roof is supported by trunks and branches of ironwood trees cut down on the property. In case nature turns nasty, there are some nicely engineered

sliding glass doors to shut out the elements. You can check this casual setting in the film *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, which spent five nights filming there.

But, hey, setting isn't everything. It's what's on the plate that matters.

I like DeAngelo's plates for two reasons. First, there's nothing particularly fancy or fussy about his presentations. The appetizer sampler, for instance, crowds a plate with kalua pig nachos, ahi cakes and a softshell crab. There's stuff and sauces happening in every direction.

Second, DeAngelo puts flavors together with real nerve. The kalua pig nachos are "nachos" in quotation marks. Kalua pig sits on crisp, fried wonton skins, topped with layers of textures and flavors. There is an Asian guacamole, which allows DeAngelo to sneak in both garlic and chili paste. There's fresh ginger sweetened with a little plum sauce. To round off and soothe those flavors, there's melted goat cheese and pepper jack cheese. And, if that's not enough, there are drizzles of Maui onion sour cream across the top.

To finish off the platter, the ahi cakes come topped with tobiko aioli, and the softshell crab comes on spinach, baby bok choy and Hamakua mushrooms, all done up in a roasted garlic butter.

Not convinced yet? You might try DeAngelo's rib eye poke. Yes, rib eye, as in grass-fed steak from Kaulana on the Big Island.

"Poke doesn't mean raw, it means cut up," says DeAngelo, who went to Kamehameha. He seasons the steak with alae salt, togarishi spice mix and a touch of raw cane sugar, then sears it rare, so it's a little red, just like ahi poke. It comes chockablock on the plate, colorful with grape tomatoes, onion, watercress and sea asparagus. Sea asparagus is called samphire in Europe, where the edible seaside plant is usually harvested wild. Here, it's cultivated by University of Hawaii professor Wenhao Sun, just down the street from the restaurant.

Sea asparagus naturally concentrates salt, so it's a seasoning as well as a vegetable. It's not seaweed, but it adds the faint marine flavor that ogo would add to a more traditional poke, but with a more appealing texture.

There were four of us at dinner, and, logically, we should have quit right here. DeAngelo makes the best pupu in town, perfect for that casual evening drinking wine with friends. But we were undeterred. We ordered another bottle of Adelsheim pinot noir, which had rich fruit for an Oregon pinot, and plunged into the entrées.



Chef Fred DeAngelo serves an unusual poke. It's rib eye steak, seared to rare and served with sea asparagus.

PHOTO BY DAVID CROXFORD

Having gone on and on about the appetizers, let me deconstruct just two of the entrées. The five-spiced, braised beef short ribs are soul food. DeAngelo takes a three-inch-thick short rib, removes two out of the three bones and wraps them around the remaining bone so it looks more like an osso buco than a short rib. Set atop Kahuku corn mashed potatoes, this is fork tender and deeply flavored.

Even more amazing is the chicken long rice. Once again, “long rice” belongs in quotes. Chicken long rice is a traditional luau food—often a few shreds of chicken in a soupy collection of transparent mung bean noodles—though just how those Chinese noodles were transmogrified into Hawaiian food is one of those multicultural mysteries.

DeAngelo's long rice is a far more substantial dish. You get half a chicken, roasted with citrus and sage, deboned except for the drummette. (That little bone somehow still makes it look like chicken.) The rest of the bones go into an herb stock, in which the noodles are cooked.

The result is some wonderfully cooked chicken sitting atop a soup bowl full of noodles, broth, mushrooms and veggies. It is at once an acknowledgment of the luau dish, and a vast improvement upon it.

There are desserts—I had one bite of the crème brûlée with caramelized bananas. I was lucky to still have room for that.

Ola goes in for substantial portions, at reasonable prices. The entrées are in the high \$20-range (unless you insist on lobster tail) and appetizers in the \$10-range, the sampler being the best deal at \$20. The whole evening reminded me why I missed DeAngelo when he left town. His food doesn't call attention to itself, it just makes you happy.

21 Degrees North

Turtle Bay Resort // 57-091 Kamehameha Highway, Kahuku // 293-6000 // Dinner Tuesday through Saturday 6 to 9 p.m. // Validated Parking, Major Credit Cards // www.turtlebayresort.com



John Armstrong of 21 Degrees North cooks up a symphony in white: a perfectly cooked scallop atop slices of poached pear.

PHOTO BY OLIVIER KONING

In addition to Ola, which is DeAngelo's restaurant, Turtle Bay has the usual array of hotel restaurants, including a high-end dining room called 21 Degrees North—which, if you are wondering, is approximately the latitude of the Hawaiian Islands.

Equipped with wraparound windows and an outside dining lanai, 21 Degrees North is a white-tablecloth restaurant, the sort that offers prix fixe dinners with wine. And that's the course on which the four of us embarked.

The first course out of executive chef John Armstrong's kitchen was an amuse bouche, a glass demitasse cup filled with coral-colored lobster bisque. Except for a small bit of sautéed leek, this was largely unadorned. It didn't need to be tricked up, because it was intensely flavored, its original stock obviously cooked with the lobster shells, adding depth and bite.

The second course was perhaps the most dazzling—a single seared scallop. Scallops are hard

to get right: One moment they are too rare in the middle, and the next they've gotten rubbery. All four of ours arrived hot, perfectly done and seasoned, as it were, with a dollop of salty Osetra caviar. This sat atop a beurre blanc flavored with leeks and two perfect slices of poached Asian pear, not too sweet, easily cut, adding something to the rich sauce. The richness of this small dish was cut perfectly by a pinot gris (yes, that's the same grape as pinot grigio) from Oregon's Elk Cove in Willamette Valley.

Freshly shucked peas are one of nature's wonders. There's no faking a fresh pea.

The third course was a small fillet of opakapaka, which now has to be imported at ridiculous expense from Tahiti or the North Pacific. “We only bring in a few pounds at a time,” says Armstrong. The fillet was served atop risotto, which seemed a little off in texture (wrong rice, not Arborio?), but had a richness and saltiness from finely diced pipikaula.

The plate was sauced with a white wine-butter sauce in which Armstrong cooked a few clams for flavor. Each plate featured one perfect Manila clam. Perhaps the best thing on the plate—and that’s saying a lot, given that the opakapaka was delicious—was the green vegetable medley: asparagus, edamame and peas.

Freshly shucked peas are one of nature’s wonders, with a perfect firm-yet-yielding texture, a flavor so rife with growing things it tastes like spring itself. There’s no faking a fresh pea—anything else is an affront. These were perfect.

The wines for the courses were picked by the resort’s wine director, Michael Novak, who splits his time among all its restaurants. “Some people think my choices are eclectic,” says Novak. “But I feel when people go out to eat they are interested in things they’ve never tasted before.” The only predictable wine he chose for this dinner, he points out, was the ever reliable Cakebread chardonnay that accompanied the opakapaka.

The next course was one more fish, and with it, he chose not only a red wine, but an unexpected one, from a Santa Barbara winery named Palmina, which specializes in Italian grapes. This was a dolcetto, a

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- Tangö

Hokua Building

1288 Ala Moana Blvd., Suite 120
593-7288

While many restaurants strive for casual, unpretentious fine dining and fail, Tangö “succeeds from an unlikely combination of ingredients, one of which is Finland.” Finnish chef Göran Streng insists on a menu of “regular comfort food, nothing fancy,” with a Scandinavian twist. Sirloin cooked on a cedar plank, rich, cheesy risotto and warm berry-compote-filled crêpes are certainly comforting, but “if you’re looking for food your mother made, probably not,” Heckathorn says.

grape you may not have heard of. It has none of the complexity of a sangiovese or nebbiolo, but has a wonderful “drink-me-now, my-tannins-are-silky” attitude. In other words, a perfect wine with chef Armstrong’s kampachi.

Most Hawaii chefs serve Big Island-cultured kampachi raw and seared. But Armstrong, noting that kampachi is rich in oil, likes to grill his browner even than the mahi. The grilling adds a whole degree of flavor, without compromising the fish’s texture.

We’d been fortunate enough to have four, count them, four seafood courses. It was time for a little red meat, a rosemary-crust rack of Colorado lamb, crusty and salty on the outside, pink and soft on the inside. One of our party had his fingers crossed, not being a fan of “too lamby” lamb. He was delighted by the clean flavors—though certainly it tasted like lamb to me, served au jus, with wonderful roasted vegetables, including fingerling potatoes.

The wine was equally meaty—a syrah from remote, mountainous Peay Vineyards in northern Sonoma. It’s a cold-weather syrah, in other words, not the usual Australian fruit bomb. It’s a serious wine—as elegant as a French syrah. It might benefit from a couple of more years on age.

“We don’t have the facilities to lay down wine for years,” said Novak. “So instead I decanted this 40 minutes before we served it, so it softened out.”

Dinner concluded with a Hawaii restaurant staple—a trio of crème brûlée, this being a particularly rich base recipe, flavored with vanilla, Kona coffee or pistachio.



PHOTO BY ALEX VIARNES

Reviewed in our April 2008 issue.

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Morton
Steak
House

Ala Moana Center
1450 Ala Moana Blvd.
949-1300

Heckathorn isn’t “a big fan of the atmosphere at Morton’s—too dark, too self-consciously masculine and steak house-y.” But, he says, what it does, it does fine. Perfectly shucked oysters and a first-rate bar enhance the beef-eating experience. Said Heckathorn’s dining companion of his porterhouse: “There’s no hiding in this steak, no butter, no seasoning, just salt. This is a steak with nerve.”

Reviewed in our March 2008 issue.

The multicourse menus run about \$100 with wine—about right for a meal of this character, especially because the wines are so well-chosen. It would seem odd to drive to Turtle Bay for this dinner—no, really, what would seem odd is wanting to drive back to town afterwards.

But it does assure you that, were you lucky enough to take a few days on Oahu's answer to a Neighbor Island, you wouldn't have to subsist solely on shrimp-truck plate lunches and shave ice, as fond of those two items as you may happen to be.

I'd prefer knowing I could get a perfect fillet of fish with fresh peas in leek-white wine butter.

John Heckathorn has been writing restaurant reviews for HONOLULU Magazine since 1984. In 2007, he won a bronze medal from the City and Regional Magazine Association for his food writing.