

Talking Story with Executive Chef TYLUN PANG OF KO

By Michelle Winner

I'm sitting at Ko restaurant at the Fairmont Kea Lani, across from one of the most affable chefs I have ever met, enjoying his Maui plantation-inspired cuisine, and trying not to laugh at his quips with my mouth full. His friend at work "the Bumble Bee" (he gives the people he likes nicknames) is sitting to my left and my friend Dee, as of 10 minutes ago now "Miss Oregon", is seated to my right. She is impossibly and blissfully lost in her caramelized Plantation Pineapple Pudding Cake after inhaling an Ahi salad, so I am not sure she is listening as chef outlines that his vision for Ko (Hawaiian word for sugarcane), is to share with visitors what locals have been eating since the days the pineapple and sugar industries reigned supreme on Maui.

On the plantation, workers lived in company towns, bought a few supplies at the company store and lived in tiny company cottages. They saved every penny they could to better themselves and their children. They grew gardens and had a pig and a few chickens to supply most of their food. They grew extra vegetables and spices to trade or sell and this produce found its way into the cook pots of many families from other countries. This cross-cultural mix of flavor profiles is the basis of Maui's island cuisine, so for menu items, Chef had to look no further than his own treasured family recipes and those of his staff.

In addition to Ko, Pang has written a cookbook "[What Maui Likes To Eat](#)", a compendium of Ko's recipes he and staff have refined from the simple, frugal fare prepared in the kitchens and cook houses in the Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese, Puerto Rican, Filipino and Korean camps dotting Maui over a century ago. Chef Pang dubs this cuisine, "plantation fusion" and yes hungry Hawaii-expats, it's all here in the book; Teri-Miso Butterfish, Sweet-Sour Spare Ribs, Chow Fun, Gon Lo Mein, Portuguese Bean [Soup](#), Lumpia and some down-home Hawaiian recipes like Chopsteak too. He donates all of the proceeds to the Maui Culinary Academy.

As a descendant of a plantation worker, I can tell you that all of the succulent dishes at Ko remain true to their origins but are presented in delightful ways that actually enhance your enjoyment of them. "Ahi on the Rock" is the perfect example of this. Chef presents the guest with a hot rock (Japanese ishiyaki stone) nested in red Hawaiian salt. Then Ahi cubes are provided and the guest "cooks" on the hot stone and then dips into a decidedly local- flavored orange ginger miso sauce to complement the island fish. Chef has partnered with local farmers and fishermen for many years to support them and to present the freshest ingredients on his Ko menu. In the restaurant and in his cookbook he plays cool, very Maui rifts on [French](#) staples like onion [soup](#) in his Sweet Kula Onion Soup. ■



Simple,
sublime,
dessert
at Ko.

Photo courtesy of Fairmont Kea Lani.

CHEF TYLUN PANG

