

Solana bright new star on the scene

BY JOHN McDERMOTT

HERE & THERE

When you get Kāhala and Waialae residents like John Brogan and Philip Ching to make a trip over the Palu to a small Kailua restaurant for dinner, something must be going on.

Most urban Honoluluans go to the Neighbor Islands more often than they go to Kailua.

Even then they think they have to have a passport and a visa. So the trek to the Solana Restaurant, which only opened in January, merited an examination.

On an early Wednesday afternoon, we telephoned 263-1227 for a reservation for a 7:30 table. It was sold out. "We can take you at eight," said Tom Bell, the restaurant's manager.

After getting lost in Kailua — now that takes skill — we found Solana at 30 Aulike St., which is just off Kuulei Road, the main street that goes through Kailua town to the beach. (First turn to the left after McDonald's.)

From the outside, the restaurant looks like a hothouse or a solarium with a large curved glass roof and siding.

Inside, the bistro is small, perhaps seating 40 diners, with

a petite bar and a minuscule open kitchen, à la Roy's, which is mandatory styling in new Hawaii restaurants today.

There is a lot of Roy's in Solana. The chef and a partner in Solana's is David Millen who worked for Roy's in his first restaurant in Los Angeles and again with Roy's in the Waikiki Beach Hotel's bistro.

Don Maruyama is the sous chef who worked for Roy's in Hawaii Kai.

Kirsten Throneberry, a strikingly attractive waitress, is also a Roy's alumnus.

Solana's also brought along Roy's noise factor.

The staff and ownership come to the new restaurant with a plate full of educational credentials. Tom Bell, the son of landscape architect Jim Bell, is a graduate of Cornell.

David Millen is a graduate of UCLA. He decided he didn't want to be a lawyer and went to Culinary Institute of America in New York, the country's most prestigious cooking school.

His heavyweight experience included a stint in France where he worked in Roger



Verge's La Moulin de Mougins in the hills above Nice and the three-star Cote d'Or under Bernard L'Oiseau in Saulieu, Burgundy.

"At Mougins, on my days off, I used to go down into Nice and try the ethnic restaurants, including Vietnamese and African. Occasionally, I would get hungry for Italian food and drive on the super highway across the border into Italy and stuff myself on pasta and veal."

Don Maruyama Jr. is the son of Dr. Don Maruyama, the respected orthopedic surgeon. Don, Jr. did two years of premed at the John Burns School of Medicine and then threw it all in and went to the Kapiolani Community College culinary school. He turned down his father's offer to sponsor him for two years at the Culinary Institute in New York.

A third, silent, partner is Cory Beall, the son of developer Alan Beall, who has shown he has his father's talent for smelling out a winning situation.

The menu is reflective of Chef David's experience. There is a little bit of Pacific Rim mixed in with North African mixed in with Italian.

I had the soup of the day, which was delicious, a salad of

the day and crab cakes. Perfect.

"Didn't you have the escargot on soft polenta with mushrooms?" asked Philip Ching when I reported our experience. "Ah, you missed the best dish on the menu."

The Lady Navigator had the mixed-greens salad with candied peppered walnuts, gorgonzola and pear in a balsamic walnut oil vinaigrette and a grilled vegetable plate, which she reported to be superb.

"You should have tried the Moroccan-styled osso bucco with vegetable couscous and kalamata olives and blonde raisins," chided John Brogan. "A winner."

We skipped desserts although the menu begged us to save room.

"We do our own desserts like espresso marscapone and chocolate soufflé cake," said David. "They are four-fork desserts and very popular."

The wine list is modestly priced.

Two unusual wines were a Coltibuono Chianti from a Tuscany villa belonging to the last of the Medici's (\$24) and a light chardonnay from France, Kermit Lynch (\$24.50).

Solana is already hot. The word is out. You do need reservations. And, if you are from Honolulu, a visa-stamped passport.