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Here's What We Think You Should Order at Chef Morimoto's Two New Restaurants

After closing one restaurant, the Iron Chef opened two more at the 'Alohilani Resort: Momosan Waikīkī and Morimoto Asia.

By Mari Taketa



Gyukotsu ramen with a side of kushiyaki and a soft-boiled egg at Momosan Waikīkī.

Photos: STEVE CZERNIAK

It was a long 14 months between the shuttering of Morimoto Waikīkī at The Modern Honolulu and Morimoto Asia's opening at the 'Alohilani Resort, down at the other end of the Kalākaua strip. We have to admit we missed the flash of Masaharu Morimoto's

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appearances, but then again, during those 14 months Waikīkī transformed into one of O‘ahu’s hottest dining scenes, with even jaded locals trading tips on parking and driving in to eat.

But that’s been largely on the ‘Ewa side of the strip. Things were quiet at the Diamond Head end—until February. With a blast of firecrackers, a lion dance and a 60-foot ‘ahi sushi roll at a jam-packed opening party, the ponytailed celebrity chef was back. Now his two new restaurants sit one atop the other on a prime corner across from Kūhiō Beach: **Morimoto Asia Waikīkī**, upstairs at the ‘Alohilani, and **Momosan Waikīkī** right below. One opened the day after Valentine’s Day and the other three months later.

So what’s the difference, and should you go? After multiple visits to each, here are the highlights.

SEE ALSO: 6 Reasons to Try Morimoto Asia Waikīkī’s New Happy Hour Right Now



Tsukemen-dipped ramen.

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Downstairs

Momosan Waikīkī

Most dining at Momosan Waikīkī is outdoors, under tentlike umbrellas on a lānai that catches the trades coming down from the Ko‘olau, and it’s here you’ll want to sit unless it’s a super hot or windy day. Momosan feels like a turning point in the arc of a star chef’s career, where he returns to the simpler times of his youth. So after Morimoto worked his way up to executive chef status at Nobu New York, after he rose to stardom with Food Network’s *Iron Chef*, launched his empire (17 restaurants from New York to Bangkok to Dubai) and won a Michelin star at Atelier Morimoto XEX in Tokyo’s Roppongi district, we get what is essentially his version of an open-air izakaya, just out of range of the passersby and single-lane traffic on Lili‘uokalani Avenue and a stone’s throw from the coconut palms on the beach.

The menu revolves around ramen (six kinds), grilled kushiyaki skewers (nine kinds) and an assortment of appetizers ranging from single orders to heaping plates. Nearly every dish comes with a photo illustration, a godsend for novices and gastronomes. You can even see the bone of the seven-hour-braised beef rib sticking out of the \$28 gyukotsu ramen. Four other ramen bowls range from Tokyo chicken in a shoyu-based broth to a coconutty tan tan sesame ramen laced with spicy miso ground pork and reminiscent of laksa; these are \$15. The last—a \$16 tsukemen-dipped ramen whose garlicky, salty-rich tonkotsu broth and fat, chewy Sun Noodles alone make this a must-get—comes with a brief tutorial on navigating the dual bowls. (It’s a dip, not a soup, with extra deep and savory flavors that are designed for a split-second dunk of the thick noodle. Soaking the noodles or drinking the broth delivers way too strong a punch.) Each topping pushes more flavor: soy-simmered egg; pork belly basted with sweet soy; salty, crunchy menma-simmered bamboo shoots; pickled mustard cabbage leaves.

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Momosan Waikīki offers nine types of skewers ranging from pork belly-wrapped asparagus to beef intestine.

Which brings us to Momosan's other focus. Like New York's Momosan Ramen & Sake Bar, its prototype, the menu lists two dozen solid sake choices ranging from Morimoto's own label to award-winning breweries like Born, Dassai and Nanbu Bijin. In Japan, ramen is a quick, often solo experience: You drain your bowl, put down your chopsticks and

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leave. In Hawai'i, people like to linger over a bowl with a glass of beer, but when it's hot outside, it's even better with cold sake. The menu breaks down sake choices into light, classic and bold, but servers are good at recommending pairings (when in doubt, a chilled full-bodied ginjo is a food-friendly choice). And while the dominance of sake is in line with Momosan's izakaya feel, the menu lists a smattering of Japanese and local craft beers and Japanese whiskies ranging from Hibiki Harmony to Suntory's Toki, Hakushu 12-year and Hakushu 18-year-old single malts.

Now the food menu turns eminently drink-friendly. When you order kushiyaki, get it with the shio or salt option as the teriyaki can overwhelm the flavors of the main ingredients. Skewers are \$4 to \$4.50 but generously portioned. Both duck and salmon belly, for instance, turn out to be not bite-size morsels but long strips folded over on themselves, leaving them tender and juicy after a turn on the grill. The tsukune (chicken meatball) comes with an optional add-on of a \$3 soft-boiled egg: As with sukiyaki, you whip it up and dredge the tsukune through the unctuous, yolky sauce. The egg is a game-changer—get it with any kushiyaki, no matter what.

Other recommendations are the light, batter-fried mimiga (pig's ear) with Japanese mayo for dipping (\$9) and the fat-kissed wagyu hamburger steak (\$12), which comes sizzling on a cast-iron platter with Momosan's teriyaki sauce drizzled atop tableside. Duck tacos feature succulent slices, skin-on with a thin layer of fat, with hoisin and apricot chili sauces in a fluffy, crispy fried wonton shell. It's a meaty menu with few vegetable options, but then again, we get the idea that these are the best food memories of Morimoto's youth.

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The dining room of Morimoto Asia.

As for how Momosan differs from Morimoto Asia? You get a couple of hints from the Iron Chef himself. First, Momo-san is his nickname. And when he appears downstairs, he's in the same T-shirt worn by the servers; upstairs, where frequent sightings in the early months had him directing the kitchen and posing with guests for selfies, he's apt to be in formal chef's whites.

Lunch daily 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.; dinner nightly 5 to 11 p.m., (808) 922-0011; momosanwaikiki.com

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Upstairs

Morimoto Asia

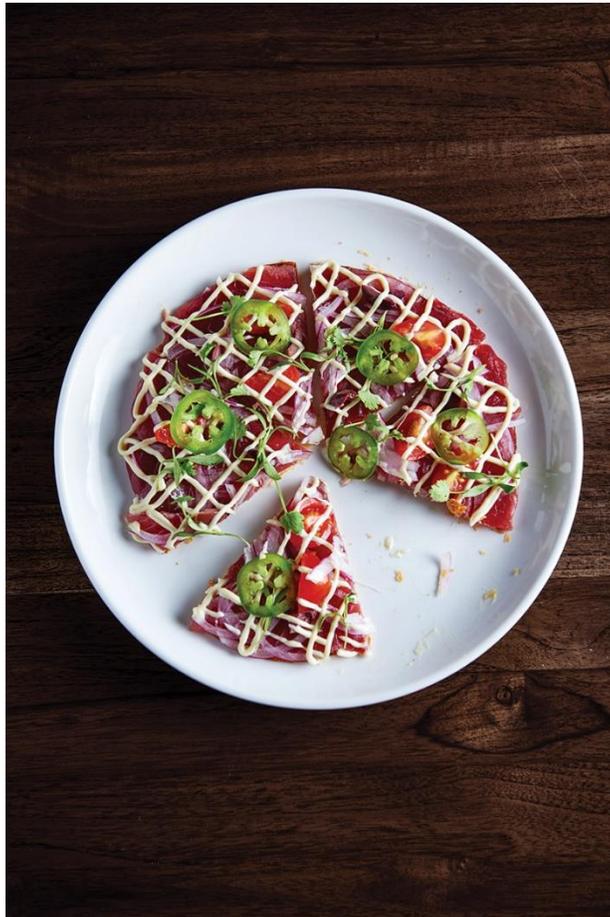


Sticky ribs.

Morimoto Asia, chic and rustic with a vibe evoking colonial Indochina, is a spot for first dates, business entertaining, girls nights out and those times your out-of-town guests want dinner with a sunset view. It's more casual and affordable than the old Morimoto Waikīkī, but with a vastly more ambitious theme. This is Asia through Morimoto's gustatory lens—a huge sweep across the continent from Japan, China and South Korea to Thailand and Singapore. The menu spans everything from hawker stall fare like Hainanese chicken rice to dim sum from a roving cart to raw A5 wagyu grilled tableside for \$25 an ounce. Because of this, and because even with eight menu sections (appetizers, salads, sushi rolls, dim sum, noodle soups, meat and poultry, seafood, and rice and wok dishes) it's not easy to coherently categorize this much of Asia on two pages, first-timers could use some guidance.

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'Ahi pizza.

If you're looking for hints of the old Morimoto Waikīkī, you'll find favorites like the 'ahi pizza (\$18) and *ishiyaki buri* (hamachi rice bowl, \$32). There is no sushi bar here—there are rolls instead, and the glassed-in kitchen that runs the length of the dining room has a display of roasted ducks hanging on hooks.

Where do you start? By remembering this is Morimoto's take on Asia. In other words, don't come looking for, say, a meal of dim sum, mapo tofu and Peking duck cooked in the style of your Chinese grandma or your favorite Chinese restaurants. That said, small shared plates worth getting include the sticky ribs (\$15), tender and coated with a zesty blast of hoisin sweet chili, and the 'ahi pizza with its green olives and anchovy aioli. Beef carpaccio and fish carpaccio are dressed with a punchy yuzu soy, as is the jellyfish.

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(Not like Chinese restaurants, remember? And these are all \$12). It's sliced into thin noodles, with tiny orbs of sesame oil adding richness and jalapeños a big kick.



Garlic Shrimp

The most decadent meal we saw was that of a couple who simply went for the garlic shrimp (\$22) and roast duck (\$60), all the more decadent because they ate both with their fingers and then licked them clean. Both are recommendations, with the caveat that no matter how much it looks like Peking duck and despite being presented in a wrapper with Peking duck-style sauces and garnishes, Morimoto Asia's roast duck is (repeat after me) not like a Chinese restaurant's. It is perfectly cooked, with a narrow layer of fat under the lacquered, not-crispy skin—two breasts and drumsticks rolled to your table on a cart by a server who flips the slices onto a steamed flour tortilla, adds streaks of apricot-chili and hoisin-miso sauces and wraps them with slivered Tokyo scallions. Both times I ordered this, I waited for the server to leave before helping myself to plain warm slices with a light dab of hoisin-miso or even just salt; you get the full, unfiltered glory of the duck that way. The shrimp, on the other hand, comes head- and shell-on in a garlic butter confit studded with melty cloves of roasted garlic; it's messy eating but good.

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Roast duck served with wrapper and garnishes.

Perhaps the biggest surprise about Morimoto Asia is this: Desserts are buzzworthy. I started hearing about the banana pudding after the opening party. I can confirm now the mildly sweet banana rum caramel pudding (\$12) is a luscious, effortless meld with the house-made vanilla wafers. My favorite is the almond pudding (\$12), a silken concoction brightened with fresh tropical fruits and enriched with black honey and soupy red-bean oshiruko—the more so because I’ve never gotten the appeal of almond extract. The mango on the sticky rice (\$12) is just-ripe and sweet-tart, which is to be expected because we all have mango standards in Hawai’i, but it’s the rice—cooked to moist, pliant softness with coconut milk—that sets this apart from versions that take strength to separate and chew. Finally, I held off on trying the chocolate sphere (\$18)—after seeing it lit aflame at table after table, I dismissed it as a showy, *de rigueur* chocolate dessert. When I eventually ordered it, I’ll admit I whipped out my phone to record the moment the server set a small pot of rum ablaze and poured the blue flames over the sphere, melting it to reveal the chocolate sorbet and whipped cream inside. That plate—with chocolate ganache, buttery chocolate sable cookies and strawberries—got scraped clean.

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So your choice between Morimoto Asia and Momosan boils down to this: a casually upscale vision of Asia for you to navigate, with some destinations holding more appeal than others, or a sake-centric izakaya whose fare is narrowed down for you, as street-level and accessible as the setting. Or both: After ramen and skewers downstairs, the rum-fired chocolate at the top of the stairs turned out to be a perfect nightcap.



The outside of the chocolate sphere melts away to reveal chocolate sorbet and whipped cream.

Open daily 5 to 10 p.m.; (808) 922-0022; morimotoasiawaikiki.com

Momosan Waikīkī & Morimoto Asia Waikīkī, ‘Alohilani Resort, 2490 Kalākaua Ave.

Takeaway: For locals, the first question about a Waikīkī restaurant is always about the parking. For Morimoto Asia and Momosan, the first three hours in ‘Alohilani’s self-park garage are free with validation. Valet parking will cost you \$9 with restaurant validation.