

Send to printer Close window

The Call of the Mai-Kai: Tales from South Florida's South Pacific

Mai-Kai brings the lure of the South Pacific to the South of Florida.

BY GEORGETTE MOGER



I wish I could tell you about the Mai-Kai and the way it actually was. The Tahitian dancers in their hibiscus tree grass skirts, swaying seductively on a torch-lit stage; the air perfumed by frangipani as you descended a wood bridge to the lanai; the pulpy bursts of grapefruit in a perfectly chilled Mara Amu, swirling with dark and golden rums. Since 1956, the Mai-Kai has been bringing the lure of the South Pacific to the South of Florida in a hidden, A-frame oasis off the very un-tropical Federal Highway US 1. Entering feels like nothing short of paradise found as each of its quiet, cavernous dining rooms transport you to a different region of Polynesia. Ominous carved tiki poles shoot straight through the thatched ceiling. Native artifacts hand-carried from New Guinea, Hawaii and Tonga line every wall. And of course, you need not ask: That is an actual shrunken head in the display case of the Samoa room.

Housing the longest running Polynesian dance revue in the United States, each night the Mai-Kai's diners and imbibers witness an on-stage diorama of island life that pulsates with drums and romantic island songs. To call it merely a supper club would be doing it a great disservice. Before the nightly performances, the Mai-Kai gushes with a steady flow of patrons pouring into the tropical gardens, marveling at the Barney West tiki sculptures, dreamily slipping past waterfalls, sipping barrels of rum and coconuts filled with hibiscus-scented concoctions. Having boasted one of the brightest stars of mid-century mixology, **Mariano Licudine** (pronounced, liquid-ini), the Mai-Kai still serves up his frothy, original creations. Earning his stripes in the 1930's working as Laurel and Hardy's personal bartender, Mariano spent 16 years as the number 2 bartender at Chicago's roaringly popular **Donn The Beachcomber's**, before being poached by the **Mai-Kai**. Armed with his own top secret book of recipes, it wasn't long before a sea of celebrities and curious tourists from all over the world were piling through Mai-Kai's doors, thirsty for Mariano's compelling cocktails. Demands were so high, that soon he was sending his young son to jump in to help. Anything but a green 17-year-old, **Ronald Licudine** acted as Mariano's right hand man, quickly memorizing recipes and absorbing the fast-paced world of mixology. Along the way, he naturally picked up a few of his father's own philosophies; "Daddy once told me that people who drink scotch have bad tempers; People who drink gin are cheap; People who drink rum are just happy."

That certainly explains much of the giddiness snaking through the corridors of the Mai-Kai, where the rum has always flowed freely. Soon after serving its first Derby Daiquiri, the Mai-Kai became the largest independent user of rum in the U.S. In one year, they had gone through over 2,000 cases of Puerto Rican rum alone. Taking notice of Mariano's cult-like following, the higher-ups at Rums of Puerto Rico began sending him on cocktail seminars for luxury resorts in Cuba and Puerto Rico. As "professor" to some of the most promising pourers in the biz, Mariano's classes at the Caribe Hilton sometimes included **Monchito Pérez**, inventor of the Piña Colada, and bar manager **Joe Scialom**, who is responsible for every early inception of the Suffering Bastard cocktail, and who easily goes down as the most notorious bartender in the world.

The Mai-Kai had the perfect recipe for success. The year-round subtropical climate, proximity to south Florida's seashores, a glamorous Polynesian palace, a luau menu boasting of so much more than Hawaiian kitsch, and of course, Mariano and his quixotic cocktails. In the late 1960's, **Johnny Carson** and **Ed McMahon** became frequent patrons, sometimes staying until the wee hours of the morning. As the clarion bong of a head-turning gong was sounded by one of the Mai-Kai's Mystery Girls, Carson was presented with a flaming bowl brimming with 13 shots of rum. As The Mystery Girl provocatively placed the woozy juice before him, she adorned his neck with an orchid lei. She left Carson in a sanguine haze with a kiss on the cheek and exited with a sinewy sway of her grass-skirted hips. Carson was so blown away by the enchanting ritual of The Mystery Drink that he decided to feature a Mai-Kai Mystery Girl as a regular addition to The Tonight Show.

While the chance encounter with a celebrity such as Carson, **Jackie Gleason**, **Joe Di Maggio**, **Liberace** or **Johnny Weissmuller** added to the glitz and glamour of the Mai-Kai, the star who always stole the show was Mariano. He shook, swizzled and stirred until 1980, passing away one year after his retirement. Each of Mariano's signature cocktails remains a fixture at the Mai-Kai, frozen like citric time capsules and served exactly as they were from the very beginning.

The welcoming spirit of the Mai-Kai, so unfettered by changing times, makes it the perfect backdrop for the annual **Hukilau**, the most intimate tiki gathering in the world. For tikiophiles who share a level fandom that borders on Trekkie fervor, this four-day festival brings with it antique dealers from the Pacific to the Atlantic vending vintage furniture, retro frocks and tiki collectibles. The beachfront hotels act as classrooms for presentations from noted mixologists and instant cinemas for documentary filmmakers premiering reels from the past and present. Over the years, Christie White, the co-founder of Hukilau, has brought in such varied acts as 1950's voodoo-lounge composer **Robert Drasnin**, **Billy Mure**, **The Stolen Idols**, **The Sweet Hawaiians**, and as any dedicated



Hukilau attendee will tell you, "one very memorable appearance by **Yma Sumac** in 2005." Christie views the festival as her idea of paradise. "The excitement surrounding Hukilau breathed new life into the Mai-Kai. Those who worked there as servers, dancers and hosts, truly felt a reinvigorated love for their jobs."

By 4 p.m., the lobby of the former Yankee clipper is a dizzying swirl of 1960's Hawaiian button-downs and vintage Lily Pulitzer mini dresses, ready to embark as a caravan to the Mai-Kai. The Hukilau is celebrating its tenth year in June 2011, just as the Mai-Kai turns 55 and Ft. Lauderdale turns 100. To further commemorate the confounding coincidence of the triple anniversary, Christie is curating, "A View of the South Pacific," an extensive collection of Oceanic art presented with the Museum of Art|Ft. Lauderdale.

The Mai-Kai is located at 3599 North Federal Highway in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. It is open daily at 5:00 p.m. with nightly dinner shows.

Hukilau 2011 runs from June 9-12.

For tickets visit: <http://www.thehukilau.com/2011>

Where to stay: Sheraton Fort Lauderdale Beach Hotel, located at 1140 Seabreeze Boulevard in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Formerly The Sheraton Yankee Clipper, this airy hotel overlooks the Atlantic, offering seasonal specials and boasts the famous Wreck Bar that features a weekend mermaid show through its maritime windows.

Throw a tikitastic Hukilau of your own with Mariano Licudine's original drink recipes and this how-to on making fresh orchid lei, both provided exclusively by the Mai-Kai.

The Derby Daiquiri

1 ounce fresh orange juice

½ ounce fresh lime juice

½ ounce sugar syrup

1 ½ ounces white Puerto Rican rum

A handful of ice

Put everything into a blender and mix at high speed for 15 seconds. Pour into a cocktail glass.

Mara Amu

½ oz. fresh squeezed lime juice

¾ oz. fresh squeezed grapefruit juice

¾ oz. fresh squeezed orange juice

¾ oz. Passion Fruit Syrup

½ oz. Bacardi Light Rum

½ oz. Meyers Dark Rum

½ oz. Ron Botran Anejo Rum

Crushed Ice

Put ingredients into a shaker with ice. Shake vigorously until shaker frosts. Pour into a tiki glass and garnish with pineapple and lime wedge.

Demerara Cocktail

1 ounce fresh lime juice

½ ounce passion fruit juice (not syrup)

1 teaspoon sugar syrup

2 ounces Lemon Hart Demerara rum

1 ounce golden Puerto Rican rum

Shake well over ice. Strain into a cocktail or a specialty glass.

To learn how to make a fresh orchid lei, visit: www.maikai.com/experience/extras/how-to-videos