

Dining tours on Maui combine food, facts and fun - Hawaii News - Honolulu Star-Advertiser

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By Cheryl Chee Tsutsumi

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So seriously does Gigi Gaea take her career as a "GastroPreneur," she printed that title on her business card.

"I coined the word when I started Hawaii Tasting Tours," Gaea said. "The title 'owner/operator' sounded so formal, and I wanted to have a fun title to match the tours.

"'Gastro' refers to gastronomy, the practice and art of choosing, cooking and eating good food. 'Preneur' is short for entrepreneur, which means a person who starts, manages and assumes the risks of a business, which is what I did with Hawaii Tasting Tours. Nothing like it has ever been done on Maui before."

Prior to becoming a GastroPreneur, Gaea was the executive assistant at the Westin Maui Resort & Spa. Every week, without fail, guests would ask her the same questions: Where should we eat? What restaurants can you recommend?

That's when Gaea had an aha! moment: Why not offer tours that enabled visitors to sample specialties from some of the stars of Maui's dining scene? She quit her job in April 2012 to make it happen.

"According to the Maui Visitors Bureau, visitors' average stay on Maui is eight days," Gaea said. "With more than 350 restaurants to choose from in that short time, they're often overwhelmed. Hawaii Tasting Tours is the answer to every foodie's dilemma."

She officially launched her company's first tour, Lahaina Lights, in February 2013 (two other tours will start soon; see sidebar). Following the format of a progressive dinner, five stops are made during the five-hour excursion, with guests enjoying preselected samplings at each spot.

"I interviewed more than a dozen restaurants to see which ones would be the best fit," said Gaea, who has worked in the food and beverage industry as a dishwasher, server, bartender, prep cook and general manager. "The criteria were service, location, reputation and, of course, food quality and style. The five partners I chose take us from one end of Lahaina town to the other and offer an eclectic mix of ambience, food and cocktails."

Owned by rock music legends Mick Fleetwood and Steven Tyler, Fleetwood's on Front St. features a rooftop lounge that opens to views of the Pacific and West Maui mountains. Like a set from "Lawrence of Arabia," two spacious gazebos are furnished with exotic lamps, long couches, cushioned footstools and wooden tables with intricate motifs.

"Sitting there, you'll feel like Arabian royalty," Gaea said. "Water misters are provided to cool you during the pau hana entertainment, which, besides a gorgeous sunset, includes live Hawaiian and bagpipe music. The tasting flight is a shrimp cocktail shooter, pita and hummus, and bursitini, a pasta purse filled with Hama-kua mushrooms."

Lahaina Fish Co.'s prime waterfront location overlooks a panorama encompassing Lanai, Molo-kai and Kahoolawe. From November to March, humpback whales cavort offshore, upping the scene's "wow" factor.

The restaurant is known for its prime rib, which is slow-cooked for 24 hours in an airtight "electric imu." "The result is the most tender, moist prime rib you'll ever have," Gaea said. "Our guests sample that and fresh macadamia nut-crusting mahimahi."

Polynesian kitsch fills the open-air Betty's Beach Cafe: miniature tikis; faux flowers, bamboo, ti leaves and coconut trees; and framed 1950s prints and posters of surfers, canoes and pretty wahine. Every table faces the ocean, Lanai and boats bobbing in the warm breezes.

"Guests love Betty's hang-loose vibe; it's like popping by a good friend's house," Gaea said. "The tastings here fit the casual, tropical ambience: kalua pork quesadilla with grilled pineapple salsa and fresh fish ceviche served with house-made tortilla chips."

At Kobe Japanese Steakhouse, chefs are the performers in a "show" that introduces patrons to tep-pan-yaki, a style of cooking with an iron griddle. They prepare tasting portions of shrimp, vegetables, beef and chicken tableside, displaying both their culinary talent and their prowess at juggling, flipping and tossing gleaming knives.

"Kobe serves the only fully hand-butchered meat on Maui," Gaea said. "It takes five chefs five hours every day to carve and trim the meat selections. The result is very tender beef."

Ululani's Hawaiian Shave Ice, the tour's final stop, delights guests with a refreshing concoction flavored with azuki (sweet red) beans and their choice of three syrups and accompanied by Maui-made Roselani vanilla, hau-pia or macadamia nut ice cream.

"Shave ice is one of my favorite treats — so simple but so ono," Gaea said. "The blending of flavors in the Wahine Shave Ice — the azuki beans and whatever ice cream and syrups you choose — is perfect."

All along the way, Gaea shares tidbits about Hawaii's history, culture and lifestyle, making Lahaina Lights a multidimensional dining experience. Hula, oli, the Hawaiian language, sustainable farming and nearby historic sights are among the topics of the evening's conversations.

"Sight, smell, touch and taste come into play as guests enjoy the views, food and drinks on the tour," Gaea said. "They also learn a lot about Hawaii by listening, which inspired Hawaii Tasting Tour's tag line, 'Feed your five senses.' Being a GastroPreneur — helping guests create special memories through good food and fun — is the most rewarding job in the world!"

IF YOU GO ...

LAHAINA LIGHTS

Meeting place: Sargent's Fine Art gallery, 802 Front St., Lahaina, Maui

Offered: Sunday through Thursday, 5 to 10 p.m.

Price: \$169 per adult age 21 and older, including a preselected tasting plate and beverage pairing at four restaurants. The evening concludes with a stop at a popular shave ice stand. Kama'aina and groups of at least eight people receive a 10 percent discount. Kama'aina groups receive a 20 percent discount.

Phone: 359-8159

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Website: www.hawaiistastingtours.com

Notes: Wear casual resort attire and comfortable walking shoes. Reservations close at noon the day prior to the tour. Vegetarians and those with common food allergies can be accommodated with a minimum 24 hours' notice. This tour is not recommended for vegans or those who have celiac disease (an intolerance to gluten). Private tours for a minimum of eight guests and group tours for 16 to 180 people can be arranged with at least seven days' notice. Optional add-ons for custom tours include a sunset sail, helicopter ride and a lunch tour to a private Upcountry farm. Hawaii Tasting Tours will launch a Lahaina Aina Awa'kea (Lunch) tour in mid-June. Its Wai'lea Lani (Heavenly Wai'lea) dinner tour will start in early July. Call, email or check the website for details.

Cheryl Chee Tsutsumi is a Honolulu-based freelance writer whose travel features for the Hono-lulu Star-Advertiser have won several Society of American Travel Writers awards.

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