

SAN FRANCISCO
Hawaiian Haute

The shrimp chips, blackened with squid ink, are dusted with smoked trout *furikake*. A smoked egg yolk sits in the center of a ring of purple sweet potato gnocchi drizzled with kukui nut relish. The malasadas ooze a hot-pink guava custard filling. These gourmet takes on Island staples can now be found in San Francisco at an award-winning restaurant called 'āina.



A year ago, Hilo-born chef Jordan Keao and business partner/bartender Jason Alonzo shut down their weekends-only pop-up in Bernal Heights and opened 'āina as a brunch-only spot in San Francisco's hip Dogpatch neighborhood. From the start, diners flocked to the place for its French toast (made with taro sweetbread shipped in weekly from the Punalu'u Bake Shop in Nā'ālehu) and the *kalbi loco moco*. Mean-



Lomi lomi Arctic char (above) is one of the Hawai'i-inspired dishes that's made 'āina restaurant (at left) a hit in San Francisco's up-and-coming Dogpatch neighborhood. At left, bottom, 'āina's co-owner, general manager and mixologist Jason Alonzo.

while, foodie bibles went coconuts: *San Francisco* magazine called 'āina the best brunch in the city, Zagat listed it among the 15 Biggest Restaurant Openings of 2016 Around the US and on the day 'āina began dinner service last October, the *Michelin Guide* added it to its Bib Gourmand list of Bay Area restaurants that excel in food quality and value.

"We even have lines when it's raining!" says an amazed Keao, who previously cooked in-house for Google and Airbnb and trained at La Folie, one of San Francisco's top French restaurants, where he and Alonzo met. Keao left Hilo when he was 13 and his family moved to Boston. There Keao first confronted the yawning gap between outsider clichés about Hawai'i and the Hawai'i he knew, so with 'āina he hopes to "start

a conversation" about Hawai'i's complexity and clarify the distinctions between traditional Hawaiian food and the local Island cuisines that came later. The menu at 'āina aims to explain how Spam is for many locals the "best-tasting stuff in the world," he says. And how so-called Hawaiian fruit punch was nothing but dyed sugar water served to quench the thirst of workers on the plantations.

"With my food," Keao says, "I'm trying to engage as many people as possible in the story of local culture in Hawai'i. Now that we've started serving dinners, it's an even deeper story."

—Curt Sanburn / Photos by Jason Henry

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