



Frozen beer and meatball sliders

Happy hour offers introduction to Morimoto Asia

MORIMOTO ASIA ALOHILANI RESORT
Waikiki Beach, 2490 Kalakaua Ave. morimotoasiawaikiki.com, 922-0022
Happy hour
5-7 p.m. daily
>> Wagyu meatball sliders, \$5
>> Fried rock shrimp, \$5
>> Frozen beer, \$5
>> Select cocktails, \$5

By Betty Shimabukuro
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There's a certain curiosity factor attached to a restaurant owned by Masaharu Morimoto, he of "Iron Chef" fame. Will it be as flamboyant as he is, will the food be as pretty as it looks on TV, will he be there? And if he is, will he take a picture with me?

At Morimoto Asia the answers are: not really; some of it;

maybe. And probably Morimoto has an empire of restaurants spread as far away as Dubai, but he does keep a condo in Waikiki, so he could stop by when you're there. A good clue: Look for his orange Mercedes G-Class SUV parked right in front of the Alohilani Resort Waikiki Beach, where Morimoto occupies the second floor.

I've seen the chef pop up unannounced at his former Waikiki restaurant, in the

Modern Honolulu, happily chatting with guests and posing for a stream of selfies. When I had a chance to interview him, he said he has 2,000 employees to take care of, and that means being successful, and that means maintaining his public persona.

In other words, yes, he probably would take a photo with you.

The experience

Our visit to Morimoto Asia for happy hour came on an

especially hot day, so our first impression of the restaurant was of a cool refuge.

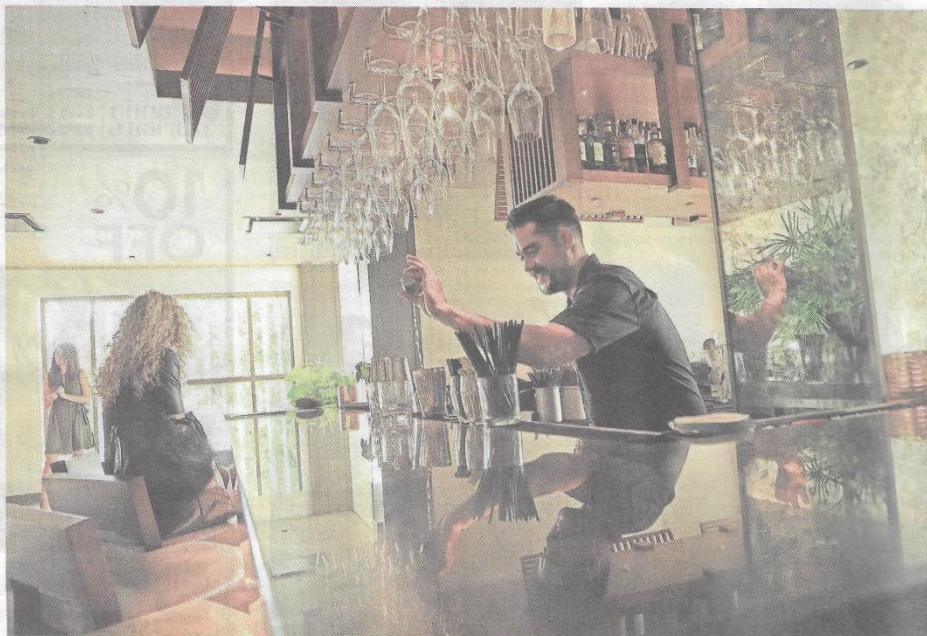
The lounge is a softly lit space, with contemporary wooden furnishings and an earthy tone ambience. Picture windows facing Kalakaua Avenue let in natural light from the bright and sunny outdoors.

Seating is at a large central bar and comfy tables circling the room. Happy-hour items are available only at the bar or lounge seating.

A valuable perk, free parking is available here, with a three-hour validation to go with your order. You can choose self-parking or valet; enter off of Liliuokalani Avenue.

The food

The restaurant builds on the model of the first Morimoto Asia, in Orlando, Fla., with a menu that spans the continent, going beyond Morimoto's base of Japanese to include cuisines of Korea, India, China, Thailand



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Bartender Rob Galvez mixes cocktails during happy hour at Morimoto Asia, located inside the Alohilani Resort in Waikiki.



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Rock shrimp, far left front row, sliders, takoyaki, tacos and yakisoba accompany a frozen beer, middle, and plentiful cocktails that are available during happy hour at Morimoto Asia.

and Singapore. The happy-hour menu is made up of five items at \$5 each, an economical way to get just a taste of the Morimoto Asia experience.

The greatest of the five is a dish of fried rock shrimp, light and sweet with a soft crunch. It comes with a not-too-spicy wasabi aioli on a couple leaves of endive. Very tasty.

A pair of mini tacos come filled with thinly sliced beef, pink pickled onions and a cheese sauce. They make nifty three-bite bits, with ultra-crisp tortilla shells.

Also coming in pairs are wagyu meatball sliders, cute little dudes given some spiciness by a chili-bean tobanjan sauce, used here in good balance. A few strands of papaya slaw provide a tangy contrast. I would have enjoyed a few more of these.

The menu rounds out with takoyaki, traditional octopus dumplings, drizzled with a sweet-soy sauce and bonito flakes; and a hot skillet of yakisoba with pork belly and shredded vegetables. Nothing special here, I'd suggest it only if you need the carb ballast.



Morimoto Asia executive chef Tommy Sao poses at his workplace. The restaurant builds on the concept of the first Morimoto Asia, which was built in Orlando, Fla.

The drink

Top billing goes to a "frozen beer" of Kirin Ichiban, actually a super-cold beer with a tall head of icy foam, looking like a soft-serve ice cream swirl. It's magnificent thing to look at, intimidating to actually drink, as you need to figure out a way to get to the beer without getting foam all over your face.

Let it sit a bit, though, and

the foam relaxes to the point where you can sip of the nippy, refreshing brew. My companion, who at first dismissed the drink, at that point declared it perfect for a warm day. "I changed my attitude once the beer broke the shell," she declared.

Our favorite, though, was the blueberry sour, a delicious, fruity mix of vodka, blueberry puree, lemon juice and cassis. It's a unique cocktail that delivers with bright flavor and just enough punch.

Pau-hana beverages are \$5 for the frozen beer, blueberry sour, a lychee spritz (with shochu and lychee juices and liqueur) or a glass of sparkling cava. Kirin Ichiban draft is \$3.

The verdict

The pau hana menu isn't groundbreaking — don't expect "Iron Chef" fireworks — but it's nicely done and makes for an affordable respite in Waikiki. The blueberry sour on its own is worth the price of admission. As a place to cool off and chill out, waiting for a glimpse of Morimoto, his lounge fits the bill.