

What barbecue
is to Texans,
this delicacy is
to Hawaiians
D6



OFF DUTY



Dan Neil
test-chauffeurs
the Aston Martin
Lagonda Taraf,
a 195-mph limo
D8

EATING | DRINKING | STYLE | FASHION | DESIGN | DECORATING | ADVENTURE | TRAVEL | GEAR | GADGETS

ADVENTURE & TRAVEL

IN SEARCH OF

Honolulu's Ahi Moment

Poke, a Hawaiian raw-fish salad, is suddenly everywhere. But it still tastes best in its rightful home, served with a side of sun, sea and no fuss

BY MARTHA CHENG

I DON'T KNOW why it took the rest of the country so long to catch on to poke. I've been hooked on Hawaii's beloved raw-fish dish, pronounced poh-kay, ever since I moved to Oahu, nearly 10 years ago. As common to the islands as hamburgers are to the mainland, it's Hawaii's version of ceviche, minus the citrus, often made with cubed ahi (yellowfin or bigeye tuna) and seasoned with soy sauce and sesame oil. Rare is the supermarket or social gathering that doesn't have poke. Elsewhere, you might bring wine and cheese to a party; in Hawaii, it's more likely beer and poke. Now that poke is popping up all over the continental U.S., from San Francisco to New York, I find myself thinking: It's about time. Still, for variety and freshness, nowhere beats Honolulu, the capital (and culinary center) of poke's birthplace state. "Poke is Hawaii's food," said chef and poke evangelist Sam Choy. "No other food has the kind of history [on] the islands." (Mr. Choy launched Poke to the Max food trucks in Seattle, in 2013, and a brick and mortar restaurant of the same name, also in Seattle, earlier this year.)

In Hawaiian, the word "poke" means to slice or cut crosswise into pieces. The dish has existed in some form for centuries. Ancient Hawaiians would harvest reef fish (the small fish you might see when snorkeling in Hawaii), slice and season

them with salt harvested from the ocean, inamona (roasted and crushed kukui, or candlenut) and limu (seaweed). But it wasn't until the 1970s that poke's popularity began to grow, thanks to advances in commercial fishing, which made deep-sea, large fish such as ahi more available. Hawaii's multicultural influences, a result of the Japanese, Chinese, Filipino and Korean laborers imported to work the sugar and pineapple plantations, contributed new seasonings to the poke mix.

These days, while you can get poke made with everything from beets to beef, ahi poke still reigns supreme. The three local favorites are shoyu ahi (flavored with soy sauce), limu ahi (also called Hawaiian-style, made with Hawaii's crunchy, salty seaweed) and spicy ahi (a creamy concoction made with spicy mayonnaise). And it's generally a no-fuss affair, scooped into a plastic deli container and eaten with toothpicks or chopsticks, or for a more filling meal, served cold over hot rice. Sure, you can find artfully plated iterations at some swanky island restaurants, but the very best versions come out of hole-in-the-walls that look like backdrops from the original 1970s "Hawaii Five-0." The spots listed here, for example, may not win any design awards, but they take great care with their ahi and their marinades. The key, as Mr. Choy put it, is "the yin and yang of flavors—the salty, the sweet, the freshness of the seafood, the crunch."



THE PERFECTIONIST'S POKE

Maguro Bros

In Honolulu's Chinatown, inside Kekaulike Market, you'll find Maguro Bros' little seafood counter with a few tables. The setting doesn't have the scope or size of Tokyo's Tsukiji Market, where Junichiro Tsuchiya, one of the brothers, worked as a fish buyer, but it has its own energetic charm, particularly around noon when the businessmen in aloha shirts stream in for lunch. In the glass refrigerated case, you'll see hunks of fresh ahi ("maguro" means tuna in Japanese), which the Tsuchiya brothers meticulously transform into poke. They mix to order ever-so-gently, adding light touches of finely ground inamona to the ahi limu, for example, and infusing shoyu with ume (preserved plum) and shiso (an herb that tastes of basil, mint and fennel) for an unusual brightness (1039 Kekaulike St. #113).



THE SECRET SAUCE POKE

Kahuku Superette

The seaside Kahuku area, on Oahu's North Shore—is famous for its corn fields, colony of food trucks selling fresh shrimp, and Kahuku Superette. When Tina Lee took over the Superette, a nondescript general store, in 1992, she started making a secret sauce for her poke that drew locals and tourists from around the island, as well as the high-school students from across the street (if you show a school ID, you get free rice with your poke).

Ms. Lee, originally from Korea, took a cue from kimchi recipes and ferments soy sauce with heaps of fresh ginger and other mystery ingredients. It makes for a pleasant, mildly pungent poke that pairs best with rice. Her shoyu poke is the star, but I prefer the understated limu ahi, slicked with sesame oil and sprinkled with limu, green onions, chili flakes and sesame seeds. Whatever you order you'll be getting some of the best ahi around, firm and free of sinew. Get your poke to go and head straight to Waimea Bay, one of my favorite spots on Oahu for its wide, sandy beach and deep clear waters just past the shorebreak (56-505 Kamehameha Hwy).

THE POPULAR POKE

Ono Seafood

Oddly stuck to the side of a two-story building, not too far from Diamond Head, this little seafood market is a candy store for seafood lovers. You'll find a fridge stuffed with sashimi, fish jerky, little bags of dried cuttlefish and smoked octopus and various pickled and marinated seaweeds. Behind the counter, mother-and-daughter owners Judy Sakuma and Kim Brug (right) mix the poke to order. The most popular, shoyu, comes coated with soy sauce that's slightly sweet and infused with shards of ginger. Order the shoyu as a poke bowl, and they'll scoop it over hot rice and drench it with extra sauce. The Hawaiian-style poke is just as good, made with crisp limu and sea-salt crystals, nutty inamona and flakes of chili pepper. The picnic tables next to the parking lot fill up quickly; take your poke bowl to someplace a little more scenic, like nearby Kaimana Beach, Waikiki's quieter and less touristy strand (747 Kapahulu Avenue).



THE OLD-SCHOOL POKE

Tamashiro Market

As pink as Waikiki's Royal Hawaiian hotel but much less regal (note the giant red crab on the facade), Tamashiro opened in 1947 in the Kalihi neighborhood. It offers one of the widest varieties of seafood in Honolulu and caters to Kalihi's multicultural residents, which means you'll find the Filipino cascaron, a fried, sweet, sticky rice ball and the Samoan version of poke, aka, marinated in coconut milk and lemon juice. You can try before you buy, but even so, I can never decide between ahi shoyu and kajiki (blue marlin), in which the white fish is speckled with black sesame seeds (802 North King St., tamashiro.com).



THE FISHERMAN'S POKE

Ahi Assassins

Fisherman Joshua Schade and his partner, Erika Luna, opened Ahi Assassins, where the business cards and staff T-shirts read "Slayed, weighed and filleted in Hawaii," in 2014 after years of selling Mr. Schade's fish straight off the boat to family and friends. The takeout-only spot is tucked into the second-floor corner of a small office complex in Manoa, near the University of Hawaii; look for the pennants printed with ahi outlines strung on the balcony like prayer flags. Inside, guys with strong forearms break down fish beside the poke display case. The Lunatic is my favorite variation here, with a garlicky sauce, hint of sugar and a heat that slowly builds (2570 S. Beretania St., ahiassassins.com).

SITES & SIGHTINGS



WINGING IT TO CUBA

In the latest sign that Cuba's days as a verboten destination are over, now you can book a commercial flight there from the U.S. with a little mouse-clicking. Whereas once you had to fly to Cuba on an airline charter or via a third country, JetBlue is selling direct tickets starting at \$99 one-way on its thrice-weekly hops from Fort Lauderdale to Santa Clara set to launch Aug. 31. From Sept. 7

on, American will offer daily flights from Miami to Cienfuegos and Holguin at fares from \$180 round-trip. (Other cities will follow, as will more airlines.) Still, don't expect to spend your stay sipping mojitos on a beach; the U.S. only allows its citizens to visit Cuba for one of 12 reasons, including humanitarian projects or educational activities (jetblue.com; aa.com). —Barbara Peterson

POKÉMON ON TOUR

With Pokémon Go city tours now on offer everywhere from San Francisco to Reykjavik, it was inevitable that tour operators would start plotting entire vacations around the augmented-reality mobile game. The travel company Zicasso now sells bespoke Pokémon-inspired trips through Australia and/or New Zealand, designed with families in mind. A private guide will show travelers around, say, Sydney Harbour or Milford Sound, while giving tips on hunting down Pokémon, including Australasia's resident Kangaskhan. For parents who shudder at the thought of a Pokémon vacation—imagining a glut of screen time and gazillion dollars of cellphone charges—there's good news: All itineraries are customizable, so you can spend ample time cruising along the Great Barrier Reef or other places still too remote for Pokémon.

And Zicasso is offering a portable hot spot for travelers who book by Oct. 1, 2016 and travel by Dec. 31, 2017 (from \$2,499 a person for a 7-day trip; zicasso.com). —Sydney Lazarus



THE GUINNESS EXPRESS

Belmond, the company which operates the famed Venice Simplon-Orient-Express as well as three other touring trains in the United Kingdom, is expanding its array of luxury locomotives. The 40-passenger Belmond Grand Hibernian will rumble across the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, starting Aug. 30, on two-, four- and six-night round-trip journeys departing from Dublin. What takes so long in a country this small? Itineraries include daily excursions such as falconry lessons at Ashford Castle or a round of golf in Killarney. Meanwhile, the observation car doubles as an Irish pub, complete with live music and a bottomless glass of Guinness. The Grand Hibernian will run through October, then resume in April, 2017 (from about \$3,570 a person, for a two-night journey; belmond.com). —S.L.