

Foodie Travel Mystery: Hawai'i

Captain Cooked

*Romance, Revenge--& Recipes
from the Big Island*

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He could not believe his good fortune, or so he thought. The hunger he carried with him since morning gurgled and cried out for all that was spread before him on the table. With a handful scoop he popped a half dozen fresh shrimp, the cold taste soothing his mouth. He gathered up abalone sashimi and plopped it on top of a crisp won ton for his personal sushi. Woozy, he shook his head, as he swallowed, still famished. Chicken wings marinated in soy and sherry sauces were sucked in slurps, with the greasy bones thrown to the ground. Tasting through every dish on the table, he grabbed with both hands, alternating, stuffing his face. His head burned with the temperature he carried all week. Food was medicine. The more he consumed, he believed, the quicker he would heal. Then, he saw the koa calabash bowl, the food filled within; this special treat must be for him. Memories of childhood flooded his mind and brought a smile to his face.

He sensed a presence.

Around the table he saw his parents, his brothers and sisters, the warmth of family. His mother handed him the bowl, and said, "Eat and enjoy, my son, this is special for you. Aloha wau ia 'oe ka'u keiki."

Someone, a stranger, shouted, "Hey, if you don't mind..." He heard no more.

Death had come to the buffet.

Recipe Table of Contents

Lomilomi Salmon Wrapspage ____

Poi Pudding

Li Hing Mui Vinaigrette/

Blanched Tomato & Japanese Cucumber Salad

Lava Flow Cocktail

Banana Papaya Sauce

Grilled Swordfish

With Pirate Zest Marinade

[recipe from Hilo Bay Café]

[recipe from Chef Amy Ferguson]

Crusted Mahimahi

With Crab Bisque

Heart of Palm & Portuguese Sausage Pistel

Kona Coffee Rubbed Steaks

With Marsala Wine BBQ Sauce

Asian Crab Crusted Mon'chong

With Sweet Chili Beurre Blanc

Kalua Pig Out

Aloha Brunch Bread Pudding

Liliko'i Bars

Crystallized Ginger Chicken

1. Paradise Arrival

A chalkboard weather report posted at the entry gate announced the atmospheric conditions on my arrival: “78° feels 85° – 65% humidity—scattered clouds--Fair is foul, foul is

fair.” Considering what I am here to do, I would have said: ‘Fare is fowl, the fowl is fair.’

I stand at the carousel at the Kona International Airport on the Big Island of Hawai’i. My luggage and camera equipment from my L.A. flight should momentarily come spitting out from behind hidden doors. At the same time my father’s plane from Chicago is just arriving, exact to the schedule we planned. UA Flight 2727. Father and daughter to be teamed up for a business adventure, a first.

As I adjust to the Pacific heat wrapping me in a constant breeze, and my blouse soaking in newly formed beads of perspiration, I allow a sea of tourists to ebb and flow around me gathering up arriving luggage. A people watcher by nature, like my father, but where he might have seen nuances in facial expressions, or interpreted hand gestures as more sinister to defining character, I just watch with silent snickers at ill-shaped bodies and sloppy fashion mix even if on vacation.

It is here, at this moment within the crowd, I made a serious error in my harmless voyeur exercise, accepting the general view and ignoring understated detail. Looking back on my later experiences with the hotel chauffer and the Beautiful People, damn, how extraordinarily lame I acted on both counts, totally off base, out of whack, to the timeless adage, revised in this case, you cannot judge a cookbook by its cover.

Take the Beautiful People, for example. My eyes are drawn to a boisterous group at the luggage carousel across from mine. They grab at arriving suitcases. Youthful, in my age range. A party in motion, laughing, joke telling, teasing. Onto a baggage cart, they are loading up golf

clubs, tennis rackets, and scuba gear. Even tech com coordinating their vacation with two of them fiddling with what looked like miniature walkie-talkies. My eyes strain to read their casual attire T-shirts to define their bumper sticker mind-set. One shirt reads, “San Quentin Law Library.” Another T-shirt marquee: ‘Careful, or you’ll end up in my novel’. One phrasing, I assumed, to quantify his intelligence, speaks in some gibberish: “Waypoint to Hell is—“. I couldn’t understand the numbers underneath, too small to read.

There, in their midst stands their leader, definitely head stallion issuing commands and hand signals, directing the melee, seeking order from the jocular chaos. In that rarity of character he seems to lead by personality, good-natured in his cajoling. His face sported fuzzed beard growth topped by a mop of hair hardly blowing in this stove-top wind; nor do I see sweat to his brow. For several long seconds, our eyes bounce together before his buddies dragged him back to his responsibilities. The leader’s T-shirt reads: “Free All Duke Hooligans.” I wondered if such sentiment has any basis in principle, or if a mere pop culture joke.

Unaware of my presence, of my existence, I took a quick, candid photo of them. These people were in that mirthful world I somehow kept missing. The women were drop-dead gorgeous, blemish free, the men like their leader, swarthy handsome. The

women wouldn’t be lacking for male attention, the ration being three perfect women to seven men. One of the women, a blonde of course, resembled a gym-sculpted, tanned, volleyball star. Her healthy mountainous chest might draw men, like bees to flowers, but the back of her shirt

qualified who might stay and gather nectar. It read: "Ready for Moi? XXX Sports is my Foreplay." The salty taste in my mouth was the drool of envy.

* * *

A young man approached me, invaded my space. Definitely a local. Black shorn hair, thick to his neck, but salon cut. Asian- Polynesian features, spiffed out in his ironed aloha shirt, sporting a grin, and bearing the gold nametag of *Michael K*. I assumed he is the official hotel greeter from the Hooilina Kai Grand Hotel Resort. He draped around my neck the customary welcoming lei of purple-white plumeria. Both cheeks, received not pecks, but kisses beyond the customary norm, warm and lingering, and he looked deep into my eyes but said curtly, "From your Father. I'll help with your luggage." Talk about let down. Hardly the romantic entry one expects to launch in this week-long island sojourn with succulent food and expectant starry, starry nights looking down on wave caressed beaches. Perhaps, who knows, does one dare say, "romance?" These days my famished love life is still served with an empty plate of desire, garnished with a single crumb of hope. I wish I were a member of that Beautiful People crowd, not relegated to a driver of the hotel shuttle.

I spot my father, Jeffrey Dayne, foodie TV star. Of course, he is with a woman, better defined as an autograph seeker, a fan, almost always a woman. She is probably Chatty Kathying on about Dayne's second and latest cooking travel book, somewhere

listed and rising on the New York Times and Amazon bestseller lists. Insatiable: Further States of Epicurean Delights. She probably squirmed a seat next to his on the plane ride over. The public, all the women fans, know he is a recent widower. Vulnerable. I rudely intrude between them with exaggerated hugs for my father, and steer him away. Not this trip, honey. Or anytime soon.

I should feel sorry for Michael K., our van driver and hotel escort. I had given him my claim stubs for the luggage. Showing his strength, which seems muscular under his hotel uniform shirt, he is grunting along a push cart loaded with my father's luggage and all my cased and boxed paraphernalia, the cameras and production equipment for the television show we are going to tape on island. This is Jeffrey Dayne's thirty minute, popular cooking program on the Food Television Channel, "Insatiable Delights." As we head out of the airport in the Hooilina Kai van, Michael K. asked if we were doing a film on the island.

"A television show," I replied, with an air of smugness. Why not, we were V.I.P. Like usual, my father corrected, or would one say, he enhanced my conversation.

To our driver, he added, "A television program about the best delights in Hawaiian food."

"Oh, you are those Daynes, for the Lūa'u Challenge." From the backseat, we both nodded. With restraint, I held back my snooty witty retort: *Were there any other great Daynes?*

I stared out the window considering the landscape where we would spend the next week. Vehicles went bumper-to-bumper heading into the town of Kailua-Kona. In paradise the march of civilization seemed to slow crawl. At least the van is going the opposite direction. The highway cut through black lava fields, moon-like desolate except for the road-side messages laid out in white coral rock. Probably the only place on earth where graffiti is accepted as near sacred, a taboo if messed with. White rocks, long dead coral, show designs of everything from

hearts to sharks, and a variety of names, *J (heart) Chachi* types, a reality check from those since departed from too-short vacations. *Ikaika wuz here -- IMUA KS! – Griswolds Rock.*

My Dad is absorbed in today's local paper, reading an article about the upcoming lūa'u competition at which he will be the celebrity food judge. I glance at the newspaper's back side, seeing headlines suggesting less pristine paradise and more urban intrusions: increased traffic accidents call for a highway lane expansion; renewing permits filed for inter-island ferries, and, local controversy, at a place called Black Sand Beach Estates, I read where the cabana expansion to the bluff home owned by a South American millionaire will disturb the nesting grounds of the nene, the endangered Hawaiian goose and state bird, thereby frothing up anger in the environmental ranks. I am going to ignore everyone else's problems. Just keep crowds away from any beach I occupy, whether white, black, or puce sand.

I turn my attention to the roadway on our journey up the coast. I see 'watch for wild donkey' signs, but see no braying critters. Long-distance bicyclists, straining leg muscles, churn out the miles. Not my sport. Out on the ocean, barely visible, are occasional white wispy spouts to signal migratory whales. As they so advertise, this place better be the harbinger of tranquil paradise. I am determined to have a fun week.

2. Barbarians at the Gate

Not to be.

Waving flags and placards greeted us as we approached the Ho'olua Kai Grand Hotel Resort. Not the welcome wagon delegation. Protestors, like angry wasps from a disturbed hive, chanted their slogans and spit stinging barbs toward us, closing in on the van from both sides, blocking our entrance to the hotel grounds.