

# HAUTE PLATES

IRON CHEF MASAHARU MORIMOTO HITS THE MARK IN SUN-KISSED WAILEA.

By Shannon Wiatrecki

From the outside, Morimoto Maui looks like an elegant poolside bar. Minimal and spare, the decor at the Andaz Maui at Wailea's celebrity chef restaurant is limited to a few contemporary wooden carvings. But once guests are seated, less becomes more.

The smallish booths evoke a private coiness. After dark, the roof over the lanai retracts to reveal the stars. The music—an offbeat compilation from the '80s onward—is just loud enough to busy conversation.

"Morimoto Maui has a more intimate feeling than my other restaurants," says the owner, Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto. "I believe guests will be able to enjoy the beauty of Maui and feel the aloha spirit when they dine here."

During a recent visit, my friend and I were eager to see for ourselves why Morimoto-san enjoys cult-like celebrity status. We unabashedly ordered the *omakase* for the full experience. This multicourse tasting menu starts at \$140 and begins with a bang.

Morimoto's signature *toho* tartare appetizer is edible artwork. Balancing on a bowl of ice, a tilted rectangle offers up a rich and delectable smear of minced bluefin tuna belly, accented by a rainbow of condiments: wasabi, avocado, nori paste, creme fraiche, Maui onion and rice crackers. Those concerned about bluefin tuna's survival (which should be everybody) can rest easier knowing that Morimoto only serves farmed *kinohi*, the most sustainable bluefin available. After this rare indulgence, I savored the sweet palate cleanser: a chilled Japanese mountain peach.



IFOOD & DRINKI REVIEW



PARADISE FOUND From top: Morimoto Maui delights at lunch, thanks to dishes like the lobster club; the outdoor lanai gives way to up-close views of Waikapu Beach; desserts, like the green tea bûche, bring The Roof to Wailea, deliver serious wow.

With each course, the flavors ramped up a notch. Our server, an enthusiastic 20-something, confidently discussed each detail as the meal progressed. For a brand-new restaurant, the staff is surprisingly on point; many are recruits from Morimoto Napa.

From hamachi carpaccio spiked with shiso and sesame oil, we moved on to Morimoto's interpretation of *beaufort outside*, a fondue-like specialty that hails from Piedmont, Italy.

The charming presentation involved a glowing ceramic tower topped by a warm pool of olive oil. Dissolving in the center of the pool: a mash of barely tamed anchovies and garlic. Dipping items included roasted fennel, heirloom carrots shaved to translucence, and a single chunk of tempura chicken so meltingly tender it stands out as one of the best bites of the night.

"The joke is that Morimoto's mom is Italian," our waiter informed us, referring to the Italian influences woven throughout the menu. While Morimoto's approach is authentically and precisely Japanese, his cuisine sings when it incorporates European delicacies. His *chawanmushi*—Japanese comfort food—is a winning example: Warm, silky custard is flavored with foie gras and topped with divered duck breast. This arrived alongside a flash-fried Fanny

## Morimoto Maui

Andaz Maui at Wailea, 3550 Wailea Alanui Drive, Wailea, Maui, 573.1234, maui.andaz.hyatt.com

Mon-Sun., 11:30am-2:30am; 5:30-10:30pm  
Starters, \$13-\$29; entrees, \$36-\$95; sashimi and sushi combinations, \$36-\$200; desserts, \$9-\$14

Bay oyster, crowned with foie gras and sea urchin. Downright hedonistic, this uber-rich combination was an intoxicating aphrodisiac. Unable to reply to the waiter's inquiry of how it tasted, my guest merely whispered in delight.

The sushi course that followed was flawless: fat slices of glistening *toho*, shad, ika, uni and, finally, "stained glass," a pressed square of rice, 'ahi and avocado that looked like a cathedral window and tasted like a humble prayer offered up to the saint of hand-rolled sushi. We requested fresh wasabi root, which our waiter shared tableside using a *shakōjin* grater. Heavens.

The signature Maui dish featured locally caught *ipohopaka* (pink snapper) in Thai curry with pobole fern, plump mussels and sushi rice. The fillet's crispy skin gave way to moist, flavorful flesh. Chunks of grilled banana balanced the curry's heat.

By this point, we were well sated, but the entrée was still on its way. An emerald green sorbet arrived to prepare our palates: bright notes of passion and shiso with a trace of sweetness. On its heels came a tray of succulent meats: spicy Spanish tako arwin in Morimoto's Angry sauce, Kobe flat iron mussels tossed with kimchee two ways—I could eat a bag full of the fried crisps—and, best in show, the amazing pork. The seared, crispy skin collapsed against my fork like a billowy hot air balloon revealing a mouthful of salty, fatty, oily goodness brightened by sweet poha berry and apple sauce.

As one would expect, even the rice here is a stunner. The resto boasts a printed rice polisher, where, every day, brown grains are polished into sushi rice, a process that ensures every grain is perfect. Plus, the resourceful pastry chefs use the leftover rice shavings in an uncommon dessert: panna cotta paired with miso butterscotch ice cream. The confection is sweet and earthy, sprinkled with gingers- and vanilla-infused pineapple chunks, lemon dust and a wee wasabi spritz.

This memorable evening ended with a single complaint: The sole restroom leaves guests to wait in the hall. Never mind, I'm already making reservations for my next dinner. Morimoto is one step ahead of me: For repeat guests, the chef has designed several *omakase* variations; the front desk keeps track of what you've already tried so each experience is always a fresh adventure. And if that's not enough, the resto also serves a superb lunch. You may never want to leave the Wailea shoreline. ■



THE ART OF PRESENTATION Clockwise from top: The sushi presentation at Morimoto Maui dazzles; the bested black cod is picture perfect; Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto shows his stuff on the Wailea side.

### Who Goes There

Savvy Maui residents, sun-kissed jet-setters, fans of Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto

### You Must Order

By all means, indulge in the full *omakase* experience. You won't be disappointed.

### Where to Sit

On the lanai, where the roof retracts to reveal the starry night

### What to Drink

Unsurprisingly, the selections of sake and shochu are excellent. But cocktails equally tempt, thanks to the use of fresh Maui ingredients like Kula strawberries.