

CHEF'S TABLE

with Alan Wong

ALYSA LIU WINS OLYMPIC GOLD WITH NEWFOUND ATTITUDE

STORY AND PHOTOS BY // ALAN WONG

You must be wondering about title of this article. I love the Olympics and what it represents, the stories behind each athlete's life leading up to the Olympic moments. If you watched Alysa Liu, she repeatedly talked about retiring from skating and then getting that desire back, and skating with no expectations, a carefree, have fun approach. I cannot skate for beans, but this I am viewing my newest journey with the Kahala Hotel & Resort with a similar mindset.

I no longer feel like I have to do what I was driven to do in the past. I stay in my lane and give my best effort every day. Whatever happens will happen.

We began this journey a while ago. It's been filled with new lessons, mistakes, successes, inspirations and redos. That's part of the learning process. I am enjoying reconnecting with old friends, farmers and people that were in my life when my previous restaurant was open. Relationships are very important to me. Trust we is the basis of a long-term relationship.

We will serve the fruits and vegetables from our land and

the fish from our oceans. I view farm-raised fish, like tilapia and kampachi, as alternative fish that I can put on the menu. They are produced in Hawaii and do not rely 100% on the ocean, which helps us avoid overfishing.

I promote tilapia grown by Ron Weidenbach, not only because it tastes great, but because it's a fish that comes with a stigma in Hawaii. Everyone "heard" it was bad tasting even without tasting it. I promise it doesn't come from the Ala Wai. It's very clean tasting and has no smell.

I have reconnected with David Wong of Mountain View Farms out in Waianae. He not only raises pigs on a vegetarian diet but is growing biodynamic vegetables and lettuces. And, they taste great! Supporting local farmers, growers and producers is important to me because we are slowly losing the battle against imported food. It's at more than 90% now, and was 80% in 1999!

Miya Nakashima is in a new role now. She was formerly chef de cuisine. Her son, Toshi, is now playing Little League Baseball and she juggles family time with being the pastry chef. She is tasked with duplicating classic desserts. She has done that well and already has a lineup desserts when the team is ready. Her personal style comes through when she works on something new.

Spencer Yamanaka continues to surprise and impress me as the chef de cuisine. He is

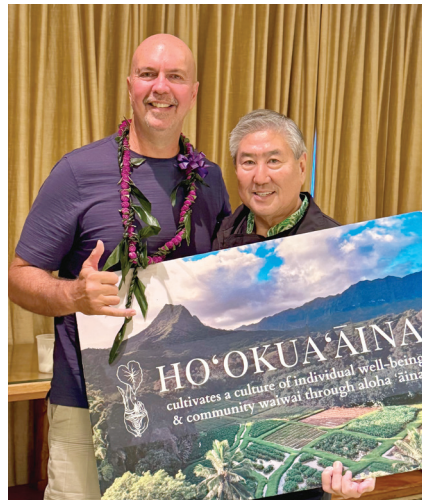
dedicated to the craft of cooking and is learning fast. His immediate task was to learn the classics. He's done that nicely and now he will teach it to the cooks. Today, a good chef has to be a good teacher and communicator, as well as be accountable for the results.

The last five weeks we have been in the kitchen doing the recipe and menu development together. It was an Olympian task to get the recipes done to the grams, recorded and costed out.

The chef team, along with Leigh Ito and Emily Cho, painstakingly got the recipes done. Next week is for the cooks to gain confidence through repetition so that the following week they begin cooking for the waitstaff. This is the process we go through to get cooks cooking for guests confidently, consistently and up to the standard. Happy cooks make happy food.

Mark Shisido as the general manager is doing great. I don't know how he is juggling all that he has to do, but his demeanor is always pleasant and professional. He and assistant Dustin Mang are trying to provide the service style you are accustomed to. Ito continues to support us all in the many ways she does.

The hotel staff has been great too. They include chief steward Won Bae, director of purchasing Tyler Eastburn, executive chef of the Kahala Joseph Almoguera, food and beverage director Christina



(Left) Dean Wilhelm of Hookuaaina
(Right) Four ways to eat marungay. David Wong from Mountain View Farms brought some for us.



Maffei and Gary Fuchigami at the valet desk. Gary acknowledges all the heavy things I carry to the restaurant every morning. A steward named Rainbow has an infectious smile and works so hard. Everyone has been so supportive, helpful and welcoming.

Dean Wilhelm came by to do a poi-pounding demonstration and talk about Hookuaaina, his nonprofit farm employing challenged youth. He shared an amazing personal story about his mom and his dad, Max Wilhelm, who was the opening executive chef of the Kahala Hilton in 1964. He later got asked to be the food and beverage director and his one condition was that they hire his good friend, executive chef Martin Wyss. Wyss spent many years at the Kahala and later opened the Swiss Inn with his wife, Jeanne, who ran the front of the house. It was with

great sadness that I heard Wyss had passed away. Rest in peace chef, you are a culinary legend in Hawaii and made many people happy with your food and impeccable character. You were a chef's chef.

Chef Wilhelm married a girl from Nanakuli who was a hostess at the Kahala Hotel and later gave birth to Dean. We will be serving the kalo poi that Dean grows on his farm. It's a chicken skin story for me. Dean has come full circle with his kalo poi being on our menu. Mahalo Dean for sharing your stories and knowledge with us, it's the next best thing to being on your farm for our staff.

Another legend, Chuck Furuya, came to talk to us, and his passion for the Kahala Hotel was evident. Furuya spent many years working there with Charlie Goodness when the Maile Room was open, another legend in her own time. Furuya's words

of wisdom come from experience. He was the first master sommelier in Hawaii, and someone who spoke from the heart about hospitality, service, being a team, supporting each other and what drives success.

The morale is good. We got off to a great start. Someone asked me why I decided to come out of retirement. I replied by first saying that I never retired — but I did retire from the King Street restaurant. I also said I still love to cook, I am still learning, I have a curiosity that never stops, my antennae are always looking for inspiration. It may sound cliché, but when someone asks what my favorite dish is, my reply almost always is, "The next one I create."

I'm looking for the next ginger-crusted onaga, I think.

I'm still having fun, but I miss hitting them balls, though. Wish me luck readers, here we go!



Chef and restaurateur Alan Wong has wowed diners around the world for decades, and is known as one of the founders of Hawaii Regional Cuisine. Find his column in *Crave* every first Wednesday. Currently, Wong is dba Alan Wong's Consulting Co.