

# HILUXURY

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## OLYMPIC GETAWAY

SKIING AND  
SNOWBOARDING  
IN WHISTLER

## HIGH-FASHION TRIBUTE

A CHIC HOMAGE  
TO THE KING OF POP

## MICHAEL EMERSON

FRESH OFF AN  
EMMY WIN,  
THE *LOST* STAR  
SHARES HIS  
STORY

## BMW 750 LI

SPEED AND  
PERFORMANCE  
IN A SLEEK CAR



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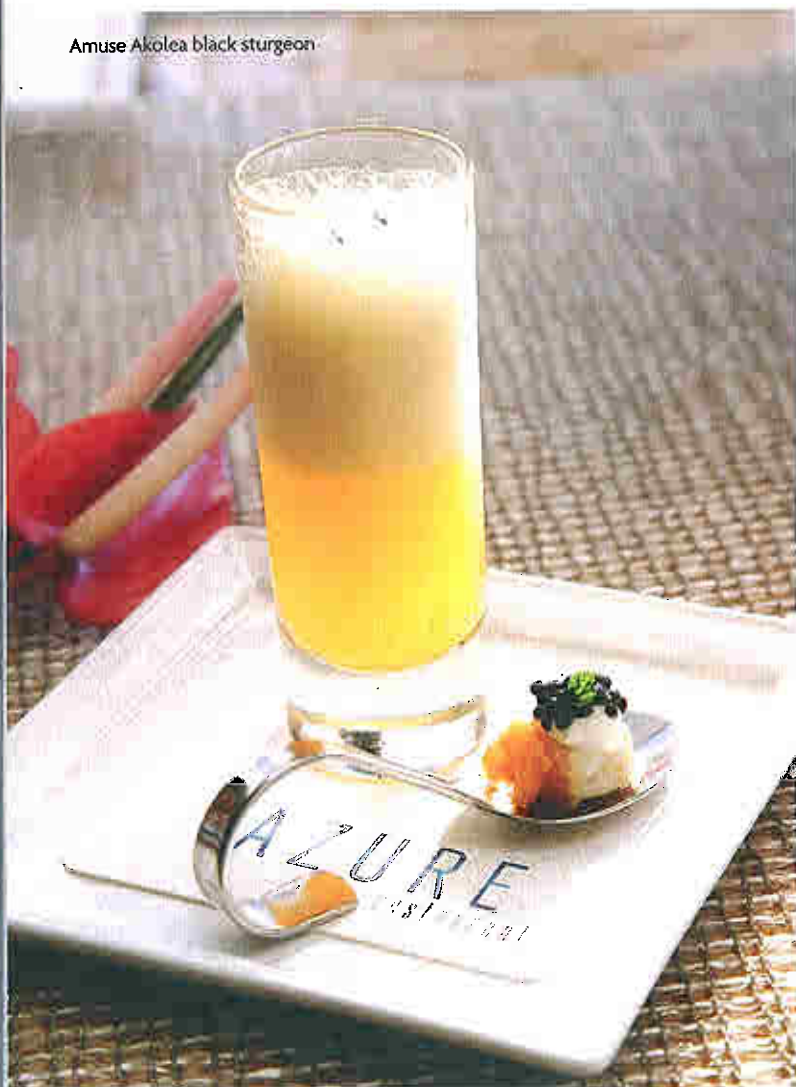
NEWSSTAND PRICE \$3.95

# CULINARY MAGIC

Savor innovative flavors and palate-tempting flair at Azure

WRITTEN BY JO MCGARRY • PHOTOS BY EUGENE KAM

Amuse Akolea black sturgeon



**T**he first thing that strikes me about the dining room formerly known as The Surf Room at The Royal Hawaiian is that architect Terry Hendrickson actually understood the original architecture of the hotel.

Call me odd, but I feel a warm glow of confidence when I walk into a restaurant where there's a firm sense of place. Azure, with its Moroccan-inspired accents, imitates the original Moorish design of the hotel. The effect is a room that is both beautiful and effortlessly elegant. Black, white and shades of brown set the stage for glowing candlelight mirrored across mother-of-pearl accents, as billowy white curtains separate the dining room from beachside cabanas and soft, luxuriant couches.

All that splendor before the cocktails even arrive. Azure sets up high expectations and sends out bold messages. Certainly the look of the dining room alone is enough to catapult it into the category of one of the most intriguing new restaurants of the year.

And happily, the only hints of pink you'll see are on the tips of a lobster tail or the flesh of a giant shrimp.

Executive Chef Jon Matsubara spent much of his early career working with top chefs in New York after a few culinary stops in Asia and Europe. Matsubara is best known to Honolulu foodies as the Alan Wong alum who opened Stage Restaurant at Honolulu Design Center.

I was interested to see what direction his food has taken. At one time he referred to his style as "designer cuisine," and I was keen to see if that odd label still applied.

Azure is primarily a seafood restaurant, with a specific emphasis on fresh Island fish. There's a very good steak — one based on a childhood memory of a dish Matsubara's father used to cook for his birthday — and there are fabulous



ribs that come to the table with a ton of smoke and lots of flavor. But mostly, it's a restaurant where fish rules and the catch of the day is the focus.

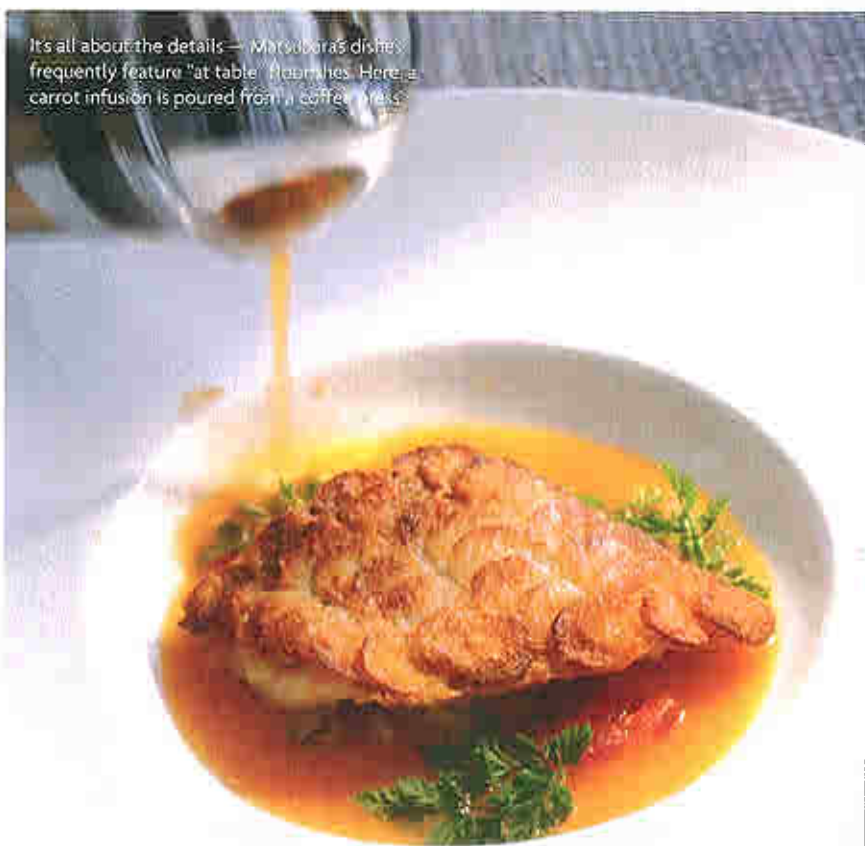
"You're in Hawaii, so you want to eat the fish," says Matsubara. "Especially if you're here as a visitor. We want guests at Azure to feel like they're experiencing not only the best dining spot in Waikiki, but the best local fish, too. The Pier 38 fish list gives them that."

As part of the regular menu, guests are given a list of fish bought earlier in the day from Honolulu's auction. Other seafood options include lobster, shrimp and clams, all served with a bounty of indigenous ingredients.

The menu isn't very extensive, and Matsubara says regular customers are eager for him to change dishes. However, he says, "we have so many people coming here for the first time. For some of them, it's the first taste of this food."

It's perhaps for those regular guests, keen to see Matsubara strut his culinary stuff, that he's designed the Royal Papa'aina, an eight-course degustation menu that showcases Matsubara's talent and love of surprise.

He says he's cooking "with two feet on the ground," and that the menu is designed to showcase local ingredients. But there's no doubt that he has



It's all about the details — Matsubara's dishes frequently feature "at table" finishes. Here, a carrot infusion is poured from a coffee press.

the ability to soar.

The \$150 per person degustation menu starts with an amuse bouche of Akolea black sturgeon, soy caviar and a passion chili soda. The Siberian sturgeon is raised on the Big Island and has a wonderfully fatty flesh that's perfect for smoking. Served with a spoonful of caviar and a passion chili soda that comes in a shooter glass, the tiny dishes are meant to be eaten more or less at the same time, by taking a spoonful of caviar and sturgeon and then shooting the soda.

There's heat and sweetness immediately on the palate. The salty smokiness of the sturgeon does two things: It reminds you that you're near the ocean, and it tells your palate to get

ready for a trip.

Matsubara loves the effect that unexpected flavor combinations and textures have on the palate.

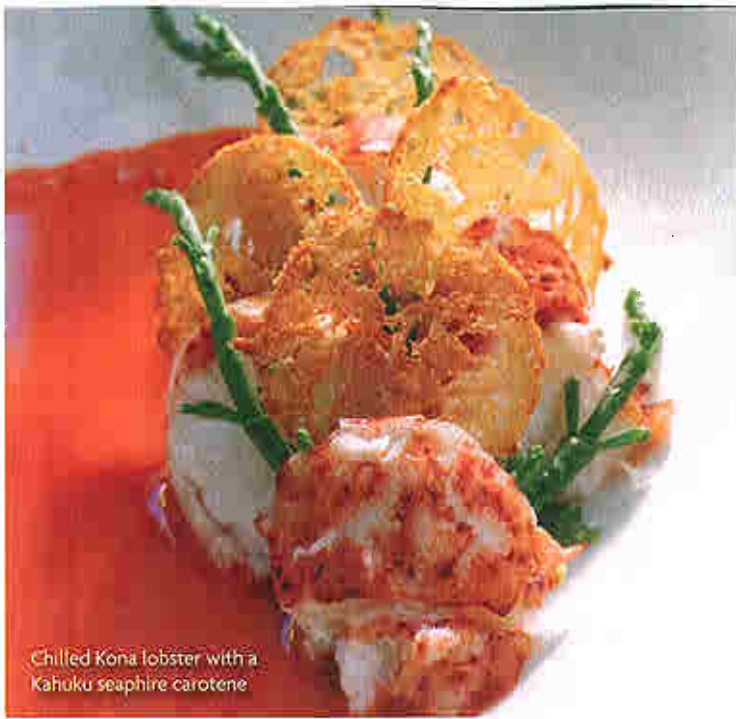
"Sometimes I just watch the guests' faces to see how they react," he says with a grin.

Next on the Royal Papa'aina menu is chilled Kona lobster with a Kahuku seaphire carotene. House-made taro chips, avocado and chilled, buttery, soft Kona lobster are combined to make a dish that's an abstract shrimp cocktail with guacamole. At the table, our waiter pours a tiny pot of carotene across the lobster, adding remarkable sweetness with a burst of color.

And so the evening goes on, a brilliant display of culinary



The dining room does not rely on the obvious ocean view, but on interesting ceiling accents, grand pillars, glass walls and cream and white hues.



Chilled Kona lobster with a Kahuku seaphire carrotene

theater with local ingredients in the spotlight.

A torched Australian Wagyu beef comes to the table under a glass cover — the kind more commonly seen on cheese boards. Our waiter removes the cover and a flurry of smoke is released, momentarily lingering over the table before dispersing into the warm night air.

It's another of Matsubara's palate-tempting tricks, and another that works.

Moi and abalone are next, then veal cheeks, then a cheese course, then dessert. In each, there are tiny sparks of culinary genius.

Matsubara is ably aided in the dining room by a staff that may be the happiest in town. Led by general manager Jim Weisiger, with the talents of mixologist and beverage director Joey Goettesman not too far away, Azure's staff members are the rare kind who notice everything, welcome all, stop to chat and genuinely seem happy to be serving some of Honolulu's most exciting food.

"We take care of everyone," says Weisiger. "All waiters go to all tables. That way, everyone's aware of what's happening throughout the evening."

What happens throughout the evening is a dining experience worthy of one of the world's best-loved hotels. ✱

Veal cheek raviolo



Dessert Maracaibo and Grand Cru Chocolate