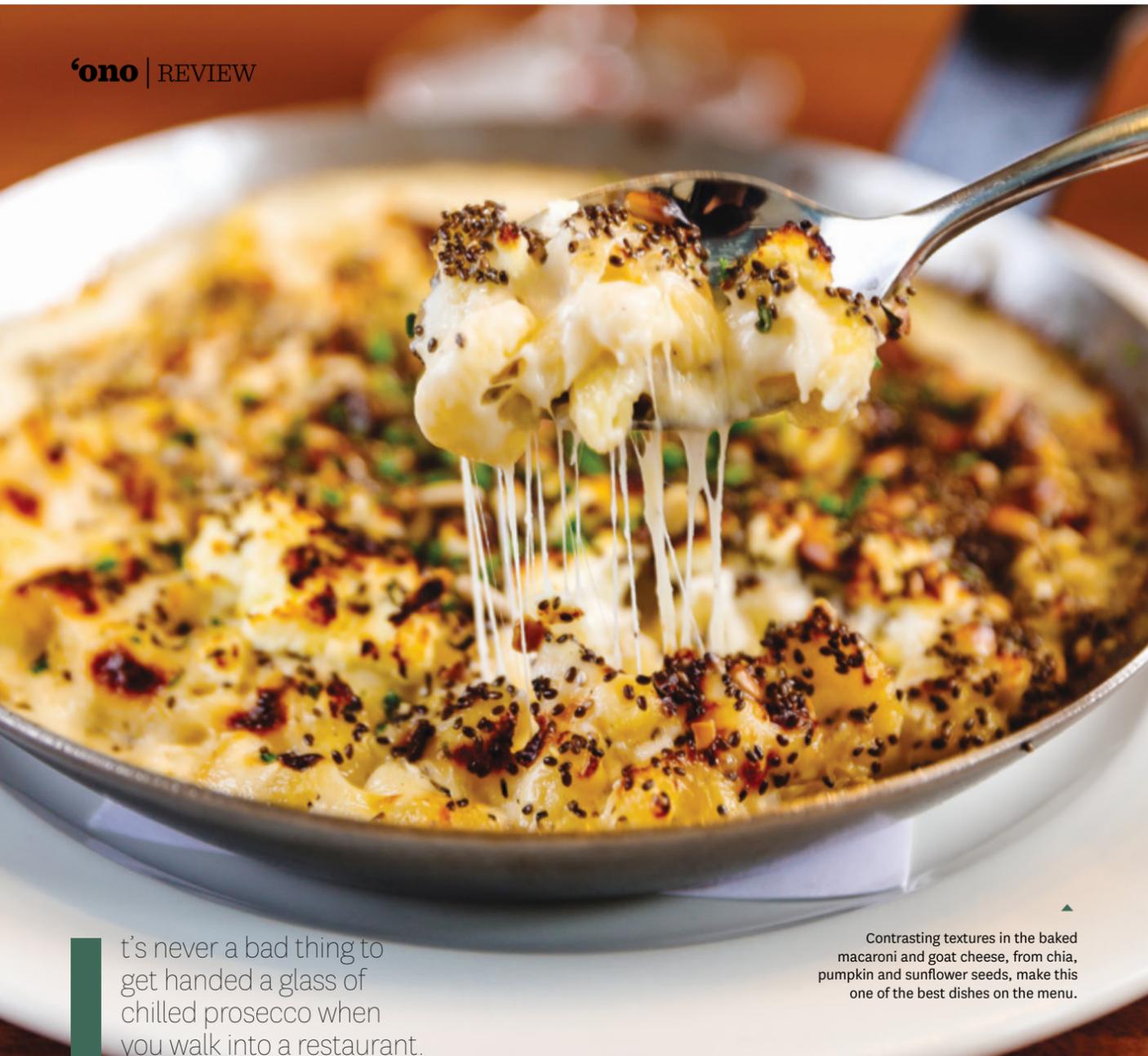


REVIEW

## Eat, Drink and Be Merriman's

The first O'ahu location of Merriman's is part casual bistro, part fine dining and a whole lot of fun.

Butterflied chicken from J. Ludovico Farm is seared in a cast-iron pan and delivered straight to your table.



Contrasting textures in the baked macaroni and goat cheese, from chia, pumpkin and sunflower seeds, make this one of the best dishes on the menu.

It's never a bad thing to get handed a glass of chilled prosecco when you walk into a restaurant.

And after a day of deadlines and dealing with problems I usually blame on Mercury in retrograde (sporadic internet connection, multiple computer crashes and an iPhone that decided to delete my contact list just for fun), that glass of bubbly was almost a medical necessity.

I didn't even mind waiting 10 extra minutes for the table I reserved.

►► **MERRIMAN'S HONOLULU HAD BEEN OPEN** just two weeks before my husband and I stopped in for dinner on a Tuesday night. And before 7 p.m., every seat in the 200-seat restaurant, including the 14 at the bar, were taken. Couples on dates, families with kids, friends sharing pūpū and co-workers (I imagined) commiserating about failing technology. With live music by Shane Kainoa Tsukayama on acoustic guitar, if you closed your eyes it felt like you were at a wedding reception, with tables of raucous guests on one side and polite relatives on another.

I can't say that I was surprised by the crowd, even on a worknight. Honolulu foodies, especially those who have dined at the charming award-winning Merriman's in Waimea on Hawai'i Island, have long wanted its namesake, chef Peter Merriman, to open one on O'ahu. The flagship restaurant in Waimea, which has earned the Gold Hale 'Aina Award for Best Big Island Restaurant for 18 consecutive years, celebrates its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, and Merriman has opened Monkeypod Kitchen and Moku Kitchen on O'ahu through a partnership with

Handcrafted Restaurants. While Honolulu boasts an impressive list of stellar restaurants that have wholly embraced the farm-to-table movement, not many chefs have the kind of deep and personal relationship with local farmers, ranchers and fishermen as Merriman. In fact, there are farmers who grow exclusively for him.

Now we can get all of those signature Merriman's dishes, from the wok-charred 'ahi sashimi (\$31) with MA'O Organic Farm cilantro slaw, Sichuan peppercorn-rubbed bone-in New York steak (\$48) and Merriman's original Caesar salad (\$15) with delicate baby romaine from Hirabara Farms and fried green tomato croutons.

The menu is executed by noted local chef Jon Matsubara, who has opened three O'ahu restaurants—including his most recent stint as the culinary executive director at Forty Carrots at Bloomingdale's—and worked for some of the best chefs in the country, including David Bouley, Jean-Georges Vongerichten and Floyd Cardoz. He says he's never worked for a chef as ingredient-focused as Merriman.

Take, for example, the vine-ripened tomatoes grown on a small farm on Maui especially for Merriman's simple tomato salad (\$14)—they mingle with Hirabara Farms baby fennel, shaved Maui onions, blue cheese from Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Co. in California and fried capers with a drizzle of chili-lime vinaigrette and basil oil.

"I have never ever seen tomatoes that perfect," Matsubara says after visiting Tamimi Farms on Maui. "The ingredients give Peter a big advantage. That's what he's known for."

Over the course of two dinners—one with my husband, another with the wife of a chef—the goal was simple: Try a few signature dishes I loved from the Waimea location and sample the ones exclusive (for now) to Honolulu.

Basically, we ate just about



This salad showcases locally grown tomatoes.



The house-made butter-milk biscuits are a must-order.

This local spin on escargot (actual size!) replaces snails with tender tako.



everything on the menu.

One of the standout appetizers was the tako and country bread (\$18), a clever dish that resembles escargot but uses octopus. Six pieces of tako are served in a porcelain escargot dish, swimming in a cognac garlic butter sauce that's simply addictive. The octopus is tender and tasty, served with two slices of freshly baked country bread.

Another favorite was the baked macaroni and goat cheese (\$11), so good I've already had it three times. Served in a searing-hot skillet—the server will remind you several times not to touch it—the dish features gooey goat cheese sourced from a farm on Hawai'i Island, topped with chia, pumpkin and sunflower seeds. Everything about this dish is perfect, from the warm and creamy goat cheese to the crunchy, nutty topping. (And it goes particularly well with the free glass of prosecco every guest gets, if you still have any left.)

The tableside poke (\$16)—exclusive to this location—is a fun take on the island staple. The poke is made to order, right at your table. Cubes of fresh 'ahi are mixed with diced Maui onion, inamona, ogo, avocado and the restaurant's special sauce. You can taste the freshness of each ingredient, particularly the fish, and the sauce is simple and delicious. It's an easy dish to order every time.

A must-order are the house-made buttery buttermilk biscuits (five for \$5), with Waimea churned butter and sea salt. You know these biscuits are good when they leave a buttery residue on your fingers. My husband politely saved me just one.

The Kualoa Ranch Smokin' Oysters (\$3 each with a minimum of four per order) is another exciting appetizer. The briny oysters, grown in the ranch's Mōli'i Fishpond, are served under a glass cover filled with smoke until it's released tableside with dramatic flair.

The restaurant had run out of the roasted cauliflower and walnut salad (\$12) the first time I dined

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there, but, thankfully, had it on my second visit. My current obsession with cauliflower is fanned by dishes like this: Florets of locally grown cauliflower are roasted and dusted in turmeric and served with sweet golden raisins and baby romaine (which, to me, was unnecessary), the flavors enhanced by an aged sherry dressing. I could eat this every day.

With all the delicious options in front of us, the one appetizer that wasn't entirely gone by the end of the meal was the shrimp, corn and mac nut fritters (\$11). We wanted to love this dish, but it felt more like a cake than a fritter. I wanted this to be crispy and cohesive, but the ingredients, as high quality and fresh as they were, just didn't meld for me.

The Big Island bistro cheeseburger (\$19) was thick and

juicy, with that slightly gamier grass-fed taste (compared to corn-fed beef). The house-made bun was springy and gave the burger the right carb-to-meat ratio. The addition of melted Gruyere cheese, along with fresh vine-ripened tomatoes and caramelized onions, elevated this to a burger worthy of serving on white tablecloths.

The house-made cavatelli pasta (\$22), also offered at Waimea, was simple and elegant, with Hirabara Swiss chard, mushrooms, a drizzle of truffle oil and house-made ricotta. The Kahua Ranch lamb (market price), another signature dish, didn't disappoint: The lamb was perfectly cooked and served with jalapeño whipped potatoes that made me feel OK about skipping the side of rice. (All entrées are à la carte.)

The cast-iron organic chicken (\$34) was available on my second



The Honolulu restaurant is the only Merriman's location to offer poke mixed tableside.

**“I have a cantilever swimming pool hanging out over my dining space outside. I mean, how cool is that?”**

—Peter Merriman

visit, and I was eager to try it after one server highly recommended it. The local chicken from J. Ludovico Farm on the North Shore had that depth of flavor you get from pasture-raised chickens. The butterflied bird was beautifully seared and golden, and the Hāmākua mushrooms added another dimension of earthiness.

The diver sea scallops (\$39) were a bit underwhelming. The scallops were firm and well cooked and the jalapeño potato sauce, paired with shoyu butter, was nice but not memorable.

Both desserts (\$11 each)—the Maui Gold pineapple bread pudding with toasted macadamia

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The roasted cauliflower and walnut salad gets a sweet boost from golden raisins.



Good Foot Hawaii/credit: Charley Myers

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nuts and the Waiialua molten chocolate purse with caramel sauce and vanilla ice cream—are served at the other Merriman's restaurants. But what surprised me the most was the strawberry ice cream (\$7), made in-house using local fruit. It was creamy, smooth and sweet, but not heavy or filling. A perfect palate cleanser.

The opening of Merriman's Honolulu has been decades in the making. More than 20 years ago, Merriman looked at a spot in the Waikiki Landmark, the luxury condo that looks like the legs of a giant robot, where McCully Street, Kalākaua Avenue and the Ala Wai meet. But he wasn't sure about



Merriman's Mai Tai features Old Lahaina rum, lime, mac-nut orgeat, triple sec and a honey-liliko'i foam.



The Kinako Sour from Merriman's "Inspired" list.



A few Merriman's favorite desserts, such as the Waiialua molten chocolate purse, appear on the menu here.

running a restaurant in Waikiki. "What we do is high-end dining, and Waikiki is high-volume dining," he says. "It just didn't feel right."

O'ahu remained on the backburner as Merriman, one of the original Hawai'i Regional Cuisine chefs, opened a Merriman's on Maui and Merriman's Fish House on Kaua'i. In addition, he partnered with Handcrafted Restaurants to open the more laid-back Monkeypod Kitchen—two on Maui and one at Ko Olina—and Moku Kitchen in Kaka'ako. He wrote a cookbook and even blogged about politics for *The Huffington Post*.

Still, opening a Merriman's on O'ahu was a challenge.

"I really wanted the right location," Merriman says. "I've looked for years and years and got close a couple of times. But I just never found it."

Then he toured Kaka'ako, particularly the Ward neighborhood envisioned by Howard Hughes Corp., and heard its plans for the addition of high-end condos and an eclectic mix of restaurants and retailers. Merriman loved everything about the project.

"I really love this neighborhood," he says, sitting at one of the booths

in his restaurant anchoring Howard Hughes Corp.'s most recent luxury condo project. "When I walk down the street I feel excited. I think Howard Hughes is visionary, and I wanted to be associated with that. I have a cantilever swimming pool hanging out over my dining space outside. I mean, how cool is that?"

The neighborhood vibe has influenced the design of the 6,000-square-foot restaurant. Merriman wanted to create a lively atmosphere for diners—a departure from the more rustic Waimea outpost—while paying homage to the area's history, from its humble plantation roots to its current upscale status.

"The design reflects what we're trying to do," he says. "We're trying to be part French bistro, part high-end dining and part Hawai'i."

The décor is split down the middle of the restaurant: On one side is the dining room, with white tablecloths and curved armchairs, and on the other side are bare tables, a 14-seat bar and bench seating with vibrant Hawaiian-print fabric by local design house Kealopiko. There are four 17-foot 'ōhi'a posts from Hawai'i Island standing along the Kamake'e Street

**"This restaurant is a collision of fine dining and fun."**

—Peter Merriman

side of the restaurant—a contrast to the concrete pillars holding up the building that Merriman decided to leave unadorned in the dining room. "It's an ode to a sense of place," he explains.

Other touches: palaka-patterned tile on the bathroom walls, noise-reducing panels in the ceiling and around the bar to mitigate the commotion from sound bouncing off all the hard surfaces in the restaurant and its open kitchen, outdoor seating, French bistro-style tile floors in the dining room, hanging lights at the bar in the shape of small glass fishing floats in nets, and servers wearing palaka print ties from Honolulu-based Pineapple Palaka.

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The most striking of the design elements, however, is a wall-size replica of a photo the designers at Kealopiko found at Bishop Museum for Merriman. It captures a dinner held by King Kalākaua in the late 1880s with famed Scottish novelist Robert Louis Stevenson and the future president of the Republic of Hawai‘i, Sanford Dole.

But if any part of the décor encapsulates the spirit of this restaurant, it’s the sign at the bar that reads, “Throw a party.” That complimentary glass of prosecco you get when you walk in is supposed to help make that happen.

“This restaurant is a collision of fine dining and fun,” Merriman says. “It’s a party. That’s our thing.” **PAU**

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**Takeaway:**

Skip the house-made bread taster and just order the bag of biscuits (\$5). They’re the best part of the sampler, anyway. Mac ‘n’ cheese lovers will dig the baked macaroni and goat cheese app. If you can’t decide on entrées, get a duo for \$44, with two half portions. (This option isn’t available for the Keāhole lobster pot pie, New York steak or cheeseburger.) Entrées are à la carte; we loved the sautéed Small Kine Farm mushrooms. You can’t go wrong with a classic cocktail, but try one from the restaurant’s Inspired list. Our pick is the Kinako Sour (\$12). And don’t try to walk in for dinner; reservations are essential.



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