

Sunshine on a plate

Likuliku Lagoon Resort is flying the flag for new-wave Fijian fare

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FIJI has never been considered a gourmet destination. Surely no traveller ever sat bolt upright in bed and declared they simply had to go to Nadi for the food.

But beyond the generous island-style buffets, the lovo oven pits and the undeniably good Indo-Fijian curries (Saffron in Nadi Town and Indigo at the Port Denarau marina are the standout restaurants), Likuliku Lagoon Resort is at the apex of a new wave of tropical culinary excellence.

When this Fijian-owned 46-bure resort — the first in Fiji to feature overwater bungalows — opened in 2007 on Malolo Island in the Mamanuca group, Australian chef Shane Watson was at the stoves. He swiftly cemented Likuliku's reputation as the island nation's gourmet central.

Watson is now at Wildfire in Sydney and succeeding him at Likuliku are husband-and-wife team Brett and Chloe Kryskow. Both are in their 20s and from Merimbula on the south coast of NSW; they are so fresh-faced it's hard to believe a pair so young could cook with such panache and ingenuity. Brett is ex-Bathers Pavilion, Serge Dansereau's gourmet mecca at Sydney's Balmoral Beach, and Chloe, a pastry chef, was most recently working at Sydney's much-awarded Quay restaurant with Peter Gilmore, who will be holding masterclasses at the resort in April.

Filling Watson's undeniably large (sand) shoes could have been a daunting task but not for this well-travelled duo, who arrived at Likuliku in October 2008. It's Brett's first position as executive chef but he worked alongside Watson at the Sofitel Queenstown in New Zealand's South Island and gained experience of Fiji and its "relaxed way of doing things" during an earlier stint at the watersports-focused resort on Namotu Island.

They have maintained Watson's trademark small-plate servings and his Asian twists to proceedings, which often are as homely (and not just for Japanese guests) as ramen noodle soup. Brett calls the food "light and tropical... evolving cuisine" and says very little dairy is used, even salad dressings come in zesty combinations such as soy and tomato rather than mayonnaise or oil-heavy garlicky varieties. "No cream, except a bit in desserts; it's all low fat, perfect for the climate."

When I interviewed Watson in 2007, he termed the Likuliku signature cuisine "clean" and so it continues to be, unsullied by any hint of fattiness.

Brett reels off a list of favoured produce, from New Zealand lamb and Kapiti cheese to wagyu and kurobuta pork from Queensland's Security Foods. He features Huon ocean trout from Tasmania and Hervey Bay scallops, in season, from Queensland.

On a local level, there's a steady stream of seafood from fishermen in the waters surrounding the Mamanuca chain but, as he points out, he can't put in an order.



Likuliku has cemented its reputation as Fiji's gourmet central and the kitchen is now in the hands of husband-and-wife team Brett and Chloe Kryskow

"It's just what is biting that day, the dishes can't always be planned much in advance." Coral trout, long-nose and spangled emperor, painted lobster and reef bugs are in abundance. When available, Brett fillets and steams kawakawa and serves with salted chilli, bok choy, baby corn and ginger glaze. Reef squid is chargrilled with morsels of chorizo and drizzled with tomato-rich romesco sauce.

Sunny-coloured fruit is plentiful in these tropical isles, from soursop and papaya to such stalwarts as bananas and mangoes of the bucketload. Chloe mentions *ivi* (chestnuts) as a favourite new ingredient, plus heart of palm and banana blossoms, which (like

pumpkin flowers) "can be gathered from the garden at about 6pm and popped straight on to the dinner menu".

A spice and herb patch on the perimeter of the Likuliku estate features a buoyant array of curry plants, holy basil, dill, sawtooth coriander, oregano, sage, chilli (purple, red, green), lemongrass, myriad Asian greens, *kata bahji* (edible Indian flower) and okra. Watson had set up a good supply chain with Nadi Bay Herbs and the Kryskows continue to use this premium purveyor for mustard cress, tatsoi, rocket, chives and parsley.

Another long-term supplier, Spices of Fiji, an organic plan-

tation at Wainadoli, just west of Suva, provides vanilla beans, turmeric, green peppercorns, cardamom, nutmeg, cinnamon, cumin, coriander seeds, fenugreek and masala curry mix.

Meals are taken in the resort's Fijiana restaurant — open sided, spacious and high ceilings — with an elevated view over the aquamarine lagoon and, beyond, the row of 10 overwater bures, with their thatched roofs perched high, like ceremonial headdresses.

Lunch kicks off with an icy shot-glass cooler — perhaps watermelon and mint, passionfruit and orange or pear and bush lemon — and an amuse-bouche appetiser such as crisp pork belly

with cucumber and chilli dressing. The main courses often have a salad base (an Asian-inspired assembly of pickled pacific squid, rambutan, cucumber, green papaya, red capsicum and nam jin is deliciously astringent) but a wagyu steak baguette with onion jam and tomato relish or beer-battered mahi mahi fillets with tartare sauce and mustard cress could also be offered as Brett's uplift on resort cafe cuisine.

There are dreamy desserts at lunch, too, which Chloe insists are so light you simply must succumb. Which is why part of the Likuliku lyme daze is to put away an iced lime and white chocolate parfait with garden mint, lemongrass-

infused lychee and jackfruit at, say, 2pm. Then to front up six hours later (after a lie-down and a bit of button-adjusting, it has to be said) for cinnamon-spiced pineapple and apple pie with gingerbread ice-cream and honey tuille or Chloe's signature dish, a Middle Eastern-meets-the Mamanucas flourish of cool-set rosewater custard, vanilla cream, mint leaves, honey and almond biscotti.

She even gives bombe alaska a tropical makeover with mango ice cream and passionfruit jelly.

The food is never predictable, whether it's a lychee sorbet, a delicate young coconut jelly or a serve of nutmeg popcorn from Chloe, or almost anything in Brett's main-event repertoire.

Over a week, my favourites are a pan-fried spangled emperor fillet with coriander, mint, tomato and lemongrass essence and steamed pacific prawns with mesclun lettuce, carrot, daikon, matsuhisa dressing and sesame seeds.

Such dishes sound almost virtuous so it's a pity about my nightly intake of coco mojitos at the Dua Tale bar, with gently Fijian irony, the name means one more.

Fast forward to breakfast and did I mention the most popular dishes are not of the plain old eggs and bacon ilk but mud crab omelet, with wild rocket, chilli and papaya relish, or pineapple pancakes, fromage blanc sorbet and passionfruit and banana salad?

Resistance is utterly impossible. Perhaps one really can declare that a trip to Fiji for the food (and the best bombe alaska south of Anchorage) is in order... as long as it's to Likuliku via Nadi.



Brett Kryskow came from Sydney's Bathers Pavilion



Chloe Kryskow, a pastry chef, worked at Sydney's Quay

Checklist

Brett Kryskow and Peter Gilmore of Sydney's Quay will run masterclasses at Likuliku from April 8 to 12. More: likulikulagoon.com