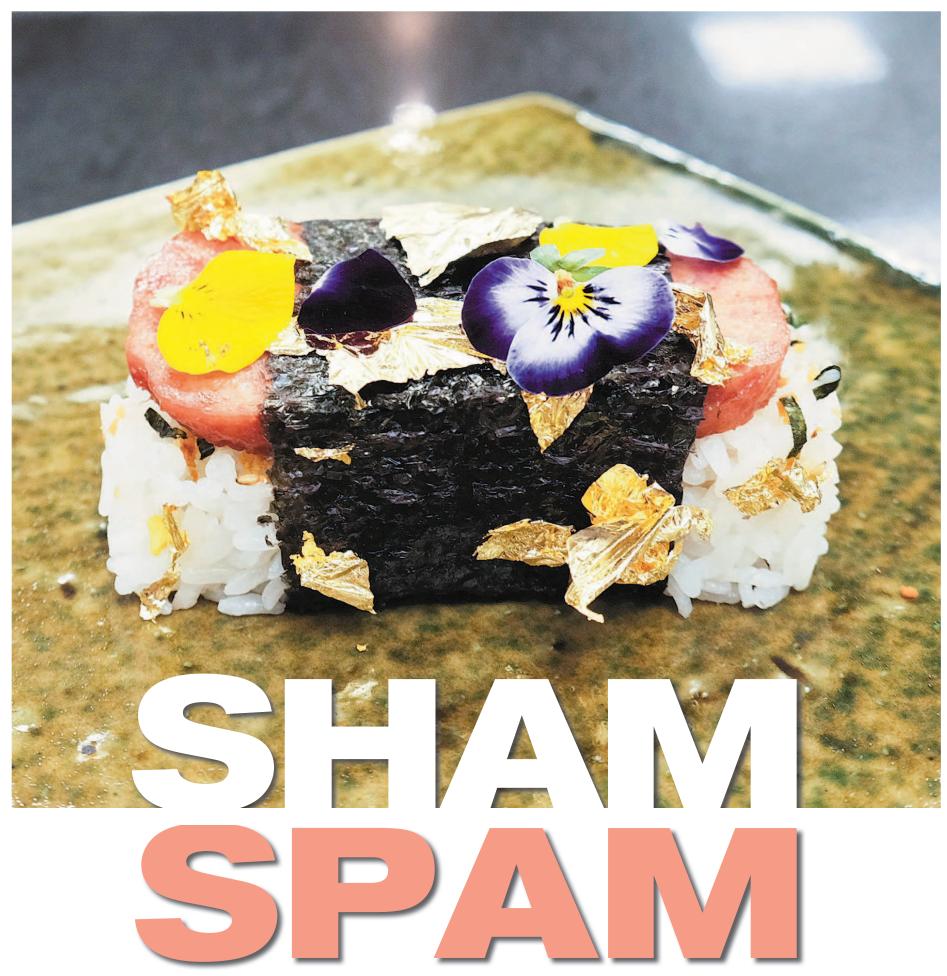


tourstrave

SIGNS OF HAWAIIAN LIFE

A roundup of reader photos who captured reminders of home while on the road >> D8

ON THE SCENE >> D3 PUZZLES >> D4-5



Prettified and de-porkified, Hawaii's favorite musubi is adapted for halal fine dining

> Story and photos by Kiki Aranita Special to the Star-Advertiser

BAHRAIN >>

y day begins with a Kona coffee espresso and a valiant replication of poke made with exquisitely cooked and cubed beets that mimic ruby red ahi. Given that I co-own and operate a restaurant in Philadelphia called Poi Dog, which serves fresh ahi poke, plate lunches and musubi to a solid customer base comprised of many homesick Hawaii people, there is nothing unusual about my meal. I consistently gravitate toward foods that remind me of Hawaii.

I grew up on Oahu, where my father's side of the family lives. Every day in Philadelphia, I am surrounded by Hawaiian ingredients, all of which abate my own homesickness. But today, I'm seated in the lounge of the Four Seasons Hotel Bahrain Bay, in this small island nation in the Arabian Gulf.

I am here to serve a version of Spam musubi at re/Asian Cuisine, a Wolfgang Puck restaurant in the Four Seasons, as part of a collaboration dinner headlined by executive chef Brian Becher and Ari Miller, chef and owner of Musi in Philadelphia. Re/Asian chef Luke Omarzu and pastry chef Fourkou Abderrazik are also working on a menu that Rumena Martin, the as-



Chefs Luke Omarzu and Ari Miller get ready to slice into their pork-free "Sham," molded in Spam cans. At top, a gold leaf and flower-decorated Sham musubi, since this is the Four Seasons Bahrain Bay, after all.

sistant restaurant director, declares, "The funkiest menu I've seen so far.'

Meat such as beef, lamb and duck imported into Bahrain must be halal certified, or prepared according to Muslim law. Imported pork is exempt because it is obviously "haram," or forbidden. Bahrain has no local pork.

"You can order pork from a vendor or buy it from certain supermarkets. There's a 'no-no section' at these supermarkets with Pop-Tarts, Lucky Charms, Vienna sausage and Spam. It's essentially the American section," Becher explains.

Omarzu adds, "Bahrain has a large Filipino population and other cultures that eat pork."

The Four Seasons only serves halal meat and no pork, so the kitchen had to figure out a Spam substitute. Their version combines chicken thigh, wagyu beef and chicken fat. The mixture is seasoned with white pepper, garlic, salt, sugar and paprika, then placed into molds to be poached and, finally, cooled in an ice bath. In this case, the molds are emptied and cleaned Spam cans.

"The biggest challenge was getting the mixture to bind properly, since we're using rendered chicken fat, not pork fat. These don't have the same texture," Omarzu said. "You have to get those molecules to bind properly. It took a lot of trial and error."

The working title is "Sham."

MINNESOTAN Omarzu lived from 2004 to 2008 in Haleiwa while working as a line cook at Turtle Bay Resort. "I grew up in a small town and wanted the biggest change that I could find. So I moved to Hawaii, the farthest away I could think of. I get there and everyone is eating Spam from Minnesota," he said.

"It's hilarious that Spam is made

Please see MUSUBI, D6

MUSUBI

Continued from D1

in Minnesota. I was made in Minnesota." And now: "Here I am in the Middle East making fake Spam."

Becher explains the development of Sham Spam. "We've de-porked many things, like lup cheong (Chinese sausage) and xiao long bao (soup dumplings). We tried baby lamb instead of suckling pig. We couldn't get the fur off without destroying the skin. It made the butcher room smell like a barbershop on fire for four days. There are some things you simply cannot de-pork, but Spam is not one of them!"

As we turn to Spam's military history in Hawaii, Miller pipes in: "Loof (a kosher product discontinued in 2011) was beef Spam used as combat rations in the Israeli army when I was enlisted. Loof came in a can and it was iconic.

"You sear it, eat with eggs or in a rice ball. This was never called 'musubi' but rather, Loof Sushi.'

Loof gives us all hope for "Sham," which turns out leaner than Spam. We have to marinate it in shovu and sugar longer than usual for the flavors to permeate the meat. The result is spot on. It's ready to be wrapped into a musubi.

Since this is the Four Seasons, I fancy it up with edible flowers and gold leaf.

THE DECORATED musubi is plated alongside a kim chee powder-dusted prawn xiao long bao and a shot of cucumber juice with a tiny fried fish balanced on the rim. The menu is a romp through the experiences and visions of all five chefs involved.

Banana blossom salad, scallops on a shiso pasta cracker with perilla oil ice cream. Black sesame seedcrusted chicken schnitzel as a nod to Miller's decade





For the musubi, rice is molded into shape, to be topped with sliced Sham and uni furikake, then wrapped in nori. Above, a mini musubi is served alongside a prawn xiao long bao and a piece of fried fish over a shot of cucumber juice.

Caitlin Bias, and reconfigured

At the close of service, we

unwrap and eat the remain-

stand in the kitchen, munch-

ing and nodding. For most in

this diverse group of cooks,

this is their first musubi. It is

comforting and warm. I am

in Bahrain by Moroccan

French chef Abderrazik.

ing "Sham" musubi. We

spent in Israel. Few members of the Bahraini-Filipino-Indian-Sri Lankan-Mexican-Indonesian kitchen staff can pronounce "schnitzel," which leads to fits of giggles whenever an order comes in. Duck-fat doughnuts with strawberry gochujang ice cream, conceived in Philadelphia by Miller's sous-chef,

PHOTOS BY KIKI ARANITA / SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER

The staff shares in a Sham musubi toast. From left: Lulwa Sowaileh, assistant chef at Bahrain's re/Asian Cuisine; Philadelphia chef Ari Miller of Musi; Tyronne Perera, Body Pernandes and Mirelle Estrada, all assistant chefs at re/Asian; Brian Becher, executive chef of Musi; and re/Asian chef Luke Omarzu.

transported home.

Miller muses, "The highlight of this experience has been eating with the international kitchen staff, tasting meals cooks have made from their home countries.

Halal Sham has furthered our opportunities to share flavors. Many of the line cooks are practicing Muslims. Miller adds, "For me, growing up in a Jewish household, Spam was contraband. I was in my late 30s when I first tasted Spam."

ON THIS TRIP, we've enjoyed Sri Lankan, northern Indian, Filipino and now, bites of Hawaii's food. Miller reflects, "These conjure up

childhood memories for me that are not my own. I'm finding comfort in someone else's comfort food."

Arpita Mhatre, a guest at the dinner, notes correlations between Bahrain and my diverse island home. "Eating out in Bahrain is like having the world on an island. We have Japanese-influenced cuisine, Greek and of course, Middle Eastern," she says.

The flipside to this international mix is that the local cuisine takes a back seat, says Hessa Al Khalifa, a Bahraini food writer and chef. She speaks of her desire to see Bahraini cuisine gain an international foothold. "Ask any Bahraini what's their favorite cuisine and they'll say Japanese or Italian. I am trying to get my generation excited about Bahraini dishes in the same way.'

Al Khalifa's words parallel my own mission to represent the food of Hawaii beyond the islands. In a sea of misrepresentation, the power and allure of Hawaii's food nevertheless has reached the shores of an island in the Arabian Gulf, nearly 9,000 miles away. The salad-bar poke trend is alive and well in Bahrain, curiously with chicken the most popular protein.

The privilege of taking the humble Spam musubi so far from its birthplace and bring it to such vastly different settings as Philadelphia and Bahrain is not lost on me.

The following morning, I sit down for brunch at re/ Asian next to a soaring view of the capital city of Manama, owing to the restaurant's 50th-floor location. Omarzu has put a scallop poke on the menu. It is marinated in shoyu and sesame oil, straightforward and reassuringly familiar. Making Sham musubi must have touched off further recollection of his years spent in Hawaii.

Also on the brunch menu: Sham fried rice.

Reclusive food celebrity is my quarantine queen

TODAY'S PUZZLE ANSWERS

DOUBLE TAKE





Like so many home cooks in quarantine, after I've used up the green tops of my scallions, I drop the white, hairy roots into a glass of water to regenerate, feeling pleased with my own sense of thrift and pragmatism.

By Tejal Rao

But last week, after Chinese internet star Li Ziqi posted a new cooking video to YouTube called "The Life of Garlic," I wished I could graduate from scallions on the windowsill.

In the 12-minute video, which already has more than 7 million views, Li pushes garlic cloves into a patch of earth outside her home. A time lapse shows the sprouts growing, reaching up toward the sky.

Li sautees the young, fresh green garlic shoots with pork. When she harvests the bulbs, she plaits the stems, hanging them up to finish the drying process, pickling and preserving the rest.

Li, who lives in a village in Sichuan province and rarely speaks to press, looks not unlike a Disney princess in her crown braids, wearing a silvery fur cape, trudging gracefully in the snow. At 29, she is famous for her mesmerizing videos of rural self-sufficiency, posted on Weibo and YouTube.

For a worldwide audience in isolation, her DIY pastoral fantasies have become a reliable source of escape and comfort.

Li tends to work in silence, without the use of any modern kitchen gadgets. Her sieve is a gourd.



COURTESY YOUTUBE

Li Ziqi lives in a village in Sichuan province and stars in mesmerizing food videos.

Her grater is a piece of metal that she punctures, at an angle, then attaches to two pieces of wood. Her basin is a stream, where she washes the dirt from vegetables.

Her kitchen is nothing like mine, in Los Angeles. But watching Li on my laptop, I think maybe I could be happy living like that, too, soaking in the natural beauty of the countryside, devoting myself to extremely traditional ways of cooking.

She is not known for taking shortcuts. A video about matsutake mushrooms begins with her building the grill to cook them, laying the bricks down one at a time, scraping the mortar smooth, then hunting for mushrooms in the woods.

The videos are deeply soothing. But Li also romanticizes the struggles of farm life, and, as any savvy influencer would, monetizes that appeal. In her online shop, she sells a curved

cleaver, similar to the ones she uses in her videos, as well as loose Hanfu-inspired linen clothing, Sichuan ginseng honey and chile sauces.

Skeptics are suspicious of her access to YouTube in China, where the platform is blocked. And though it seems unlikely, some people have wondered in the comment sections if her videos are propaganda.

Li's story, as she tells it, is that she left home as a teenager to find work, but returned to the countryside to take care of her grandmother, then began documenting her life. Though she used to shoot her videos alone, on her phone, she now works with an assistant and a videographer.

In isolation, watching Li gather rose petals and ripe tomatoes, I catch myself thinking: Are these videos a record of the collective food knowledge we've already lost, or an idealized vision of its recovery?

UP & DOWN WORDS

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