

*An early illustration by James Russell Bingham, who was often published in the Saturday Evening Post, showed the Mai Kai upon completion with its original open "garden" dining pavilion. Illustration Courtesy of Tim "Swanky" Glazner*

## 7 LAUDERDALE LEGENDS REDISCOVERED | #4 Mai Kai

Text Nina Korman

There is – and there has always been – only one Mai-Kai. Emerging from a desolate Fort Lauderdale field on Federal Highway, the inimitable restaurant debuted in December of 1956, the creation of brothers Bob and Jack Thornton, natives of the chilly Chicago suburbs. Like many eateries of its kind in the 1950s, the Mai-Kai was a result of America's post-World War II fascination with the South Pacific. Returning soldiers hoping to re-live happy memories produced an artificial Polynesia that far surpassed their experience and for a brief moment delighted the entire world.

Designed by Fort Lauderdale architect Charles McKirahan, the original Mai-Kai was a modest four-room, A-frame structure topped by a thatched and screened-in roof. Increasing popularity soon warranted an expansion to the eight-room wonder it is today, complete with extensive gardens and a powerful waterfall. Inside, beyond the heavy wood doors is an otherworldly realm so dim it takes a few moments for eyes to adjust. But once they do, the authentically artificial Polynesia that appears is impeccable down to every detail, the handiwork of art directors (Florian Gabriel and George Nakashima) and décor such as vintage velvet paintings in the style of Edgar Leeteg and carved cannibal statues from the famed Oceanic Arts of California.

Adding to the "authenticity" is the Molokai bar, which emulates the interior of a ship. Columns stand in for masts. Nets and blowfish lamps hang from the thatched ceiling. Water cascades gently over the windows. In the main dining room, a myriad of lanterns suspended from the soaring ceiling cast a soft glow over the full-length floor show featuring curvy maidens and flying fire batons.

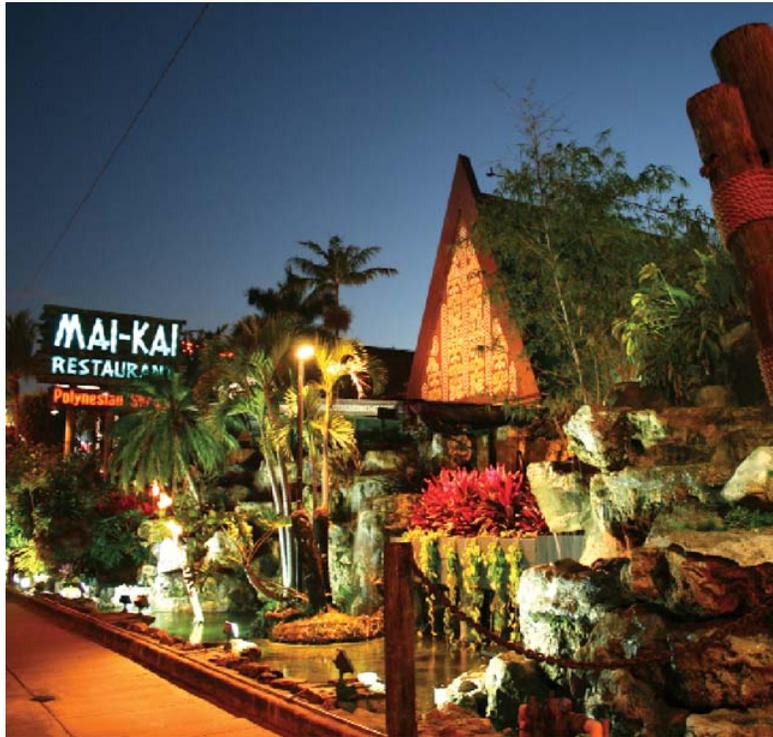
The Mai-Kai is family-run still with Dave Levy, the son of Bob Thornton's widow, Mireille (a former floor show dancer and now choreographer), at the helm. The family also extends to the 200 loyal employees, many of whom have worked there more than a quarter of a century, rising from junior positions into management jobs. Ask a long-time maître d' about the famous figures that have frequented the restaurant over the years and names such as Liberace, Johnny Carson, and Joe Namath come up.

These days a subculture of Aloha-wearing tikiophiles worships at the altar of the Mai-Kai. For nearly 10 years, they have come from various parts of the globe to the annual event known as the Hukilau, where they celebrate all things Polynesian Pop and pay tribute to the mighty Mai-Kai. And it is a place worthy of reverence, for in 2005 after the dual assault of Hurricanes Katrina and Wilma, the Mai-Kai sustained severe damage. Some thought it might be lost completely. But slow, careful renovations ensued thanks to Garth Wight of Safari Thatch, who traveled to far-flung places like Vietnam and the Philippines to obtain rattan of the very same diameter used in the original décor. "We tried to be true to what the feel and spirit of the Mai-Kai was in 1956," says Wight. One look at the refreshed restaurant and it's clear they succeeded.

In the mid-1950s, it seemed everyone wanted an exotic escape to the South Pacific, and the tiki craze took off. A truly international phenomenon was spawned and chain hotels capitalized on it, opening their own restaurants. Hilton had Trader Vic's, Marriott had the Kona Kai, and Sheraton had Kon-Tiki. A slew of independent restaurants cropped up as well: Columbus, Ohio's Kahiki; New York's Hawaii Kai; San Mateo's Lanai. Few, if any, remain except the exceptional Mai-Kai.

JOH  
JOC

HILA  
HLE



To this day, the entry to Mai Kai is exotic, with flaming torches, carved tiki statues and tropical plantings. Entry is still made crossing over a creaky wooden bridge. Photo: Sven Kirsten



Mai Kai has been famous for its Polynesian Islander shows since the early 1960s. Photo: Florida State Archives

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