



TASTE

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Culinary tours yield surprising finds

Little-known locales, delicacies, history all come to light

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Why would a local want to take a culinary tour in the Islands?

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You might learn something. I did. And I grew up here and have been writing about food in Hawai'i since 1989.

Not long ago, I took two local culinary tours: Matthew Gray's Hawaii Food Tours here on O'ahu and Bonnie Friedman's Tour da Food on Maui, my home island.

As the foodie world proliferates, culinary tours are a growing business here and across the world.

The two local companies have similar goals: to introduce visitors to the foods locals love and, along with the manapua and musubi, to impart a slice of our multicultural history. Both tours are eating marathons that see many guests deciding by the end of the day to cancel their dinner reservations and just lie down, put their paws in the air and groan.

"There's no better way to learn about a culture than through its food," says Mainland-born Gray, a trained chef and a bit of a ham who likes to call himself CFG ("chief food guy"). He operates his business with his fiancée, local girl Keira Nagai, a restaurant business veteran and an excellent cook in her own right (as a little makana, or gift, for the tour, she showed up with musubi she made herself; sometimes she brings scones).

Gray admits to having had a bit of an uphill climb in getting the mostly ethnic businesses with which he deals to believe that tourists would be interested in their food. "But we were like little puppy dogs, we just kept showing up."

Said Friedman, who has lived on Maui for more than 20 years: "Tour da Food Maui is designed to be as educational as it is delicious. I think many of our visitors are interested in our ethnic diversity, and there's no better way to learn about it than through food." She keeps her tours small and intimate (four people maximum). The food spots she takes people to are the ones she frequents herself.

Both entrepreneurs pay full price for all the food they purchase for their clients, included in the fees.

FLOUR POWER

On Gray's tour (yes, he's the former Advertiser food critic), I learned about fish fritters with deep-fried basil leaves. Even standing in a light drizzle in the Kekaulike Market courtyard, eating standing up, with our hands, this was a life-changing experience. And I'm not even much of a fish person.

The succulent fritters and crunchy basil garnish come from KC Meatball House, a tiny takeout spot deep inside chaotic Kekaulike Market, just an open kitchen and a couple of chairs (8 a.m. to noon Tuesday through Sunday at 1039 Kekaulike St., unit 110; 393-8417).

They don't always have the fritters (made from marlin and flecked with spices); but you could pre-order (however, speaking Cantonese would help). They also served our tour a sweet Taiwanese pork sausage, grilled and cut into slices, that yielded up flavors of cinnamon and honey. Their specialties are cornstarch-bound meatballs, light and springy in texture, that are a very satisfying lunch or snack.

I would never have found this place on my own; when I go to Kekaulike, I tend to make a beeline for whatever I'm trying to buy and get out of there

because negotiating the crowd gives me a headache. But I'm going back for sure.

Gray does several different tours; this was the Hole in The Wall trek. I call it a trek because practically the only time you get to sit down is when you're ensconced in their luxurious Mercedes Benz van, which seats about a dozen comfortably. This is not a tour for anyone who has trouble walking.

The standing up was my sole complaint with what was a delightful day starting with a local's favorite breakfast — manapua at Royal Kitchen at Chinatown Cultural Plaza, followed by (do NOT plan to count calories on tour day) coco puffs at Liliha Bakery. The rest of the day passed in a blur, with most time spent in Chinatown, visiting the Ying Leong Look Funn Factory at Kekaulike (the place looks like a powder factory exploded, with rice flour everywhere).

Then, standing in a circle in Kekaulike courtyard, we had to huddle up because people kept stopping by as Keira ferried food to us, thinking, as Gray quipped, "I'm the Costco free sample man." We ate rice noodle rolls, followed by half moons (which Keira had brought from Char Hung Sut), a tasting of tropical fruit including longan and rambutan (which had the tourists' eyes popping). Keira made lychee-vodka-pineapple cocktails, and Matthew taught everyone to say " 'okole maluna."

Then we ambled about the stores on Hotel Street, buying crack seed and such before ending at Char Siu House for the crispy skin roast pork that Matthew calls "five layers of heaven."

If all this weren't enough, we then headed across town for a completely superfluous dessert of Leonard's mala- ssadas.

Matthew's goal is to keep the tour as "warm and fuzzy" as possible, and as we wiped sugar from our lips and laps, he asked everyone what they'd most enjoyed about the tour. By the end, everyone was hugging and promising to tell their friends.

NONSTOP FEASTING

Bonnie Friedman's Tour Da Food is a very different experience from Matthew's. Friedman, a Brooklynite who has immersed herself in Hawaiian culture, studying the language (she volunteers with 'Aha Punana Leo) and hula, meets her guests in the parking lot of Kepaniwai Park in 'Iao Valley. It's a convenient way to introduce the Islands' history because not only is the valley the site of a famed and bloody battle in which Kamehameha defeated Kalanikupule to establish his dominance over the Valley Island, but the park is populated by structures representing the various cultures, from a Portuguese home with a forno (masonry oven) to a thatched-roof Hawaiian hale.

It was spitting rain, and Friedman and guests Linnette Jones and Michael Hansen ambled about, she telling the history of each group's arrival in the Islands and subsequent history. Jones, clearly the food enthusiast of the two, was entranced. Hansen headed back to the car to get dry.

From there, we all piled into Friedman's car for a day of feasting and talking story. Friedman is a trained pastry chef, food writer and publicist and a discriminating eater. She tailors each tour to the interests of her clients, varying the eateries based on her impressions of them as they spend the first half-hour or so together.

First stop on this trip was funky Kaohu Store (1833 Kaohu St., Wailuku), where generations of 'Iao Elementary School kids have piled in for their post-class musubi, cone sushi and other local-style snacks. Hansen clearly did NOT want to try a Spam musubi, but when he did, he was surprised; Mikey liked it! Kaohu is one of the last remaining mom-and-pop groceries in fast-changing Wailuku.

This is the part where I learned something: T.J.'s Warehouse Outlet, (875 Alua St., 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturdays; 808-244-3711, tjwarehouse .com). If you love local food and Japanese kitchenware, appliances, dishes and tchotchkes (is there such a thing as an Asian tchotchke?), you're gonna go crazy in this store. It was once solely wholesale but now is a retail store with a bustling bento bar, located in Wailuku Industrial Park, off Beach Road. The buttafish bento plate is the bomb, and they carry Maui-made products I've never seen before: locally made natto and tofu, a variety of pickles, noodles, snacks, sweets. They also have party supplies.

If I hadn't already had a full suitcase and several days ahead before I returned to Honolulu, I would have left there burdened like a Sherpa. Bonnie and her guests sat down for a snack and a chat about Island food history. I window-shopped, picking up some of my favorite Donna's Cookies (from Pa'auilo on the Big Island, but hard to find on O'ahu).

Lunch — as though we needed it — was, inevitably, at Sam Sato's (1750 Wili Pa Loop; 808-244-7124 — just past the post office and turn left), a Maui institution where the specialty is dry mein. These are delightfully al dente fried noodles, house-made, with succulent char siu and fish cake, served with a rich broth on the side. We opted to share four different dishes (dry mein, saimin with teri stick, a teri burger and I can't remember what else; I was in a food coma by that time). I've heard the loco moco and roast pork highly praised here but I always end up with dry mein.

But my eye was on the glass case where the fast-selling pastries were dwindling. I didn't want to miss the turnovers, so I went up and ordered coconut, peach, apple and pineapple. They have an interesting system: You can tell which kind by the cuts in the pastry: pineapple has dots, peach has one slit, apple has four slits and coconut has none. Oh, and I got a manju, too, the last one (and it was only noon).

After you put your name on the waiting list, you can sit in the courtyard or peek in the screen door where the ladies are making the pastry and, if you know anyone on Maui, you'll run into them. Garanz ballbarez.

Michael cracked us all up by asking the waitress if they served wine. Uh, no.

Cautions: It's on-street parking. There is ALWAYS a wait. The servers are friendly but frantically busy; know what you want and order fast.

Our final stop — what! we're going to eat again? — was at Tom's Mini Mart (372 Wai'ehu Beach Road, Pau- kukalo, 808-244-2323), where they make their own syrups and you can get ice cream with your shave ice. I borrowed tastes. Friedman's right; the most finely shaved ice I've ever encountered, and the truest flavors.

To cap off the tour, we strolled down to the beach just to feel the wind in our hair and digest a little before driving back to Kepaniwai and, lo!, as though Friedman had planned it, we saw the most prolonged and dramatic display of whale cavorting I've ever witnessed. I've never seen whales on that side of the island and was literally dancing with glee (it did help with digestion, too).

Two unforgettable experiences. And I did learn something: You can't know everything about a place no matter how long you live there.

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