



A trip into Polynesia

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Bali Hai Restaurant
2230 Shelter Island Drive (Shelter Island)
619-222-1181
Dinner prices: Starters, \$8 to \$17; entrees, \$17 to \$31

Dining With | Frank Sabatini Jr.



Fried bass topped over vegetables (Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr.)

When the flying-saucer shaped Bali Hai Restaurant opened on Shelter Island, the “I Love Lucy Show” was in its fourth season, Americans were introduced to TV dinners and President Dwight D. Eisenhower was in office. The year was 1954, which also started a running count for the number of extra-strength Mai Tais that Bali Hai has served to present day.

The total easily exceeds 2 million, said Susan Baumann, whose late father, Tom Ham, established the restaurant after working briefly for it as an accountant. Organized record keeping has enabled the Polynesian-style operation to track sales of the celebrated cocktail, which adheres to the original Trader Vic’s recipe that emerged from the tiki culture fad of the early ‘50s.

Lightweights beware. The drink contains no fruit juice as seen in later versions. This is basically dark and light rum hiding modicums of orange liqueur and sweet and sour. A thicket of finely crushed ice on top tempers the flavor but doesn’t necessarily diminish the brain slam.

My dinner companion, a Hungarian transplant accustomed to hard liquors in his homeland, could barely finish the drink. A friend in a previous visit poured splashes of the cocktail into each Coke refill, resulting in a series of brawny rum and Cokes that carried him through the evening. Provided you have a designated driver, the Mai Tais are a jolly part of the Bali Hai experience.

Complimenting a \$4.5 million renovation a few years ago, as well as one of the best bay views in San Diego, is an ever-changing menu of Pacific Rim dishes, most of them featuring contemporary twists. As of this week, Executive Chef Dion Morales added several new supper creations to the lineup, which include rich lobster-mushroom risotto with a poached egg. Vegetable broth is used for achieving the ideal balance of creaminess while bits of the knuckle meat from Maine lobsters tease the palate with oceanic sweetness. As the egg yolk starts seeping in, the dish turns more luxurious.

Crispy ahi is also new. Ruby-red in the center, the medallions are lined in nori and rice batter. We loved the contrast between their warm, flash-fried rims and their soft, fleshy centers. Fresh and flavorful, the fish was on target to what you'd find at top-notch sushi houses. Less exciting was a debut appetizer of smoked salmon Philly wontons. Assuming that the salmon will eventually be given greater prominence, we could detect only the cream cheese and scallions inside the delicate pillows.

Among the standbys, a starter of coconut shrimp was fantastic. Unlike phony Hawaiian preparations that rely on white sugar to sweeten the shrimp, these are pre-soaked in coconut milk before taking on their sturdy coconut batter. Spunky ginger-lime dipping sauce and refreshing papaya salad provided Malaysian-Thai credence to the dish.



Seared ahi with crispy edges (Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr.)

From the salad category, the chef expertly matches Asian winter squash to spring greens, Parmesan cheese and curry vinaigrette. It's an unusual and complex medley of ingredients, while at the same time it strikes an unexpected compatibility of flavors.

Sweet and sour chicken has remained on the entrée list since Bali Hai opened, offering customers a taste of the past with chunked pineapple, peppers and onions in a Cantonese-style sauce. The 14-ounce wok-fried Corvina bass in ponzu sauce grabbed our attention instead as a relative newcomer to the menu since the remodel.

"This reminds me of the fried fish I ate as a kid along the Danube River," my companion said as we poked through the comforting batter and into the moist, flakey meat. The only difference is that in Hungary, such fish isn't sold blanketed in bok choy, fresh chives and raw ginger. Both the presentation and flavors were rousing.

Our dessert carried tropical flair with caramelized pineapple strewn across vanilla bean ice cream and cinnamon crumb cake; a James Dole meets Betty Crocker meets Ben & Jerry's kind of treat that provided a fulfilling sugar fix.

So what does San Diego's "tiki temple" look like these days? The mysterious "goof on the roof" still stands over lush landscaping, while a network of slanted wooden beams throughout have been restored to their luster. The bay-facing dining room, open for lunch as well, feels roomier and with views offered from every white-linen table. Polynesian artifacts are neatly contained in lobby display cases. And on ground level, an annexed pavilion plays host to weddings and other private events.

Baumann's latest renovation is occurring across the bay at Tom Ham's Lighthouse, which her father also founded. Like Bali Hai, it is operated with the support of her husband and sons. Completion is due by early May.

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