

DESTINATIONS

HAWAII – EATING THE BIG ISLAND

USA



Hawaii

WHERE ON EARTH

Hawaii

HIGH-LOW



Eating the Big Island

by LAURA SUTHERLAND

PHOTOS THIS
SPREAD
CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP
LEFT Cracking a
coconut; Cacao
fruits ripening
on the tree;
Rambutan fruits;
Cultivating taro.



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Fruit platter from Shipman House B and B; Dragon fruit; Cacao pod cut to reveal fresh cacao fruits; Three kinds of poke from Suison Fish Market.

« **W**E HAD WORKED UP A BIG APPETITE on a horseback ride at Dahona Ranch, a family-run operation outside of Waimea that takes visitors through the rolling hills of Big Island cattle country, rich with views of Mauna Kea's volcanic peak and the vast Pacific Ocean beyond. So, after we patted our well-trained horses goodbye, we headed a few miles down the road to Village Burger to try one of their legendary Hawaiian Wagyu beef burgers.

At the very last second I changed my order to a taro burger and my meat-loving husband shot me a horrified look. "What are you doing?!" he gasped. "This is your chance to try the famous Hawaiian beef in its own backyard!"

But I'd eaten some really tasty *laulau* the day before at a hole-in-the-wall called Kaaloa's Super Js and I wanted to know more about the different uses of the Hawaiian taro plant. *Laulau* uses the broad taro leaf to wrap pork (or chicken or fish) into tidy packages while they steam for several hours. They look like dolmas the size of a fat deck of cards and are melt-in-your-mouth tender.

My 'burger' was made from the taro's starchy root, mixed with leeks and other goodies and topped with *lomi* salmon, another local specialty that tastes like salmon-drenched tomato salsa. It was a long way from the bland taro root poi that I tasted at touristy luaus as a kid.



Traditional Hawaiian foods like poi, *lulau*, and roast suckling pig are still found around the islands, but a constantly evolving regional cuisine that combines the islands' extravagant fauna and flora, flavours from the far-flung cultures that settled on the islands, and forward-thinking island chefs have turned Hawaii into a compelling gourmet destination. We were on the Big Island to enjoy its tropical beauty and beaches, of course, but also to experience the culinary highlights at both chic restaurants and casual cafés and to see where the food comes from on this remarkably fertile island.

We'd selected hotels that had the best locations and the best restaurants so we could drink a few mai tais, enjoy an outstanding dinner, and a leisurely stroll back to our room. On our first night at the Hapuna Beach Prince Hotel's Coast Grille, we feasted on a brilliantly balanced soup made from coconut milk, brandy, kaffir lime, four kinds of mushrooms grown by local Hamakua Mushrooms, and Thai basil plucked fresh from the hotel garden; and we swooned over the chef's sophisticated twist on *poke* (pronounced po-keh), the Hawaiian



...We saw ginger, allspice, taro, and four kinds of avocados...



specialty of cubed raw fish tossed with soy sauce, threads of seaweed, sesame seeds, kukui nuts, or other ingredients.

Hook-to-cook possibilities, or in the case of *poke*, hook-to-slice-and-dice, are endless on the Big Island given the number of delectable fish just offshore. Other Hawaiian islands certainly have the same quality of fish but they can't claim the startling variety of terrain — from tropical rain forests and volcanic deserts to high altitude peaks dusted in snow — that creates so many microclimates and hosts the diversity of produce that thrives in the Big Island's ultra-rich volcanic soil.

We were so smitten with *poke* that the next day, after a vigorous snorkel and kayak excursion with the Kona Boys in crystalline Kealahou Bay, we stopped by Umeke's in a strip mall in Kona. Their simple *poke* rice bowl consisted of a scoop of *poke*, a scoop of rice and a side dish. I ordered *ho'io* for my side, made with a local fiddlehead fern that is found on the wet side of the island... and pictured the plant growing in pretty emerald coils in a rain forest as I ate the slightly crunchy salad.

The next day we found ourselves admiring a trio of green sea turtles sunbathing on a lava and sand beach at the Four Seasons Hualalai Resort. After we'd snorkelled in their private saltwater lagoon amidst tropical fish and a polka-dotted eagle ray that seemed to fly through the »



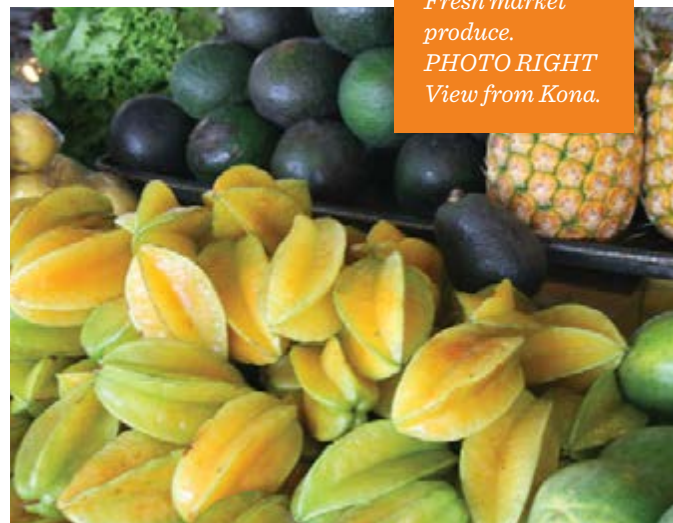
SERVES 1

CLASSIC HAWAIIAN MAI TAI

THERE ARE NUMEROUS variations on the mai tai, and some contain orange juice or pineapple juice and substitute Cointreau for the Orange Curacao. This is my hands-down favourite.

Orgeat Syrup $\frac{1}{3}$ oz
 Orange Curacao $\frac{1}{3}$ oz
 Simple Syrup $\frac{1}{3}$ oz
 Light Rum 1 oz
 Dark Rum $\frac{1}{2}$ oz
 Fresh Lime Juice $1\frac{1}{4}$ oz
 Dark Rum $\frac{1}{2}$ oz
 Mint Sprig
 Pineapple Wedge

- 1 **MIX** the first six ingredients and pour into a glass filled with crushed ice.
- 2 **FLOAT** $\frac{1}{2}$ oz dark rum on top and garnish with a pineapple wedge and mint sprig.



THIS PHOTO
 Fresh market
 produce.
 PHOTO RIGHT
 View from Kona.

We marveled over another new-to-us fish the next night at Kamuela Provision Company. With the moon rising over the Pacific, we shared a plate of ginger-steamed *monchong*, a flaky, deeper water fish with a mild sweet flavour and acknowledged that while we might attempt to duplicate *poke* at home, fish like *monchong* were attainable only on romantic trips to tropical islands... and we were okay with that since it meant we'd have to return.

Many of the best chefs we encountered had parallel stories. Raised in Hawaii, they attended culinary school on the mainland, worked in top kitchens around the world, and eventually made their way back to Hawaii where they now embrace the Big Island bounty in endlessly creative ways.

Our plan to visit the places where the food was grown led us first to Kohala Grown Farm Tours in Hawi, where we visited a variety of small farms. We saw ginger, allspice, taro, and four kinds of avocados; sampled exotic fruits plucked fresh from orchards, like dragonfruit, soursop, and *liliko'i*; sat in the middle of a pod-heavy cacao grove and tasted chocolate while we learned about its cultivation; and sipped fresh coconut water through a papaya stem straw from a young coconut hatcheted open on the spot.

Since we'd already checked off two of our three favourite ice cream flavours — chocolate at the Farm Tour and coffee at a Kona coffee farm tour and tasting at Greenwell Farms — we had to tour North America's only vanilla farm — Hawaii Vanilla Company — on our way to the rainy side of the island. We learned that the world's second most expensive spice is the only edible member of the orchid family and is painstakingly pollinated by hand at this family-run farm.

For the last few days of our trip we headquartered in historic Hilo at the Shipman House B and B, whose breakfast fruit platter was another biology lesson in Big Island tropical fruits. It was an explosion of colour and taste — papaya, starfruit, hairy eyeball (rambutan), pink and white guava, apple-flavoured bananas, pineapple, and eggfruit, which looks like a tiny yellow water balloon but melts in your mouth like cotton candy.

« water rather than swim, we walked along the shore to the 'Ulu Ocean Grill. It was easy to understand why world-renowned island chef Sam Choy calls *poke* "Hawaii's soul food," as we tasted the restaurant's upscale *poke*, prepared tableside with the tenderest chunks of ahi tuna, bits of copper-colored *ogo* seaweed, sweet Maui onions, white shoyu, and sesame oil. Since we had a pact to try fish we'd never eaten — or even heard of — we also ordered *hapu*, a type of sea bass found only around the Hawaiian islands that has a delicate taste and was accented with kimchee romesco to give it some attitude.

Our final excursion was to Volcano National Park, where we hiked through exotic terrain and viewed molten lava glowing a fiery orange-red at dusk. But before we left the island the next day we stopped at the Suisan Fish Market where newly caught fish arrive each morning; we figured their *poke* would be so fresh it would practically wiggle. We ate it on our way to the airport, and with the soul-stirring taste of *poke* lingering on our palates, we settled into our seats and the plane soared off. **T&T**



Coast Grille
www.princeresortshawaii.com

Four Seasons Hualalai
www.fourseasons.com/hualalai

Dahana Ranch
www.dahanaranch.com

Greenwell Farms
www.greenwellfarms.com

Hapuna Beach Prince Hotel
www.princeresortshawaii.com/hapuna-beach-prince-hotel/index.php

Hawaiian Vanilla Company
www.hawaiianvanilla.com

Kamuela Provision Company
www.hiltonwaikolavillage.com/dining/kamuela-provision-company

Kohala Grown Farm Tours
www.kohalagrownfarmtours.com

Kona Boys
www.konaboys.com

Shipman House Bed & Breakfast
www.hilo-hawaii.com

Suisan Fish Market
www.suisan.com/our-services/fish-market/

'Ulu Ocean Grill
www.fourseasons.com/hualalai/dining/restaurants/ulu_ocean_grill

Umeke's Poke Shops
www.umekepoke808.com

Village Burger
www.villageburgerwaimea.com

Kaaloa's Super Js
 83-5409 Mamalahoa Hwy, Captain Cook



USA

MAKES 1 LOAF

MANGO BREAD

THIS LOVELY MANGO BREAD is not overly sweet. Enjoy a fresh slice with a cup of tea, or toasted and spread with butter. The loaf will keep for a week in a sealed container and also freezes well.

Flour 1 cup

White Sugar ½ cup

Baking Soda 1 tsp

Salt ½ tsp

Cinnamon 1 tsp

Dessicated Coconut
1 cup

Eggs 2 large

Vegetable Oil ½ cup

Vanilla 1 tsp

Dark Rum 2 Tbs

Mango Cubes¹ fresh
or frozen, 1 cup

1 PREHEAT the oven to 350°F.

2 COMBINE the flour, sugar, baking soda, salt, cinnamon and coconut in a mixing bowl.

3 IN another bowl, whisk together the eggs, vegetable oil, vanilla and rum.

4 STIR the egg mixture into the dry ingredients until well combined but do not over mix. Stir in the mango cubes.

5 SCRAPE the mixture into a greased loaf pan and bake for 55–60 minutes.

¹ *If using frozen mango cubes, thaw them ahead of time and drain off excess liquid.*

LAURA SUTHERLAND is a travel writer based in Northern California. **T&T**