

Introduction

A Magical Meal on Maui

This book is born of desperate necessity and soul-searing, passionate love. It has taken five years to write, decades to research, and was inspired by a glorious Maui sunset and an unforgettable meal.

The story is so magical and romantic you might not believe it. Even my own mother can hardly believe it happened to me. But everything I'm about to tell you is true. And it could not have happened anywhere else on earth but Maui.

Five years ago Jim and I met on a beach on Maui. With our first glance, we were catapulted into an intense love affair. We each gasped a little in recognition of our connection; it felt downright mystical. Our hands took the initiative and reached for each other. As they intertwined for the first time, Jim murmured "Where have you been all my life?" (Yes, he really said that.)

I couldn't answer. I could only stare, like a wide-eyed child, then look away at the sky above his head still streaked with my first Maui sunset. The first quarter moon was already bright and two stars popped out as his eyes twinkled.

He asked, "Are you hungry?"

I nodded, my head heavy on my suddenly weak neck. I was hungry. I was also struck dumb and a little dizzy. My arms tingled just above the wrist. Was my circulation cut off? But he persisted: "Do you like sushi?"

This snapped me out of my moonstruck state. My head cleared and I spoke crisply, "No, I don't. I *love* sushi. But I have to warn you, I think most of what passes for sushi shouldn't be fed to a stray cat."

Jim smiled and drew me to his side. We turned and faced the distant island of Lana'i, arms wrapped around each other, pulling our quickly beating hearts close together. Watching the sky shift from pink to indigo to velvet, he said, "That's my girl. I knew you'd drift in someday." The waves crashed louder and louder until they were all I heard.

When time started again, Jim took me to my first Maui restaurant. Following the petite hostess in her silk kimono through a large, lusciously draped room filled with long-haired beauties and a piano player pouring honey-sweet music all over the floor was like walking into my most private dream. We were seated at a table along the rail on the wraparound lanai (porch). Two waiters immediately

*"I
don't 'like'
food. I love food.
If I don't love it,
I don't swallow."*

– Ego,
Restaurant Critic,
Ratatouille

hustled away for our drinks.

We toasted each other, tinkling our white porcelain cups brimming with warm sake. The miso arrived and we drank the deep, rich, hearty broth straight from the bowl. We told our life stories and held hands in between plates of fish and bowls of rice. Our fingers and our chopsticks cradled the tender pink and yellow and white morsels before delivering them to our tongues, where they quivered a little before giving up their sweet ocean flavors.

Every once in a while I pinched my thigh beneath my napkin. Was this really happening?

We stayed until the pianist had retired, other diners had departed, and the lights were dimmed. As they cleaned and stacked and cleared, the servers brought us cool water, tiny coconut creams, and refreshing green tea, assuring us that we should stay until we were ready to go. It was clear to all of us that magic was happening, and no one wanted to interrupt it.

On the drive back to the beach, heavy perfume from plumeria trees lining Wailea Ike Drive rushed through the open windows. I asked Jim “Is this heaven?”

He smiled and said “I think so.” I had never felt so content, relaxed, and beautiful.

After we parted for the night, I called

my girlfriends back on the east coast and woke them up one by one. As I giggled and swooned and stammered my way through the story of my first Maui evening, dozens of stars sprang from their places in the black sky above my car and streaked across the ridges of Haleakala in the most glorious meteor shower I’d ever witnessed.

Our *Top Maui Restaurants* review guide was conceived on that magical night, but we didn’t have an inkling of it yet.

Two months later, firmly established in our new love affair and still discovering the depths of our mutual passion for food, Jim and I were driving by “our” restaurant when we saw a “Now Closed” sign over the door.

I was shocked. How could this paragon of fabulous dining, unbelievable ambiance, and stellar service have thrown in the towel?

Jim shook his head sadly and a weary expression crossed his face. By this time we had eaten in many of the restaurants reviewed in this guide, and he explained carefully that each one of them – no matter how wonderful – were in imminent danger of closing due to the heavy overhead and high turnover inherent in the Maui restaurant scene.

Restaurants on Maui, he explained, open and close overnight like tropical flowers. For as many superb restaurants as there are now, several times that number had failed since 1990, when he first arrived.

The following week we took a beach walk after breakfast. I noticed a beautiful restaurant practically on the sand and asked him why he hadn't suggested going there for dinner yet. He wrinkled his nose and said "It's not worth it."

I was skeptical, and pressed him. I was hungry for Italian, I said, and I wanted a special night out to celebrate our two-month anniversary. Waiters in formal-wear seemed like the perfect touch, and according to several of my guidebooks, it was one of the best restaurants on the island. Jim gave up with an affectionate shrug, and we booked a table for that evening.

To my surprise and growing horror during the meal, Jim was right. I like to focus on the positive, so I won't go into detail here. I will leave it to your imagination until you read the review for yourself on page 134.

After we left I declared "Why didn't anyone warn me?! We just spent over \$200 on a meal that wasn't worth half that – at a restaurant I never would have *bothered* with back home in New York!"

The next day we were still talking about it, and the next, and the next. Watching my consternation grow at the "inaccuracy" and "unreliability" of tourist guides, Jim's author wheels started turning. The problem, he decided, was that I was relying on dining guides, not dining reviews.

What's the difference? A whole heck of

a lot.

Dining Guides, in our opinion, are next to worthless. Primarily descriptive, they are designed to tell you the Who, What, Where, and When of a restaurant. They leave out the essential How and the crucial Why.

A Dining Review, on the other hand, is written by an actual person (or in this case, two persons joined at the hip) with actual opinions and actual (hopefully good) advice. A good review does not just *describe* the restaurant. It also helps you decide if you want to eat at the restaurant.

We noticed that most dining and tourist guides feature restaurant guides, not practical, honest, restaurant reviews. And unfortunately, the few reviews we did find were not written by people who know food.

Jim and I, on the other hand, know food. We both come from food-obsessed families and are excellent home chefs. We've eaten in the best restaurants in America, Europe, and Asia – not once or twice, but repeatedly.

We were even obsessed as kids.

My aunt was a restaurant owner and natural foods chef, so I grew up knowing about and eating healthy, organic food prepared to taste absolutely delicious. I started baking at the age of seven, and made all family birthday cakes, including my own. I cooked for my family

when my mother returned to work, and I learned firsthand how challenging it can be to focus amidst chaos and infuse love into the food. I also learned how magical food is when you do it right, and how a good meal can pull a fractious bunch together.

Later I lived in Boston and then New York City, where I ate at the best restaurants (not necessarily always the most expensive) every single day of the week for eight years (I'm not kidding). I took cooking classes, read cookbooks from cover to cover (even though I wasn't cooking myself – I'm a perpetual student, and wanted to understand what the chefs were doing in my favorite restaurants). I've always had friends who loved good food – and my four years in New York City taught me what New Yorkers have known for a long time: food can be the best form of entertainment. Even when I moved to Montana – not known for its high cuisine – I made a point of learning as much as possible about grass-fed beef, local produce, and the wonderfully sweet, wild-tasting huckleberries the bears love almost as much as we do.

Jim's obsession with food started at his grandmother's kitchen table, at age five. He would study her cooking, trying to capture her recipes on paper. She was a high French and German cook who had never written anything down, so his notes (he still has the "recipe book") include "Stir until arm grows tired," and "Pour flour into one of Grandma's

hands, two of mine, until it overflows just a little." To this day he speaks in German when he makes us breakfast.

When he started his business consultancy he worked with restaurant owners so he could get complimentary meals (we have a strict anti-comp policy for our guide – much to the chagrin of our accountant). This allowed him to dine at the best restaurants in Washington, DC, where he was born and raised. He has taken cooking classes everywhere he's lived and traveled – including Le Cordon Bleu in Paris – picking up hundreds of techniques, ingredients, and culinary mindsets. He's even studied Ayurvedic Indian cuisine with Mother Teresa's personal chef.

Once he realized the desperate need for a genuinely insightful, useful, honest, advice-oriented Maui restaurant review, Jim suggested we draft a review of "our" two restaurants: the dreamy-but-closed Japanese place and the too-well-marketed-to-die-a-natural-death Italian joint.

And that's how *Top Maui Restaurants* was born. The more we wrote, the more we wanted to write, until soon we had over fifty reviews. We shared them with a couple of friends who were coming to Maui, and they called them "invaluable."

We started selling our guide to people researching their Maui vacation online. (We still do.) Over the years the guide increased to over 200 pages. During that time, many people asked if there was a

book version available. They didn't want to print out 200 pages from their home computers. We always shook our head dismissively and said "Who needs another travel book to Maui?"

But the demand kept coming, and we finally gave in for the 2008 edition of the guide. This, the 2010 edition, is still the definitive dining review guide to Maui.

We get mail everyday from readers who have just spent time on Maui and used this book. Their stories about the memorable meals they've had are touching and spur us to create an even better guide for next year.

We've also started a brand new blog dedicated to Maui's restaurants. You can visit us there at www.MauiRestaurants-Blog.com. That's where we keep readers like you up-to-date on our latest food adventures, share recipes, and alert you to changes in the restaurant scene here on Maui. Each restaurant has its very own webpage on the blog, and we worked hard to implement a reader-review feature. If you love a restaurant (or not), you can go to that restaurant's page, write your own review, and rate it on the same 5 Star system you'll see in the reviews in this guide.

Everyone who visits Maui feels the magic that flows through this place. It's not just paradise on earth, not just white sand beaches, endless skies, warm breezes, swaying palm trees, lush rainforests, green volcanoes, whales, dolphins, and

rum drinks.

There's something else at work here. We don't want to get too woozy, but Maui can make you kind of ...woozy. It's so ...delicious. Like a coconut warm from the sun, cut open and spilling its milk down your throat, it's sweet. When you come here, you relax on some deeper level and life starts looking more manageable. Parts of you that may have been dormant wake up. Life looks ...good.

We want you to relax on your vacation, and then relax some more.

Stressing out about food – about when, where, how much, or what to eat – should not be on your agenda. Let us guide you. We write these reviews as if we were writing to our friends, and we would never recommend a place that we wouldn't send our best friend to.

We've included the very best, from Thrifty to Four Star. In case you think we're always positive, we've also included some ringers and some restaurants that market themselves well enough to attract your attention but are not worth your time or money.

We take no prisoners when we write. If the place looks dirty, we say so. If the food is overcooked, we point it out. If the dessert is brilliant, we cheer and ooh and ahh. The better the restaurant, the pickier we get. But we don't expect a banana bread stand by the side of the highway to rise to the standards set by Four Star restaurants.

For the first four years, we were completely anonymous, because no one on Maui even knew who we were (we never sold to locals). Now, of course, some of the better (smarter) restaurateurs recognize us, but we stick to our no-comping standards and refuse to take advertising from restaurants (even though some want us to).

We eat out an average of eleven times every week, rotating through restaurants to update our reviews. Over time, we've refined our methods for researching and writing reviews to a science.

When we first visit a restaurant, I excuse myself at least four times to discreetly capture my detailed notes in "private" in a bathroom stall. Jim, meantime, taps away on his iPhone, sending emails to himself with his notes. During the meal, we ask lots of questions of the servers, the busboys, and the hostess, trying to pick up as much information as possible about food preparation, the owners, the chef's philosophy, and the way they operate their business. If they ask us why we're so interested, we open our eyes wide and say "Because we love food so much!"

We often tape our "car conversations" immediately after the meal, so we can catch our first joint impressions about the food and the restaurant.

We write our first draft of the review as soon as possible, but only after we've been to a restaurant at least twice, and

usually three or more times. We return to the restaurant over and over to refine our opinion and keep things "fresh." If we hear about a change in the chef, a new menu, or a renovation, we make a visit to check it out. If a friend or a reader emails us or calls to let us know about a problem, we make a trip to investigate.

We eat about six disappointing meals every week to make sure that you don't have to. The result? Well, we've gained some weight, there's no denying. And we've gotten into some full-scale shouting matches that turned out to be nothing more than bad-food-induced temper tantrums.

And we've spent a heck of a lot of money on food that would make you cringe, since we don't take complimentary meals (and never will).

Our friends think we're nuts. They're happy to help by dining with us at certain places, and they report their own dining experiences back to us, but they flat out refuse to eat at many of the restaurants we have to review. But if they happen to work with visitors, they always ask us about our new favorites. Why? Because the number one question they field from visitors is "Where should we eat tonight?"

You won't be asking that question. You'll be spending your time on Maui lazing by the pool, trailing your fingers in the tidal basins, or snorkeling.

Thoughts of where to go to dinner may

enter your mind, but they'll quickly be answered by flipping through this guide.

At least, that's our hope. After all, Maui can be magic – as our story shows – and we wouldn't want its romance lessened in any way for you, our food-obsessed readers.

In 2007 we were married on Lana'i. One day during our honeymoon, we caught a glimpse of Maui and knew we were looking at the beach on which we met those years ago. We imagined looking back through time at our former selves at that magical moment and embraced as we had then, drawing each other close and feeling each other's hearts beating with the ocean waves. We thought of our home, just one block away from that beach, and sighed with contentment and happiness.

It's our most sincere hope that you will have a magical time while you are on Maui, too. This book should help.

Jim and I wish you shooting stars and glorious sunsets, and very, very good eating.

Warm Aloha,

Molly Jacobson
Kihei, Maui, Hawaii
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