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[Home](#) ▶ [Articles](#) ▶ [Mark Ellman's Mala Ocean Tavern Sparks a Flame in Wailea](#)

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## MAUI RESTAURANT REVIEWS

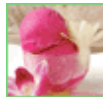
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## Mark Ellman's Mala Ocean Tavern Sparks a Flame in Wailea

by *Brian Berusch, Publisher, [B on Hawaii](#)*

It's easy to forget that Mark Ellman is one of the dozen (or so) founders of the Hawaii Regional Cuisine movement that sparked a flame under restaurants statewide nearly twenty years ago. He hangs with A-listers and rock stars like Alice Cooper and Clint Eastwood. He started a widely popular fast (yet healthy, according to Ellman) food eatery called Maui Tacos, which has outlets from Kihei to Windward Oahu, California to Fifth Avenue, New York City.



But diners seeking fresh, locally harvested eats in Wailea are getting a fast reminder that Mark Ellman is all about quality fare at reasonable prices. In 2008, Ellman opened a second Mala eatery at the Wailea Beach Marriott, to complement his superpopular (and ocean fronting) Lahaina eatery of the same name that opened nearly four years ago. And the tone that was set at Mala in Lahaina—laid back, Mediterranean tapas-style plates with the option of larger entrees, and a sizeable wine list—now has refined diners on the south shore soaking up the vibe.

“Mala at Wailea is actually the only dinner spot in the hotel,” said Ellman. “And we’ve got our challenges ahead of us. The hotel has been under heavy construction for over a year, and is just starting to win back some of its clientele.”

Ellman adds that the sizeable layout of the Marriott also has some guestrooms in closer proximity to the restaurants at The Shops at Wailea than their in-house Mala. However, he's confident once the word spreads of the well-rounded dishes, generous portions and unique wine offerings (like a 26-spigot cuvee), the dining room will be full more often than not.

As far as the cuisine is concerned, Ellman sources as much of his product as he can from local purveyors—something Hawaii Regional Cuisine founders (and followers) are absolutely set on.



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“It’s getting easier to buy organic in Hawaii. We get a lot of our veggies from Adaptations in Kona, which are flown over twice weekly,” shared Ellman. “And there are now a number of mom and pop farmers on Maui—even in Kihei. All our tomatoes are from John Applegate at Olowalu farms—and they’re amazing.”

It’s the use of such fresh, local product that shapes the varied dishes at both Mala restaurants. “Everyone went through that phase of using gastriques and foams on their dishes,” admits Ellman. “But you get over that fast. Just look at Joel Robuchon. He’s opening bistros around the world right now. Back to the basics. And it’s what we’re doing here in Hawaii. The best thing to do as a chef is to establish a relationship with the food you’re buying. Then you have confidence that as long as you don’t overdo a dish, it will taste great.”

This notion has spread like wildfire throughout Hawaii’s top eateries, many of which are helmed by chefs that Ellman himself mentored. All throughout Hawaii, restaurants are “dolling up” their dishes less, and letting the organic produce, fish from local waters and on-island game speak for itself. The closer to the restaurant an ingredient was acquired, the better it’s going to taste, says Ellman.

The sentiment carries right through to Ellman’s philosophy with dealing with staff. Instead of hiring food purveyors or buyers, Ellman has his seasoned chefs do all the buying of ingredients around the island—in hopes that they too establish relationships with the food they prep.

“The other day I was speaking with one of my growers who just harvested some local limes. She was raving about how good they were in margaritas she made at home,” said Ellman, adding that he incorporated them in to a Mexicanstyle dish at Mala. “The same thing happened the week before with one of my farmer’s star fruit,” to which Ellman says he was able to incorporate the tangy fruit in to a dish at Mala in Wailea.

“It was great--and a lot of our customers visiting from the mainland hadn’t seen star fruit used in a hot dish the way we prepared it,” said Ellman, who adds we’d have to come by Mala to see how it was used.



For the opening of Mala at Wailea, Ellman partnered with long-time friend (and uber-successful music producer) Shep Gordon. Other partners include Alice Cooper and Clint Eastwood. And it’s the philosophy of A-listers who care about “green”

happenings that melded with Ellman’s own.

“We just switched over to all biodegradable cleaning materials in all our restaurants [Mala, Mala Wailea, Penne Pasta and Maui Tacos]. They are far more expensive, but I think it’s worth it,” shared Ellman. “Not only because it’s the right thing to do, and people are always keeping an eye on what I’m doing [as a founder of Hawaii Regional Cuisine]. But because I know that if I buy them, it will encourage other restaurants to do so. Then, the prices will go down.”

Ellman’s dedication to fine fare extends beyond what’s on the plate. His “it’s just food” attitude is comforting in the restaurant scene. While he is adamant about top-quality dishes, he’s just out to serve people a good time.

“If we can bring people a little bit of joy through a certain vegetable they’ve never had before from the Big Island, or a baby coconut from Hana, it’s worth it. Just to see someone’s face light up after they try something new, in a gorgeous setting—be it in Lahaina on the water or at the Marriott overlooking the beach—it’s an amazing feeling.”

[Mala Lahaina](#)

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[Mala Wailea](#)

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