

HAWAII

MODERN LUXURY

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Morimoto Asia Waikiki, a new arrival in Masaharu Morimoto's global restaurant empire, is sleek and showy in an understated way. There's the precise geometry of long, clean lines that carry the eye across a large room of organic wood surfaces and fish-basket lights to a gleaming open kitchen. There's the view, which takes in Kuhio Beach and the ocean beyond in an unobstructed sweep from the eatery's second-floor lanai. And there's the Iron Chef himself, still sleek at 62, hair slicked back in his trademark ponytail above immaculate chef's whites.

It's Morimoto's charisma that pervades the redesigned 'Alohilani Resort Waikiki Beach's showpiece restaurant, and the quiet thrill of diners drawn by his cachet is almost palpable. There are couples on vacation, mother-daughter pairings dressed to the nines, and foodies on the hunt for the fusion Japanese chef's new Pan-Asian cuisine.

What they find is as showy as the Iron Chef himself, but it's not the cool chic of his now-shuttered Morimoto Waikiki. This new resto is more of a rickshaw ride across Morimoto's vision of Asia. You take it all in—the expected, unexpected and the occasional showstopper.

So a trio of crispy, tender sticky ribs features on the appetizer menu, along with softly crunchy jellyfish noodles dressed in soy, sesame oil and jalapenos. It's a promising start, especially if you've ordered a flight of Morimoto-brand sakes or a cocktail of Savasana or the North Shore Mule. The first is a cleansing refresher of Hendrick's gin, lemon juice, shiso and cucumber; and the second, a tangy tropical twist rich with velvety lilikoi passion fruit. Both up the vacation feel if you're sitting on the lanai; bring sunglasses if you're dining before sunset.

Here's where things get interactive (it's a rickshaw ride, remember?).

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FOOD & DRINK

review

To dine at Morimoto Asia without trying some of the former sushi chef's fresh fish seems like sacrilege (Morimoto was head chef at one of Nobu Matsuhisa's Manhattan haute spots and earned a Michelin star at Morimoto XEX, his teppanyaki and sushi outpost in Tokyo). A sashimi salad of fresh local greens is presented in a clear plastic tube fastened with a traditional red-and-white mizubiki knot. From the kitchen, meanwhile, a dim sum cart appears; the choices are tempting, but we're in the mood for some lax.

Now comes extravagantly marbled A5 wagyu beef, arrayed on a platter like sashimi slices. With it is a searing-hot stone: You cook at your leisure, turning the delicate pieces between sips and chatter—three seconds on each side for medium-rare, five seconds for medium. The effect of DIY wagyu is empowering. So

we call for Peking duck and are rewarded with a tableside presentation of an impeccably roasted whole bird, its tender, juicy slices folded into warm flour tortillas with fresh scallions, apricot sweet chili and hoisin miso.

None of this, as you will have guessed, is for the individual. It's mostly family-style here, as it is across most of Asia, so you'll do best to dispense with any personal appetizer-entree-dessert plans. Solo diners have a range of options with sushi, salads and noodle bowls—the last containing early hints of the menu at Momosan, the Iron Chef's ramen and yakitori spot slated to open downstairs. And if it's reminders of the old Morimoto Waikiki you seek, you'll find the occasional dish like the ishiyaki buri bap, the chef's take on a sizzling Korean rice bowl. It's prepared tableside, of course.

At this point, nearing satiation, we become aware of a couple two tables down. They're licking their fingers and nodding approval over a plate of seven large, sweet Kauai shrimp. We check the menu: It's garlic shrimp in a butter confit with melting cloves of roasted garlic. We put in our order and are soon licking our own fingers.

Dessert is a must here, and it ranges from chilled slices of sweet-tart fresh mango with delightfully soft sticky rice to a sublime banana pudding with housemade vanilla wafers and caramel rum pudding; and the light, ultracreamy almond pudding, which will spoil you for any other version. The Iron Chef one-ups all these with a final showstopper: a chocolate sphere that—flambeed tableside in a cloud of blue flame—melts to reveal the chocolate sorbet within. Did we say final showstopper? We forgot the Iron Chef himself. On more than one visit, we spy him in action, directing his chefs in the glass-walled kitchen or bowing graciously at diners' tables. Maybe, if we're lucky, he'll stop by our table and pose for a selfie. ■



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Click here from top left: orange chicken; chef Morimoto proudly takes a stand at his new resto; the Caviar rice; the dining room features a view of the pristine open kitchen; the Sashimi salad. Opposite page: the Maui's sashimi salad, wrapped like a gift.