

Arancino designs a menu of artful cuisine



The crostacei di mare at Arancino at the Kahala is a delicate arrangement of abalone, amaebi and greens drizzled with herb oil.

Arancino has all the markings of being the product of a large Japanese corporation, from ambience and consistency, to a sense of perfection and professionalism. So it would probably surprise many diners that it remains an intimate, family-run enterprise with roots in a small bar on Waikiki's Beachwalk Avenue, borne out of Ichiro Inamura's passion for food and drink. Today he serves as CEO, with daughter Aya as vice president.

At the original Arancino and Arancino di Mare in Waikiki, the cuisine is excellent, though casual, as befitting its mass-market setting, so when I heard they were opening at the Kahala Hotel & Resort, I wondered how the Italian menu would be reoriented for the resort's upscale clientele. I couldn't imagine advancing much further with one of the world's most democratic cuisines.

With executive chef Daisuke Hamamoto at the helm, Arancino



NADINE
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has met the challenge full on, to the point where this restaurant is not for everyone. If you hunger for simple spaghetti with red or cream sauce, tossed

with some veggies and seafood, stick to the Waikiki locations. The Kahala iteration offers a presentation that has more in common with Vintage Cave than its own older siblings. Here, food is as much art as sustenance, and not everyone is willing to keep an open mind about food as art. Those who open themselves to the experience will be rewarded.

THE RESTAURANT is on the site of the former Tokyo Tokyo, with an open kitchen taking up most of the real estate. Al fresco dining is enjoyed on the lanai. A private dining room with room for up to a dozen is also available.

Staffers recommend following the restaurant's prix fixe format in the evening, which allows diners to experience the full Arancino vision and the Italian progression of five-course dinners (\$100) or four-course dinners (\$85). But,

**ARANCINO
AT THE KAHALA**
Kahala Hotel & Resort
>> 380-4400

Food	★★★★★
Service	★★★★★
Ambience	★★★★1/2
Value	★★★★1/2

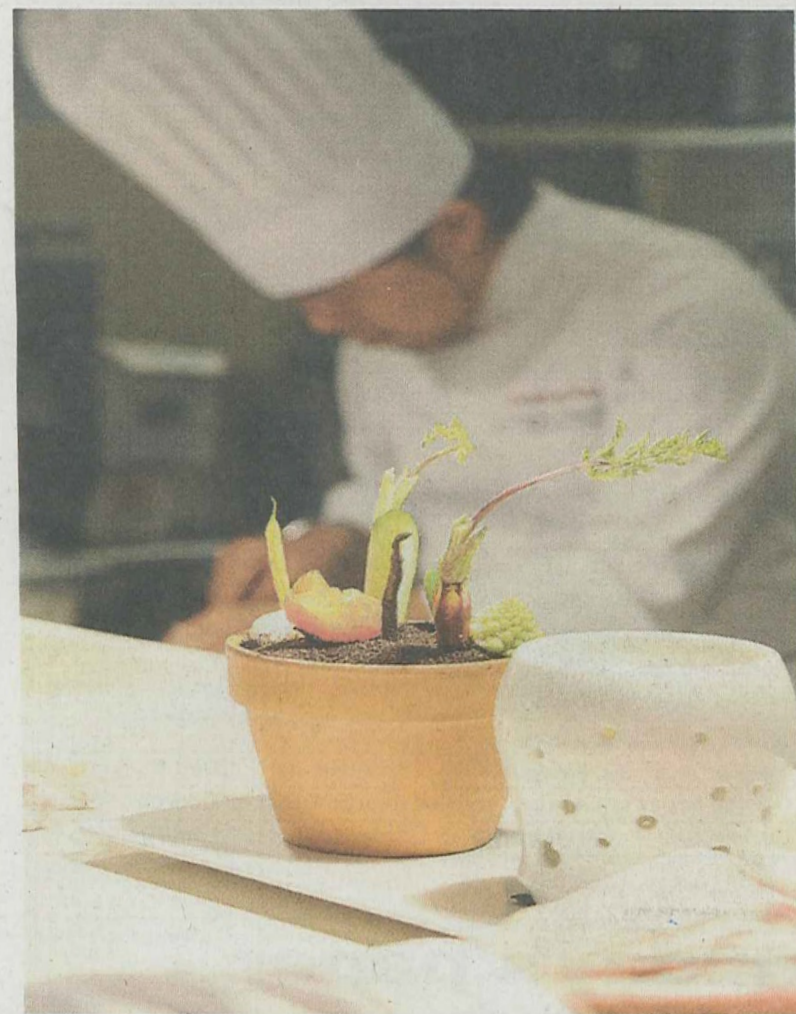
Hours: 11:30 to 2:30 p.m. and 5 to 10:30 p.m. daily.
Cost: A la carte lunch \$40 to \$50 for two without alcohol; five-course prix fixe dinner \$100, four courses \$85 (a la carte also available)

Ratings compare similar restaurants:
★★★★ - excellent
★★★ - very good; exceeds expectations;
★★ - average;
★ - below average.



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Executive chef Daisuke Hamamoto, left, prepares his version of a classic bagna cauda, a garden of carrots, potato, okra, tomato and greens “planted” in a clay pot and served with warm anchovy dip. Above, a lavender-scented slice of beef is served with arugula, tiny potatoes and petals of onion.



lobster bisque with brioche toast and claw meat.

The antipasti course comes next. Dishes perfect for summer are a slice of local papaya blanketed with sheets of Iberico ham; a carpaccio of Kona kampachi and ahi in an arrangement also featuring ogo and sea asparagus with lemon dressing; and for Instagrammers and Facebookers, crostacei di mare, another verdant arrangement comprising bits of abalone and amaebi, and greens drizzled with herb oil.

Pasta shows up in the primi course. The chef is most proud of the chitarra alla pescatora, the house-made, squid-ink pasta cut with an instrument reminiscent of the guitar, or “chitarra,” that gives it its name. The dish boasts lobster, scallops, shrimp and calamari, but the shellfish appears in such tiny dice that it’s hard to discern their flavor. Only the calamari, appearing at the top of the dish, gets fair representation.

More impressive were the house-made tagliolini in a pungent sea urchin and garlic-wine cream sauce, and wagyu beef bolognese over house-made pappardelle. Again, don’t expect too much beef.

Risotto or gnocchi of purple Okinawan sweet potato await those with gluten intolerance.

THE RESTAURANT shines with its secondi course of meats prepared sous-vide. Using this method, food is sealed in airtight plastic bags and cooked in a water bath, retaining all its juices and delivering remarkable flavor and tenderness. The meat will appear pink but is fully cooked. Two highlights are the lavender-infused Tajima beef served with arugula, petite potatoes and onion petals, and the Colorado lamb in a lamb stock reduction sauce with a slice of Okinawan sweet potato.

Those who find duck too gamey may appreciate the delicate cuts of Muscovy served here in a more autumnlike mix of golden- and earth-toned mushrooms and fried leeks in a roasted duckling stock reduction.

The dessert course has its challenges. There’s been a trend toward experimenting with savory rather than sweet flavors. I’m pretty open-minded about progressive food ideas, but this one tests expectations. I love chestnut and I love celery root, but a chestnut purée wrapped around celery custard seemed more like an appetizer, even when sweetened with yuzu honey sauce.

Then there’s tomato sorbet with sweet tomato compote. I wanted to try it, but a deconstructed tiramisú beckoned and did not disappoint. Some will take issue with the fact that it’s one-tenth the size of a typical slice of tiramisú. (Your waistline will thank you.)

For those who like the taste of citrus, a chocolate-pineapple mousse with citrus sorbet creates a refreshing finale. And chocolate lovers will rejoice with the glistening dark chocolate torte, topped with gold leaf and also finished with the bright citrus note of a kumquat compote.

Nadine Kam’s restaurant reviews are conducted anonymously and paid for by the Star-Advertiser. Reach her at nkam@staradvertiser.com.

the restaurant also accommodates those who want only so many carbs and calories with a la carte service also available at lunch and dinner.

Lunch offers a more casual experience with its roster of pizzas (\$18 to \$23), salads (\$15 to \$16) and pastas (\$19 to \$27). Many of the salads and pastas reappear in the evening, but there are no pizzas on the dinner menu.

So far, dinners have started with a charming amuse bouche of Kahuku sweet corn foam topped with prosciutto di Parma and corn kernels served in a miniature resealable jar, followed by the presentation of house-baked whole wheat bread, focaccia and cheese breadsticks with a slim stick of unsalted butter and black Molokai salt.

This is my downfall: the classic Piedmont bagna cauda that is among the salad and soup selections. The warm anchovy, garlic and olive oil dip with crudité is a staple at all the Arancino restaurants. Here the crudité is presented in a clay flowerpot as a garden planted with purple and orange carrots, potato, okra, tomato and other greens, ready for dipping. Not everyone cares for the briny taste of anchovies, but I can’t get enough of this, and when the vegetables are gone, I start dipping pieces of bread, which leaves me full before the other four courses arrive. For parents eager to get their children to eat their veggies, I’ve watched keiki devour their greens when presented this way.

If bagna cauda is too heavy for you, other selections include a caprese with mozzarella and Hamakua tomatoes; flame-grilled romaine Caesar with crisped prosciutto di parma and Parmigiano Reggiano; and light