

Yes, there is ahi in North Africa.

The Gathering Place



Dinner destination: Solana's dining room

JOLYN OKIMOTO

A friend had sent me a menu from a restaurant she'd discovered in Kailua, a place called Solana. Of the several Mediterranean-influenced dishes on the menu, one in particular caught my eye: North African Style Seared Ahi. "Didn't know they have ahi in Africa," I thought, momentarily forgetting that ahi (a.k.a. tuna) truly is the chicken of the sea. Despite my interest in the restaurant, the Windward side seemed far away, and I put off my visit.

Eventually putting my "townie" excuses aside, I persuaded my friend to make the trip with me.

The primarily glass structure of Solana reminded me of a greenhouse, but instead of plants, the building was filled with people. Appropriately, *solana* means "warm gathering place" in Spanish. The conversation and laughter of the diners and servers, together with cooking sounds from the open kitchen, create a lively, spirited atmosphere. Add to that some jazz, and you have what some might call noise. Others, like Solana's manager Kris Chatterjee, would call it excitement. He's got a point. The place was hopping.

Our server assisted us with the menu. I appreciated his warm smile and friendly personality; moreover, he was poised and knowledgeable. But I'd long made up my mind: North African Style Seared Ahi with White Bean and Artichoke Salad drizzled with Tapenade and Twin Pestos (\$9.25). The prospect of a new kind of seared ahi intrigued me.

I wasn't disappointed. The plate was a palette of green (basil) and red (sun-dried tomato) pesto, with slices of ahi neatly arranged around a mound of white navy beans and artichoke hearts. Although I savored the ahi's smoky flavor, my favorite part of the dish was the firm and subtly flavored white beans.

This particular appetizer is a good example of the creativity that Executive Chef David Millen brings to the menu at Solana. Millen's résumé includes formal training at the Culinary Institute of America, years of experience as a chef for Pacific Rim cuisine guru Roy Yamaguchi and a year of living and cooking in the Mediterranean. Chef Millen's varied background — and his search for something "different" — is showcased in such creations as Solana's North African Seared Ahi. In the words of Chatterjee, Solana serves up a "fusion of Mediterranean regional cuisine" or, more abstractly, "cuisine of the sun."

My friend had already chosen my first-choice entree — Seared Salmon Fettuccine with Baby Artichokes, Grilled Red Onions and Zucchini (\$13.75) — so I asked for Millen's recommendation. His reply was twofold: Moroccan Style Osso Bucco (\$17.50) or his personal favorite, Tuscan Style Roasted Chicken with Garlic Mashed Potatoes and Roasted Peppers (\$16.25). I chose the Osso Bucco, a veal shank, slow-cooked in spices.

My entree was delivered with a steak knife which Millen didn't think I'd need. He was right: A fork was sufficient for the tender veal. The sweet, brown sauce was an intrigu-

ing blend of unexpected spices — cinnamon, coriander, cumin, fennel, ginger, paprika and cayenne pepper — mixed with golden raisins and kalamata olives. The vegetable couscous served with the Osso Bucco provided balance to the meal. Comparatively bland, the couscous was an ideal complement to the sauce.

I was almost too caught up in my own meal to sample the Salmon Fettuccine across the table. Fortunately, I was able to collect a forkful of pasta and a piece of salmon before the plate was wiped clean. Both were good, but I preferred my own choice. On another visit I'd like to try the Grilled Vegetable Plate (\$11.50), a combination of red onion, shiitake mushrooms, yellow squash and grilled zucchini, served with basmati rice.

We split the Chocolate Soufflé Cake, one of several featured desserts (prices vary). The dark, rich cake was accompanied by vanilla gelato and raspberry coulis. I ate quickly for two reasons: The warm cake was melting the gelato, and I didn't want to share. The petite portion, although aesthetically pleasing, makes sharing a challenge — especially when it tastes so good.

People-watching seems natural at Solana; maybe the glass walls encourage it. What I observed (or possibly what made me observe) was that the people seemed happy — happy to dine there, happy to work there. Restaurant partner Tom Bell says "having fun" is one of the main objectives at Solana; it seems this new restaurant is on the right track.

While Bell calls Solana a "neighborhood restaurant," it has the makings of a "destination": distinctive, high-quality food and good service in a unique location. As one might expect, Solana is a bit pricey. But all things considered, it's worth it. As far as I'm concerned, Kailua just got closer.

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