



In the Kitchen

with *Leilani's on the Beach* chef RYAN LUCKEY

Story by ALMA TASSI

When I ask Chef Ryan Luckey for his earliest memories of food, he recalls being eight years old, making mac and cheese for his five-year-old sister. At that time, cooking was a necessity, helping his single, working mom. With a dimpled smile, he admits, "My mother was a terrible cook with a few go-to meals, one being the classic hamburger-and-mushroom casserole."

Born on Maui to a Canadian mom, Ryan shuttled between the Islands and British Columbia for much of his youth. At fifteen, he moved to Maui for good, and enrolled at Lahainaluna High School. Soon after, he started working at Red Lobster. He proved to have natural leadership skills, and quickly rose through the ranks, upgrading from the standard white apron

to the fancy red one. "It was a big deal," he jokes, though you can hear the pride coming through.

His first foray into what he deemed a "serious environment" was Kapalua Grill and Bar. He was just seventeen. "Everyone felt older—like my dad—and they were hard on me. I learned on the job." With no formal culinary-school training, Ryan instead developed his skills with stints at Jameson's Grill and Bar, the Plantation House Restaurant, then Kapalua Bay Club. "That was a really creative time," he recalls. "I learned about Spanish oils, cheeses, cured meats, [a bit of] French cuisine."

A turning point in Luckey's career came when Chris Kaiwi (now part-owner of Taverna) brought him in as executive chef at Pineapple Grill.



Opposite: Leilani's 'ahi poke bowl is a sashimi-lover's dream, with avocado, ogo (seaweed), Maui onion and crispy taro chips. Clockwise from top left: Chef Ryan Luckey helms Leilani's kitchen. The Maui Fresh salad is a cornucopia of local ingredients: Kumu Farms' shaved fennel, upcountry greens, Zuhair's cherry tomato, organic Maui beets, toasted macadamia nuts, and Surfing Goat Dairy cheese with a white balsamic vinaigrette. Leilani's takes the humble slider uptown with Ni'ihau Ranch lamb, Maui Brew Company beer-mustard aioli and tomato-ginger jam on a toasted brioche. Sesame-crusted 'ahi steak sits atop coconut and citrus jasmine rice, shiitake-soy butter, and grilled Kula asparagus.



LEILANI'S ON THE BEACH

Ryan was all of twenty-nine. Always humble, he credits Pineapple Grill's founding chef, Joey Macadangdang—a Roy Yamaguchi protégé—for broadening his knowledge of Asian/Pacific Rim cuisine and laying the foundation for Ryan's success. "It felt like a homecoming. I spent six years there, got married, had my daughter, and bought my first house."

As I chat with him on a bright afternoon at the bar of Leilani's on the Beach, Luckey reflects on those who made an indelible mark on how he cooks and runs a kitchen. He fondly calls Alex Stanislaw, the founding chef at the Plantation House, his "chef dad." "[Stanislaw] instilled a philosophy of simplicity: not nineteen ingredients, just four or five. Be humble and appreciate the team. He was also my 'psychiatrist.'" Luckey would often ask for a heart-to-heart talk in the walk-in cooler during their shifts together.

I notice this influence as Ryan interacts kindly with his staff, and when I try some of his signature dishes. I could eat the 'ahi poke bowl at Leilani's every day for the rest of my life. 'Ahi tuna with avocado, kukui nut, local seaweed and Maui onion served with crispy, homemade taro chips—bring

it! I also sample a trio of the dining room's fish preparations—all simply prepared for wide appeal, yet with uncommon local flavors for those with a refined palate. Luckey has worked with global flavors, and distilled that experience to a style that emphasizes natural, bright, and thoughtful food. He leans toward clean flavors like shiso, cilantro, and preserved lemons. Local, sustainable sourcing wasn't a priority at Leilani's before Luckey joined the team. It is now.

Towards the end of the meal, I ask Luckey about his daughter. What does she like to eat? His dimples reappear as this accomplished chef confesses that his seven-year-old doesn't like his cooking, preferring the same comfort food of his own childhood. Maybe Ryan's mother wasn't such a terrible cook, after all.

Leilani's on the Beach
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