

MAI-KAI ANNIVERSARY

Mai-Kai is a Pacific oasis on the Atlantic

The Mai-Kai restaurant has maintained its intimate island atmosphere for 50 years, even as urban development threatened to swallow it.

BY ANI MARTINEZ

armartinez@MiamiHerald.com

The signature tropical atmosphere highlighted by bamboo furniture, streaming waterfalls, tantalizing dishes and Polynesian shows has stood up well to Father Time.

The wooden-plank bridge still leads to a thatched-roof building filled with South Pacific art and artifacts. Sarong-clad maidens and agile warriors still transport diners to a world apart from the daily grind.

Yet as the Mai-Kai Restaurant in Oakland Park sits poised to celebrate 50 years on Dec. 28, looming development and the rising hustle and bustle of traffic on North Federal Highway have begun to compete with that intimate island feel.

"You used to be able to look up at the dark sky, and now you see the top of the City Furniture," said general manager Kern Mattei, referring to a large, white furniture store rising next to the restaurant's exotic garden. "We used to be the landmark on U.S. 1, but not anymore."

Despite these aesthetic challenges, the Polynesian restaurant resembling an elaborate tiki bar has preserved as much flame-throwing, ukulele playing and hips gyrating as ever.

Its intimate ambience and unique island culture have stood the test of time, and even grown -- albeit surrounded by a metropolis that has grown even more.

"It's my religion," said Mark Chatham, 47, a Mai-Kai regular. "It's a getaway. I walk through the door and my blood pressure drops 10 points."

Chatham has celebrated his anniversary every year at the Mai-Kai since 1982. He also comes every Wednesday for an appetizer and a rum barrel drink.

"It's the last of its kind for a dying breed," he said. "A world without the Mai-Kai is a world I don't want to live in."

The Mai-Kai, which means "the best" in Hawaiian, aspires to keep tradition alive by keeping many things the same.

The potent and refreshing drinks, made with an assortment of rums, are permanent staples for diners. The eight different flavors of homemade secret syrups are only known by the mixologists, who are the only ones to mix the drinks. Bartenders serve, but don't mix.

TROPICAL DRINKS

"Not much has changed. Some of these drinks have been around since the beginning," said Troy Gallant, a mixologist at the Mai-Kai for 20 years. "The fresh-squeezed juices and homemade syrups give the drinks the truest tropical taste."

The menu has incorporated traditional flavors with gourmet trends.

Chinese ovens indirectly smoke steak, ribs and duck at 600 degrees.

Asian cooks operate the Cantonese and Mandarin wok stations, where the stir fry is skillfully prepared.

When the restaurant opened in December 1956, it only had four rooms, a small bar, woks and fryers, and served pupu platters. It stood alone on what was then the outskirts of Fort Lauderdale.

Though the restaurant's culture has stayed the same, much has changed since it opened.

The Molokai Bar -- with its South Seas seaport look -- was added in 1970, staffed by scantily clad female bartenders.

A fusion of French and Polynesian plates was added to the menu in the late 1990s, and a sushi bar was introduced in 2005 during happy hour to accommodate the Japanese craze.

"The basis of our business is the local people in the community," Mattei said. "We want to keep them excited about coming."

Drawn to Fort Lauderdale for spring break in the 1950s, brothers Bob and Jack Thornton, Stanford University graduates, created a Polynesian-style restaurant in what was then a largely undeveloped area.

TRADER VIC'S

The brothers' interest in Polynesian culture and food was sparked by frequent visits to Trader Vic's, a Polynesian chain restaurant, when the boys were youngsters in Chicago.

They opened the Mai-Kai with room for 150 seats. It was a hit its first year.

A few years later, Jack Thornton left his brother in charge of the restaurant. He ran it until his death in 1989.

Today, the late Bob Thornton's wife, Tahitian-born Mireille Thornton, owns the restaurant.

SEATING FOR 716

Now, it boasts 716 seats, award-winning Asian cuisine, and rooms named for the islands of Polynesia.

The Polynesian decor complements an outside dining area overlooking the garden and tiki statues by Barney West.

Angel Vega, 68, the maitre d', has been at the Mai-Kai for 43 years. He started as a bus boy and slowly worked his way up. As customers enter, Vega, dressed in a powder blue sports coat and white from shoes to suspenders, greets everyone with a smile.

"Even though the owners passed, we really don't have too many changes," Vega said. ``Last year, when Hurricane Wilma came through here, we were pretty slow, but no one was let go. We really stuck together and were like a family."