

Big Island Grinds

by Kate

Dining in Hawaii is based on a multi-cultural history. Plate lunch, for example, is the offspring of a mixed-race labor force sharing the contents of their lunch boxes. Saimin, a uniquely Hawaiian meal, is a Japanese/Chinese/Filipino/Hawaiian soup, and it's even served at McDonald's. Bento boxes are not just for Japanese.. Hawaiians have a history of making the most of low-priced alternatives: Per capita, Hawaii eats more chicken thighs and more Spam than any other state. Wild pigs are a plague here, and pork dishes a specialty.

■ With the exception of restaurants in the resort areas, most of our recommendations feed more locals than tourists. If you want to dine like a tourist (not that there's anything wrong with that), the more popular guide books can offer mo' bettah suggestions than we can.

■ Most of the recommended restaurants offer little or no view. On this island there's often a negative correlation between view and value. Not always an accurate generalization, but a well-founded one, since the view itself can be a considerable percentage of the value of the meal. Go ahead and splurge on a stunning vista if you like; but, if you're on a budget, you can often get the same panorama by buying a bento and eating it at the beach, at 70% off Oceanside Restaurant prices.

■ Many downtown eateries don't have their own restrooms. This is standard, and not an indication of quality. It can be an inconvenience.

■ L & L is a state-wide chain serving locals choke portions kau kau for not much kala. While more low than haute cuisine, two budget-conscious travelers can eat for the price of one by sharing a mixed plate.

■ If you see a roadside Huli-Huli (or Huri-Huri Hilo-side) barbecue stand, stop your car and buy some. Huli-Huli is a delicious island smoked barbecue specialty, and

offers great value for the money. Whole chickens and racks of ribs are offered, sometimes also meals with sides already included. Other island specialties that deserve a try are Spam musubi, poke (po-kay, Hawaiian ceviche), shave ice, and Kahlua pig. Don't miss local produce from a farmer's market, especially apple bananas, rambutans, and fresh papayas. If white pineapple is available, chance 'um, cuz!

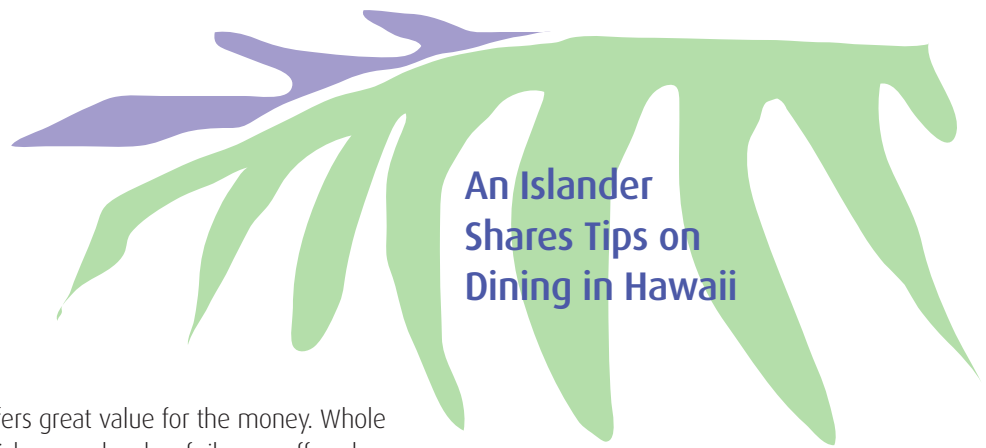
■ Pronunciation tip: "W"s that begin words are pronounced as "wha;" "w"s inside words are pronounced with a hard "Vah." For example, Waimea is pronounced, "Why-may-a;" Hawi is pronounced, "Ha-vee."

Hilo

Hilo Bay Café – Upscale American menu based on local ingredients, including organic produce with innovative entrees, salads, and sandwiches. Lunch & dinner, full bar. \$\$\$ — 315 Maka'ala St. (Walmart Shopping Center near Office Max) ...935-4939.

Nori's Saimin and Snacks – Headed by one of the famous "Two Skinny Chefs," with the island's most extensive selection of Hawaii's favorite iconic meal-in-a-soup: Saimin. And much more. Enchanting combinations and always fresh, Nori's often surprises and always pleases. Home of the famous chocolate mochi cookies and cake, both gluten-free. Hard to find, but worth it! \$\$ — 688 Kinoole Street ... 935-9133

Ocean Sushi Deli – Local favorite that offers more than sushi, but not exactly fine dining. Local dishes, fresh catch, old Hawaiian recipes, newly remodeled. It's sister, the Tsunami Grill, is right across the street. \$\$ — 239 Keawe Street ... 961-6625



An Islander Shares Tips on Dining in Hawaii

Puka Puka Kitchen – Tiny (seats maybe 20?) diner and bento shop. Fresh specials daily, right on the main waterfront street downtown. Local favorite, with kitchen connections to a high priced eatery. \$\$ — 270 Kamehameha Avenue ... 933-2121

Miyo's – Difficult to find, but worth the safari. Located in a park-like setting, Miyo's has an open air, second floor dining room, excellent and inexpensive Japanese standards. \$\$ — 400 Hualani Street ... 935-2273

On the road south from Hilo

Ning's Thai – Casual, friendly, family joint with a good selection as well for vegetarians and vegans. Soups are great, curries can be too sweet. \$ — 15-3001 Pahoa Road, Pahoa ... 965-7611

Keawe Kitchen – Highly recommended for wood-fired pizzas, sandwiches, and salads. Busy and friendly. Also recommended in Volcano is Thai Thai. Both \$\$ — Volcano Village ... 967-7711

Hana Hou – Big ole pies and other homemade desserts await you after large salads, sandwiches, and daily specials, so plan accordingly. \$\$ — 95-1148 Spur Road, Na'alehu ... 929-9717

Desert Rose Café – "Life's short, eat dessert first," is their motto! Nothing fancy, but a local hangout with an eclectic menu and a popular island chef. \$\$ — Pohue Plaza, Na'alehu ... 939-7673

On the road north from Hilo

Tex Drive In & Restaurant – Ya gotta stop for the malasadas! Cooked fresh every few minutes, Portuguese donuts are filled or unfilled, still hot when they're counted into the bag. Other meals are filling and adequate, but not great. \$\$ — 45-690 Pakalana Street (Honoka'a) ... 775-0598

What's Shakin' – Smoothies made from fresh frozen farm fruit, homemade sandwiches and daily specials make this a refreshing stop or a worthwhile destination. On the lovely Onomea Bay 4-mile scenic drive, or on your way to the Botanical Gardens. Open 'til 4:30 every day. \$\$ — 27-999 Old Mamalahoa Drive, in Pepeekeo ... 964-3080

Waimea (Kamuela)

Chef Daniel's Seafood Café – The only and the best sushi bar in Waimea. In the historic Chock In Store. Other fresh seafood and turf specialties, plus great wine list and sumptuous desserts. Lunch and dinner. Occasionally, fresh Waimea strawberries available at the stand outside. \$\$\$ — 65-1259 Kawaihae Road ... 887-2200

Huli Sue's BBQ and Grill – Barbecue joint with local ingredients and flavors and some Japanese/local fusion items: a hot new restaurant triumphs. Fresh, flavorful, and fattening, lunch & dinner. \$\$ (lunch); \$\$\$ (dinner) — 67-1185 Mamalahoa Highway ... 885-6268

Solimene's – Nothing island about this place except the local family who runs it. Good pizza, spectacular soups de jour, decent salads and tasty pastas make this more Long than Big Island. The tight fit and nightly crowds add to the ambience. Lunch and dinner, beer & wine. \$\$ — 65-1158 Mamalahoa Highway (Waimea Shopping Center) ... 887-1313

Kohala Coast

Kirin – Ignore the name, it's the best Chinese food on the island! Fresh and diverse dim sum from 11 am To 5 pm. A la carte also available. Fresh seafood and vegetables, thorough menu; dinner is pricy. \$\$\$ — Hilton Waikoloa Village ... 886-1288

Luke's Place – Newly renovated at the Kohala Village Inn. Fresh ingredients, a tasty, innovative menu, reasonable prices and respectable servings make this a new local favorite. Live music occasionally. Lunch and dinner, full bar. \$\$ — 55-510 Hawi Road, Hawi ... 889-1155

Merriman's Market Café – Indoor/outdoor light dining for lunch and dinner. A great change from hotel food: Sandwiches, salads, entrees, all fresh and well-prepared, friendly service. \$\$\$ — 250 Waikoloa Beach Drive at King's Shops ... 886-1700

Pahu i'a – Best breakfast buffet on the island! Be sure to come hungry, it's expensive! Dinner also served, more formal, more yummy, just as dear. View of Maui included with most meals. \$\$\$\$ — Four Seasons Hualalai ... 325-8000

Sushi Rock (Hawi) – Despite its name, not just sushi, but a broad range of Hawaiian and fusion dishes, all innovative and tasty, and fresh, fresh, fresh! A favorite of locals and nearby residents at the tippy top of the island. \$\$ — 55-3435 Akoni Pule Highway ... 889-5900

The Hualalai Grille by Alan Wong – Visionary use of local ingredients and fusion cuisine by a Hawaiian virtuoso. Fresh catch might still be swimming at the time of your order. Fine, extensive wine list. Service can be spotty, but setting is amazingly serene for an open kitchen. Lunch & dinner. \$\$\$\$ — Four Seasons Hualalai ... 325-8000

Kailua Town

Big Island Grill – The best local eating anywhere on the island: Broke Da Mouth good! Family owned and run, friendly

and atmospheric. Reasonably priced local favorites, and excellent daily specials. There might be a line, but as the ads say, they're worth the weight. \$\$ — 75-5702 Kuakini Highway in town ... 326-1153

Jackie Rey's Ohana Grill – A fresh approach to island cooking and another family favorite. Local ingredients, great recipes, lots of fresh catch specials. Both reliable and delicious, with good service. A gem among local restaurants. Lunch & dinner. \$\$\$ — 75-599A Kuakini Highway (out of town in Pottery Terrace) ... 327-0209

Java on the Rocks (AKA Huggo's on the Rocks) – Enjoy some of the best coffee in town right on the water, with a modest breakfast menu before they set up for lunch. Lunch and dinner are also decent, and reasonably priced. Dinner also includes local musicians and hula. Same view, less comfortable, less money, than Huggo's next door. \$\$ — 75-5828 Kahakai Rd. (Just off Alii Drive) ... 329-1493

Original Thai – Now considered the best Thai food in town. Family owned, superb menu and specials. No ambience to speak of, but the food more than compensates, AND, it has its own rest room! Lunch & dinner. \$\$ — 75-5629 Kuakini Hwy. (Behind the Firestone in the strip mall) ... 329-3459

Sushi Shiono – Japanese restaurant and sushi bar. Excellent sushi and authentic Japanese dishes. Occasional specials; good spot for lunch. \$\$\$ — Alii Sunset Plaza 75-5799 Alii Drive ... 326-1696

You make the roll – a dive the size of a large SUV hidden behind a downtown Kona mall. Fresh, tasty sushi at incredibly low prices. Usually a line, and the staff close when they get tired. Sushi platters to go a specialty! \$ — 75-5725 Alii Drive, Space D101 ... 326-1322

U-Top-It – Great for breakfast and lunch. Sweet or savory crepes and more, with local twists on a familiar theme (Taro pancakes, Curry crepes). \$ — Alii Sunset Plaza ... 329-0092

