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Maui Bistro aims to capture the 'aloha' spirit

By: RUTH MARVIN WEBSTER - Staff Writer



Owners of seven North County Chin's restaurants, Chin and Jade Tsai's latest venture is a departure from their other Chinese ones. Opened in mid-March, Maui Bistro in San Marcos' Restaurant Row does not feature Szechwan and Mandarin dishes, but Pacific fusion cuisine.

The owners of the Maui Bistro, Chin Tsai and his wife Jade, in their restaurant San Marcos on Tuesday.

HAYNE PALMOUR IV Staff Photographer

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A civil engineer originally from Taiwan, Tsai moved to Hawaii in 1976, where he attended school to learn English before opening his first restaurant, a Mongolian barbecue in Honolulu. Though his first venture into the restaurant business was an unmitigated failure, he said, he learned he needed to learn more. "I lost everything," he admitted.

Always thinking about food, though, and constantly jotting ideas on a tiny notepad he kept in his pocket, Tsai worked in restaurants in San Francisco, Vancouver and Seattle before finally investing again in his next venture, a restaurant in Santa Monica where, he said, he tripled the business in six months.

Moving on, he opened a Vista restaurant, China Szechwan, but walked away from it after two years, he said, when he didn't see eye to eye with his partner. He opened the first Chin's in Carlsbad in 1984. "It is still there. I still own it and it is still doing great," Tsai said, adding that only a year later, he "started to build his empire." Now he has a total of nine Chin restaurants (not including his new Maui Bistro), five of which are in North County, plus two more in Hawaii.

Fueled by the success of his two Hawaiian restaurants, Chin said, he is coming full circle, bringing a bit of Hawaii to San Marcos. "I just feel that Hawaii is so beautiful of a place, that I want to bring it here and share the paradise with the people," he said. "It is more like Pacific fusion than Polynesian cuisine."

The bistro does have some teriyaki dishes and ahi tuna sashimi, which is called poke in Hawaii, featuring cubed fresh, raw ahi marinated with green onions, soy sauce, chile, sesame oil and sesame seeds. "I'm not trying to make money on the food," said Tsai, pointing to the eight ounces of fresh tuna for \$8. He added, "The orange leaf for decoration is from my

garden."

Salads include the Maui Charbroiled Chicken Salad (a chicken breast with romaine lettuce, apples, cranberries and walnuts with balsamic vinaigrette) for \$8 and the Linko Tomato Salad for \$7, as well as seafood and tuna salads.

The lunch menu is extensive, with 16 entrees from a grilled burger (\$7.50) to grilled salmon with sesame rice (\$10) or O'hana Duck Wraps served with mixed greens (\$8).

For dinner, besides chicken, fish or lamb, diners can choose from lobster tail (\$24), braised duck leg (\$15), king crab legs (\$19), the popular Kahana Jumbo Prawns (\$18) or the Hana Jumbo Scallops (\$16).

Dinner and lunch menus include Tsai's favorite curries ---- a Mala Seafood Curry with lobster, prawns and scallops for dinner (\$15) and for lunch, the Liliha Curry Rice Plate (beef, chicken or shrimp) for \$7.50.

"I make the curry my own," Tsai said. "I don't worry about sharing my secrets with people."

He said one of his secret ingredients, which gives a hidden sweet-and-sour flavor to his sashimi and salad dressings, is finely ground dried sweet and sour plum that he brings back from Taiwan a few times a year. He said dried plums are available in Asian markets in Los Angeles, but they are much more expensive here.

While the food may not be strictly Hawaiian, the ambiance at the Maui Bistro certainly is. You'll find Hawaiian music and tiki torches outside on the patio and tropical fans inside. Surfing photos and surfboards adorn the walls, and the servers are quick with an "aloha" or a "mahalo."

But Tsai is not sitting on his laurels. His plan is to make his Chin restaurants combine two restaurants in one ---- with customers choosing one entrance leading to the typically Chinese restaurant or the other leading to the Hawaiian fusion fare. Tsai said he visualizes a restaurant, split in two, with the servers' outfits, decor, ambiance and menu to fit each cuisine. If it sounds like a great deal of time, money and effort to implement, Tsai is not dissuaded.

"I never feel tired," he says with enthusiasm. "You're never tired when you're interested. I like to serve people. I enjoy sharing my dishes with the people."

-- Contact staff writer Ruth Marvin Webster at (760) 740-3527 or rwebster@nctimes.com.

WHAT: Maui Bistro by Chin's

WHERE: 1020 San Marcos Blvd., San Marcos (Restaurant Row)

HOURS: 11a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Mon-Thu; 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Fri-Sat, 11 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Sun. Happy hour from 3 to 5 p.m. daily (cocktails \$2 off, beer and wine \$1 off; all starters \$2 off)

PRICE RANGE: Lunch, \$7.50-\$10; dinner, \$15-\$24

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