

RESTAURANTS

CHRIS MCDONOUGH

Kaimuki's latest restaurant adds a new dimension to Honolulu dining

Talk of the Town

LESA GRIFFITH



Tasty choice: A flavorfully diverse menu makes you want to go to Town

Menu writing is an art, and few are the examples in Honolulu that make a prospective diner want to order everything. Open just a month, Town has that menu. After months of sweaty toil and permit wranglings, Town emerged fully formed and ready to go (minus a liquor license), like an artificial-intelligence child, walking and talking and serving a Mediterranean-leaning cuisine that is at once rustically traditional and wholly of the moment.

No matter what the cuisine, cooking with an Italian (or Alice Waters) sensibility has been the food trend for the last few years. Paring dishes down to essential, honest—sometimes naked—flavors have been hallmarks of boldface New York chefs such as Wylie Dufresne, Tom Colicchio and Tom Valenti. Chef-owner Ed Kenney (yes, that's his mom, the elegant Beverly Noa, showing you to your seat) and chef de cuisine David Caldiero break new food ground in Honolulu with a similar cooking philosophy. They also took design cues—while working on the space, Polaroids of details at their favorite spots (like New York's WD-50) were tacked to a bulletin board—to create a sleek, welcoming room.

The list of dishes, printed in downscale chic on brown paper in a typewriter font, is an exercise in agonizing triage. What can wait until the next visit? Will it be the salt cod fritters or the braised pork cheeks?

The lineup changes every day, and on a recent night, a palm-size ravioli, the supple pasta hiding beet

greens and an egg, made its debut. Cut into the little treasure bag and the yolk oozes out sensually into the light, flavorful tomato-basil broth.

Sweetbreads in the fritto misto are encased in a light batter, the soft chewiness of the pancreas and thymus glands (no wonder a nickname was invented) contrasting with the light crunch. Take a bite of the fried Meyer lemon—its mild tartness cuts the richness of the meat. It's a simple dish served unassumingly on butcher paper. Peasant made perfect.

Mussels swim in an addictive citrusy broth spiked with Cinzano and dotted with cavatelli. Gnocchi, on the dense side, are enhanced with the elemental flavors of sage brown butter and fresh sweet peas—it's the menu's "gotta have it again" dish.

Even vegophobes will fall for salads like the well-balanced tangle of sweet, meaty roasted pears with spicy arugula, bits of endive, ricotta salata shavings and walnuts coated in a light sherry vinaigrette.

Town has the closest thing to steak frites on the island. When diners order the North Shore Cattle Co. strip loin, servers ask if they're familiar with the grass-fed beef. Apparently, some customers, familiar only with the corn-stuffed variety (cattle actually aren't built to digest corn), haven't been happy with the natural meat. But anyone who has enjoyed good Argentine beef will savor the subtly gamy, chewy steak. Roquefort cheese tames the extreme beef, but a chimichurri or au poivre sauce would make a great alternative.

On one visit, the flattened, well-seasoned half-chicken was so moist and tender, it could have been mistaken for milk-fed veal. A subsequent meal yielded a dry, but still

tasty, bird. Surrounded by roasted grapes and bits of salty pancetta, it's another basic, rustic dish that can make you rethink poultry. Take advantage of the BYOB status (there's a \$3.50-per-glass fee)—the food is ripe for fun wine pairings.

Simple style extends from plate to room—dark-chocolate Kyoto chairs, steel tabletops, a long wood banquette along one wall (cushions would be kind), a backlit case, innovative light fixtures fashioned from PVC by artist Mark Chai and a friendly eat-at-the-counter bar make Town a natural in-crowd hangout.

Kenney, a local boy who found his culinary self on a round-the-world trip, and Caldiero, whose Italian roots can be tasted in the stellar pastas, are plugged in, motivated and conscientious (they're doing their best to make their operation as green as possible). They use Wai'anae-grown ingredients, O'ahu-raised beef and smile under the worst kind of pressure.

New York may already have its own restaurant called Town (run by celeb chef Geoffrey Zakarian), but garans ball barans it don't have our version's big side order of aloha. ■

Town

3435 Wai'alea Ave at 9th Ave (735-5900); parking behind restaurant

Hours: Mon–Thu 11:30AM–3PM, 5:30–9PM; Fri, Sat 11:30AM–3PM, 5:30–10PM

Starters: \$6–\$12

Pastas: \$13–\$18

Entrées: \$18–\$22

Recommended dishes: Ravioli, gnocchi, black mussels and cavatelli, pork cheeks, steak

Payment: AmEx, MC, V

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