

# THE TOAST OF KOHALA

The seduction began with fresh, surprising flavors. Welcome to Hawaii Island cocktails.

By KIA MCINERNEY

WAIKOLOA, Hawaii — On our last afternoon on Hawaii Island, I was gazing at a sparkling crescent bay and planning my evening cocktail.

Would it be the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel's delicious version of the Bee's Knees? Or its savory and sophisticated Mauna Kea Mule? And then there's Twilight Skies, made from Grey Goose vodka, fresh blueberries, sage, lemon juice and a hint of honey.

They are among the current lineup of premium craft cocktails making waves at the resort.

Like many local properties, the Mauna Kea is doing a balancing act as it brings innovative beverage ideas to this legacy property.

As we would find, the experiment is working. Why else would I be dreaming of my evening aperitif, fresh from the morning's snorkeling adventures?

As wine aficionados, my husband and I are used to sniffing out the best of the world's wine regions have to offer. But our first visit in January to Hawaii's Kohala Coast opened our eyes to a ramped-up bar scene. ("Kohala" is the name for the northwestern part of Hawaii Island, and the Kohala Coast refers to the coastline's sprinkling of resorts and golf courses.)

These libations are not syrupy mai-tais. We're talking new ingredients (or new uses for old ingredients), and the spots we visited are investing in top mixologists and using local sourcing to achieve fresh, surprising tastes.

"We need to be innovative while still sensitive to the taste of our customers for the classics," said Wendie Leshner, food and beverage director for the resort, which includes both the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel and the Hapuna Beach Resort, which in May will become the Westin Hapuna Beach Resort after a \$46-million renovation.

One such innovation led to developing a new approach to harvesting honeycombs from the *kiawe* — a class of mesquite — trees on the 1,800-acre property.

For the Bee's Knees, Leshner's team uses the estate honey, local basil and island limes along with Botanist gin, a small-batch artisanal liquor made in Scotland.

"I was staring at 120 pounds of honey and wondering how we could use this resource to contribute to our guest experience," Leshner said. With the help of three or four resort mixologists, the drink was born.

Prepare to be seduced. The taste is bracing and citrusy, and the gin selection means less of the juniper berry sharpness of many traditional English varieties.

"The honey sourced from our hives goes incredibly well with the gin," Leshner said.

"Just as appealing is the brand's commitment to place, which we feel strongly here in Hawaii."

## Danger ahead?

"Twenty-one miles south of the Mauna Kea resort is the Four Seasons Resort Hualalai's Beach Tree Bar, where guests gather for one of the island's lingering sunsets.

Nature is good for the barscene, we found; it is easy to swirl two or three flavorful Tom's Pink Shirts before darkness drapes itself over the surf.

Tom's Pink Shirt, like many of the best cocktails we sampled, uses premium liquor, in this case Tanqueray Rangpur gin. It also contains guava liqueur and muddled strawberries, giving it that beautiful rosy color.

"It's a dangerous drink," said Shelly Smith, general manager of the Beach Tree Bar. "You may think it doesn't contain alcohol." Obviously, that's not the case.

What's not obvious: how the drink got its name. The libation introduced in 2011, was an immediate hit, but its creators didn't have a catchy name. A favorite bartender was wearing a pink shirt, so it was dubbed Tom's Pink Shirt.

"We all laughed and eventually, the drink was named Akala Cooler, which means 'pink' in Hawaiian," Smith said. "But mysteriously, when the drinks menu came out the new cocktail was listed as Tom's Pink Shirt, and the name stuck."

## So smooth

The views and the vibe go together like appetizers (pappas) and cocktails along the Kohala Coast.

A popular small bite at the Four Seasons Resort Hualalai is *kam-pachi crudo*, sashimi-grade yellowtail joined with sliced avocado, silvers of local jalapeño, toasted corn nuts and chantro microgreens.

The Nahi Wai cocktail makes a good companion. It's made with lime, ginger-sour and watermelon flavors that marry with Casamigos tequila.

The spirit company's founders — actor George Clooney and two friends — were seeking a super-smooth tequila, and that quest gave rise to Casamigos. Was it suc-



FRESH blueberries and sage add the finishing touch to the Twilight Skies at the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel on Hawaii's Kohala Coast.



SUNSETS are a draw at the Four Seasons Resort Hualalai. As are the Tom's Pink Shirt cocktails.



## If you go

**Four Seasons Resort Hualalai**, 72-100 Kaupulehu Drive, Kailua Kona; (808) 325-8000, [fourseasons.com/hualalai](http://fourseasons.com/hualalai)  
Drinks sampled: Tom's Pink Shirt, \$19; Nahi Wai, \$19; Bali No, \$10  
**Lava Lava Beach Club**, 69-1081 Kunalii Place, Waikoloa; (808) 769-5282, [lat.ms/lavalava](http://lat.ms/lavalava)

Drinks sampled: Tahitian limeade, \$18; Gilligan's Girl, \$16  
**Mauna Kea Beach Hotel**, 62-100 Mauna Kea Beach Drive, Kamae; (808) 882-7222, [maunakeabeachhotel.com](http://maunakeabeachhotel.com)  
Drinks sampled: Bee's Knees, \$20; Mauna Kea Mule, \$16; Twilight Skies, \$19; Hemingway daiquiri, \$16

## Lime and the coconut

For a change of pace and the feeling of laid-back Hawaii, Lava Lava Beach Club, on the sands between the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel and the Four Seasons, delivers serious cocktail hour competition for a little bit less.

You'll find such ingredients as coconut water, ginger beer and

macadamia nut honey, which comes from a nearby farm, said Nick Roschi, director of operations for the club.

The Tahitian limeade uses Malibu coconut rum, Patrón Citrónge a liqueur of Persian limes cultivated in Mexico, fresh squeezed limes and coconut water, served in a custom Mason jar, which the imbiber is welcome to take home.

The bar's Gilligan's Girl is a nod to the *caipirinha*, Brazil's national cocktail. This incarnation has Skyy Infusions coconut vodka and Stirrings ginger liqueur, pineapple juice, passion fruit (*liliko'i*) and coconut water. It's a light, refreshing and not-too-sweet option that meets the club's objective: hydrate without hurting.

## Fond farewell

Not a drinker? Not a problem. "Working with our executive

chef, we experimented with a reverse-distilling process using a copper still to create a nonalcoholic gin and tonic," said Leshner of the Mauna Kea Resort. "It turned out delicious and satisfying, retaining all the botanical flavors of the gin."

At the Four Seasons, the Bull No is a favorite mocktail served at Ulu, the fine-dining restaurant. The gin is gone, but what's left is a crisp, pliant lemongrass, lime and coconut spritz.

For my send-off, I chose something I'd not tried: the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel's Hemingway daiquiri made with Luxardo maraschino cherry liqueur from Italian Maraschino.

"Using Luxardo adds a vibrant color and slightly sour and rich flavors," Leshner said. "The tart elegance of my daiquiri was the ideal ending to a fabulous getaway."

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