

MAI-KAI FACTS

In the 1950s, two young Stanford University graduates from the Chicago area, brothers Bob and Jack Thornton, decided to build a Polynesian-themed restaurant in a near-barren rural section of Fort Lauderdale. As travel magazine publisher and author Jean Emond points out “Where the Mai-Kai now stands was a dusty, two-lane unpaved road embraced by a cow pasture to the west.” Emond, an old friend of Bob Thornton and his family, says, “It’s bizarre when you think about it: trying to bring the South Pacific to Fort Lauderdale.” With \$100,000 of their own and their parents’ money — plus a reluctantly granted bank loan — the brothers managed to open the Mai-Kai in December 1956 in the sleepy but growing tourist town.

The main visionary behind the restaurant, Bob Thornton, then 25, had always wanted to enter the restaurant field and ended up living out a fantasy of postwar American success. A tall, dashing bachelor surrounded by gorgeous women until he settled down with just one, Mireille, he traveled to the South Seas islands to discover Polynesian culture and artifacts, palled around with celebrities in exuberant nights of hard partying and ran a multimillion-dollar business. Yet he also treated his employees generously, offering profit-sharing, health benefits and sometimes providing the down payments for their homes or paying for their kids’ college educations. Angel Vega, who started as a busboy in 1963 and is now the maitre d’, says, “He was great to work with and very fair.”

“He was very warm, so kind and giving, and he was always there for someone in trouble,” adds his widow, still at 65 an ageless, dark-haired beauty with the infectious, high-spirited charm of her younger days.

Bob Thornton also had a penchant for hard work, disciplined management and daring business acumen. His interest in the South Pacific was initially spurred by the Polynesian restaurants he saw growing up in suburban Chicago and later while attending Stanford University in California. The Polynesian islands held a special allure for him, as he told Emond in 1974: “These islands represent natural grace to me. ... I get much of my inspiration from the carefree welcoming spirit of these people.” The brothers chose Fort Lauderdale as the site for their Polynesian dream after they visited the city during leave from an Army camp, attracted by the pleasant area and the niche they could fill.

As Bob Thornton told *The Miami Herald* in 1974, “The region generally was on the move, and Fort Lauderdale had no specialty restaurants outside of steak houses.” After leaving the service, the brothers trained at bars pouring drinks and toured all the leading Polynesian restaurants in the country, including Hawaii.

Despite such opening-night snafus as in-house telephone order lines that went dead, the restaurant turned into a booming success. Starting as a four-room restaurant with a small bar, it grossed \$1 million in its first year, a huge sum in that era for a new specialty restaurant. Over the years, it grew in size and scope, adding new gardens, rooms and a gift shop, with a major expansion launched in 1969 that increased seating from 225 to 600.

In the restaurant’s earliest years, it didn’t have the Polynesian revue that has made it a continuing tourist attraction, complete with hip-swinging South Pacific lovelies and flame-twirling dancers. Mireille Thornton became the guiding spirit, costume designer and

choreographer of the Islanders Revue, a role she still holds today. But she almost didn't make the cut after she first came to the Mai-Kai on New Year's Eve 1960 after being recruited by a friend of Thornton's while staying in California.

She was invited to join the troupe being assembled in early 1961, but after the first week of rehearsal, she was called in to Thornton's office and told she was being fired because she couldn't dance — and was too fat. She burst into tears and pleaded for a two-week reprieve. She underwent a grueling choreographic regimen directed by a professional Polynesian dancer, and to lose weight, "I wrapped myself in plastic dry-cleaner bags and would lie in the sun sweating," she says. She lost 35 pounds.

Two weeks later, Thornton evaluated her performance, and his jaw dropped in astonishment at her improvement. After being promoted to chief choreographer and costume designer in 1962, she visited the islands regularly to ensure the authenticity of dances and costumes, including the genuine grass skirts made from the bark of hibiscus trees. Romantic sparks would eventually fly between the boss and the dancer. They started dating in 1965 and got married in 1971, honeymooning in Tahiti. Thornton and his flower-draped bride rowed across a lagoon in a two-seat outrigger canoe to her home village; that same canoe now hangs from the ceiling in the Moorea room. They had a ready-made family: By 1963, her two children from her first marriage, David and Kulani, had already moved here from Tahiti, and both became her partners in the enterprise after Thornton's death in 1989. (He had bought out his brother in 1970.)

Bob Thornton's flair set the tone for a restaurant that became so popular in the '60s and '70s that crowds eventually began lining up outside at 5 p.m. for the early dinner show. Sometimes, the lines were so long they snaked down Federal Highway. "This was the 'in' place to be," Emond recalls.

The crowds waiting outside were given free Derby Daiquiris, a frosty orange concoction, so by the time they finally got a table, "They were in a pretty good mood and didn't mind where they were seated," manager Mattei says. For instance, even while maintaining attentive service, the place was so jam-packed that during the busiest nights, tables were placed on the stage between shows, and a few diners were even seated at emergency tables in a corridor nicknamed "I-95" because of the waiters whizzing past them to the kitchen.

But it was more than just crowds that made the nights sparkle at the Mai-Kai. "Every night was almost like New Year's Eve," Mireille Thornton says. On weekends especially, the customers dressed to kill: women in their fanciest dresses and jewelry, men in their best suits and ties. After 8 p.m., on nights when the shows started later, Mireille and other dancers swept in one by one to the dining room in their own stylish dresses, creating a stir among the customers and pleas to join them at their tables. The dancers were the stars of the Mai-Kai, and, she says, "We loved it."

As the evening wore on, in those days before worries about drunken driving and health effects took hold, customers became loud and ebullient, even rowdy, as they imbibed the rum potions originally created by Bob Thornton. Some downed as many as five sweet but powerful Rum Barrels each, laced with four shots of rum in every drink. After the shows were over, "They wanted to talk to you and touch you," she says, and the dancers visited the customers who called out to them. Or Mireille and a few musicians led the revelers out of the Molokai bar in a conga line snaking throughout the restaurant. The festive nights often continued after the restaurant closed at 4 a.m., and Mireille, other dancers and staff,

and Bob Thornton and friends kept the party going at the late-night club Porky's up the road. Talking about it all now, she claps her hands together and suddenly bursts out, "It was great!"

With all the glamour, exotic drinks and, of course, beautiful women, the Mai-Kai became a magnet for celebrities. Some, such as Johnny Carson, were regular visitors and after-hours friends of Bob and Mireille Thornton's. Carson and a few buddies — including Ed McMahon, who usually left around midnight — were especially fond of the fabled Mystery Drink ritual. When they ordered the drink, a gong was struck, and a sinuous Polynesian maiden silently delivered a huge, flaming bowl packed with 13 shots of rum while undulating before the lucky customer, placing a lei around his neck, then kissing him on the cheek before gliding away. Carson was so taken with the sensuous presentation he even featured a Mai-Kai Mystery Girl on *The Tonight Show*. The Mai-Kai continues to perform the Mystery Drink ritual to this day.