



THESE MOCHIKO CHICKEN STRIPS (RECIPE ON PAGE 50), COATED IN A SEASONED RICE FLOUR BATTER AND THEN FRIED, ARE TYPICAL OF MAIN DISHES FOR HAWAIIAN PLATE LUNCH.

IN HAWAII,
 “DELICIOUS” EQUALS
 PLATE LUNCH,
 SAYS CHEF
 Sam Choy

O n o N u i



CHEF SAM CHOY (ABOVE, WITH HIS FAMOUS FRIED RICE) IS A RESTAURANTEUR, TELEVISION HOST, AND COOKBOOK AUTHOR WHO IS CONSIDERED AROUND THE WORLD TO BE ONE OF HAWAII'S CULINARY AMBASSADORS. WHO BETTER TO TOUR PLATE LUNCH JOINTS WITH IN HONOLULU (RIGHT)?



“Can you taste the love?” asked chef Sam Choy as we tucked into his Famous Fried Rice. We bobbed our heads enthusiastically. Mouths full, humming musical umms of delight, we savored his fragrant, mahogany rice studded with bright slivers of green onion and red *char siu* pork, a recipe created especially for the plate lunch menu at Breakfast, Lunch, Crab, & Big Aloha Brewery, one of Choy’s well-known restaurants. • For the uninitiated, plate lunch is a build-it-yourself meal that leans heavily on starch. During our many visits to the islands since our honeymoon 22 years ago, John and I have grown to love plate

lunch as much as we love Hawaii. Traditionally, the first thing that goes on your plate is two scoops of steamed or fried rice. Next you choose a mayonnaise-based salad like macaroni or potato. Some restaurants also offer sides of cold or hot Asian noodles called long

pickled vegetable dish known as *kim chee*. The finishing touch is protein: Since these are fast food–style meals, the meat, fish, or chicken is most often barbecued, grilled, or fried.

TEXT AND HAWAII PHOTOGRAPHY HOLLY RUDIN-BRASCHI AND JOHN C. BRASCHI
 FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY BY BEATRIZ DACOSTA
 FOOD STYLING BY MEGAM SCHLOW
 PROP STYLING BY EDOUARD PRULHIERE

Chef Choy calls plate lunch one of the most economical and filling meals in Hawaii. “You can eat your biggest meal of the day at lunchtime for anywhere from \$4 to \$12,

depending on your appetite,” he says.

We have learned to save this stick-to-your-ribs lunch for times when we’ve built up hunger after an energetic morning of bodysurfing, snorkeling, or hiking. Our restaurant choice depends on our location that day and whether or not we have time to change after our morning activities. We’ve savored plate lunch on fine china at gourmet restaurants and eaten it from Styrofoam boxes filled by hardworking Japanese “aunties” cooking in shopping center kiosks. We’ve sampled the fare dished out by friendly Koreans from their lunch wagon parked near the beach and waited in strip mall diners while Vietnamese grill jockeys cooked our lunch. And we have rarely been disappointed.

Still, we knew that the best way to really experience plate lunch was to spend the day with chef Choy, visiting his favorite plate lunch palaces (see their recipes that follow). After all, this unique meal that originated in the islands is frequently featured on the *Cheap Eats* television spots Choy appears in for Honolulu’s KHNL.

“One of my favorite ways to get people excited about Hawaiian cuisine is introducing them to plate lunch,” explains Choy, whose larger-than-life passion for his local cuisine is as genuine in person as it seems on TV and in his nine cookbooks. “It’s probably the most exciting meal to have here in the islands because it gives a true taste of our culture and our history.”

Sitting with us at our first stop of the day, Choy’s lively Breakfast, Lunch, Crab, & Big Aloha Brewery in Honolulu’s industrial district, the chef tasted a forkful of his handiwork. “*Ono nui*, pure Hawaiian love,” he exclaimed, using the Hawaiian words for “very delicious.” Plate lunch is in fact inextricably linked with “Hawaiian love,” better known as the aloha spirit. We asked Choy to talk a little more about it.

What makes plate lunch such a special and important meal in Hawaii?

When we cook in Hawaii, we extend our love and our spirit of aloha to anyone who eats at our table. Here in the islands, “aloha” is more than just a greeting of hello or good-bye. It’s a beautiful philosophy handed down to us from the ancient Hawai-

ians that means each person regards the other with mutual respect and affection. It also means we welcome one another with warmth and sincerity, no strings attached. Plate lunch is Hawaiian culture because every ethnic group that calls Hawaii home has contributed to its development.

How did plate lunch originate?

The real notion of Hawaiian plate lunch originated from the 1860s to 1880s with the wave of over 40,000 Japanese plantation workers. As with the Chinese immigrants who came before them, their primary food was rice. Everything else, like vegetable and protein dishes, was served in small portions because it was considered *okazu*, or secondary condiments to the rice.

Most of the immigrants at the time were



men. Since they didn’t have families to provide their meals, *okazuya*, or side-dish shops, were set up. These were our first Hawaiian fast food restaurants. Typically, customers would start with a load of rice and then would choose from a variety of sides.

As more women immigrated to the islands and married, they took over making lunch for their husbands. The worker’s families packed their lunch in *kau kau* (food or meal) tins, an early-style lunch box of round stackable tin dishes. They would usually put steamed rice in the bottom tin, then two or three different meat, chicken, fish, and vegetable dishes in the nesting tins above it.

With the immigration of Portuguese plantation workers in the 1870s, and Koreans, Filipinos, and Puerto Ricans around the turn of the 20th century, food packed in *kau kau* tins began reflecting the cuisines of these new cultures. The Portuguese brought their spicy *linguiça* and milder *chouriço* sausages to our shores. Koreans brought us dishes like tangy barbecued beef and *kalbi* (pork ribs). Settlers from the Philippines brought their succulent chicken *adobo*, slowly braised in vinegar and wine. Puerto Ricans introduced dishes like *tostones* (plantain fritters) and *pasteles* (dough stuffed with pork and cooked in banana leaves). During World War II, American GIs brought us Spam.

How did plate lunch move from being cooked in the home to being served in restaurants?

In the early 1950s, when the Hawaiian economy started shifting gears, people’s appetites hadn’t changed. They craved the same kind of food that they used to eat when they labored in the fields. I am so sentimental about the way we used to eat plate lunch that I still have the original *kau kau tin* my mom used to pack for me when I picked pineapple as a kid.

As a result, some enterprising locals started serving plate lunch commercially from lunch wagons. They would park in big parking lots near office buildings, by the ocean, or by construction sites, and all the locals would go there to buy lunch. In the early ’60s and ’70s, plate lunch began filtering into restaurants.

Today, plate lunch has become so popular throughout Hawaii that each chef strives to make his interpretation “*da kine*” (the best). The most popular restaurants can serve upward of 300 lunches in an afternoon. The chefs of Hawaii have taken island-style plate lunch to levels where people are now enjoying it on the mainland.



When Zachary Lee opened his small takeout restaurant three years ago, it caught on quickly in the nearby business district. This ultra-crispy chicken, a dish he learned to make from his Chinese-Korean mom, is one of Sugoi’s best sellers.

MOCHIKO CHICKEN FROM SUGOI

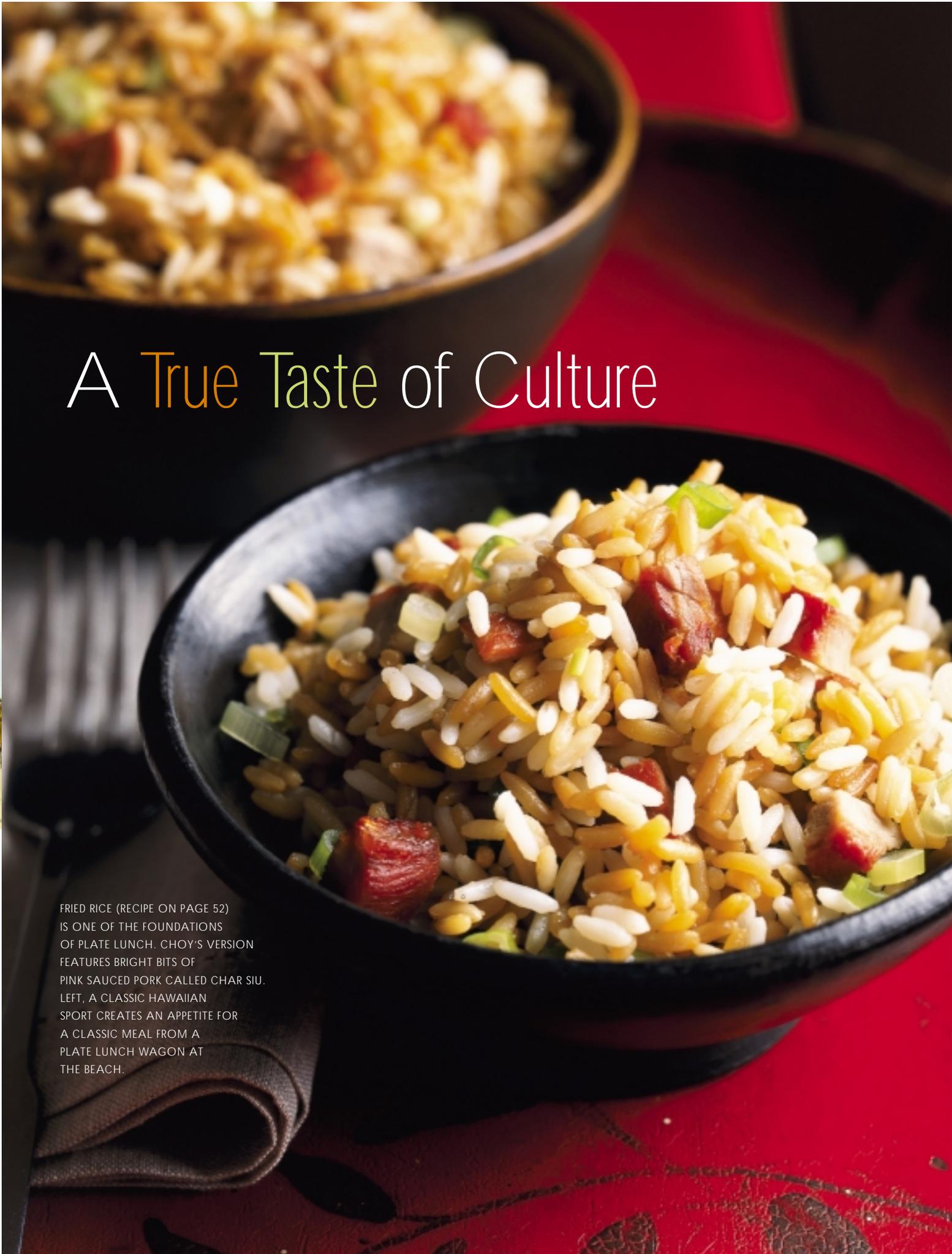
PREP AND COOKING TIME: 40 minutes, plus at least 24 hours chilling time

NOTES: Mochiko sweet rice flour, made from finely ground short-grain rice, is available in supermarkets in areas with a large Asian population. If your supermarket doesn’t carry it, substitute all-purpose flour.

MAKES: 6 to 8 servings

A True Taste of Culture

FRIED RICE (RECIPE ON PAGE 52) IS ONE OF THE FOUNDATIONS OF PLATE LUNCH. CHOY'S VERSION FEATURES BRIGHT BITS OF PINK SAUCED PORK CALLED CHAR SIU. LEFT, A CLASSIC HAWAIIAN SPORT CREATES AN APPETITE FOR A CLASSIC MEAL FROM A PLATE LUNCH WAGON AT THE BEACH.





ASIAMANOA OFFERS THIS TASTY KUNG PAO SHRIMP. SUGOI (BELOW RIGHT) LOOKS CALM, BUT WAIT UNTIL THE MIDDAY RUSH—THEY SERVE MORE THAN 300 MEALS.

"Plate lunch is usually eaten out at restaurants or out of the house," says chef Choy. "If we cook it at home, we like to take it to the beach or a park for a luau or pot luck."

EASY CHAR SIU

PREP AND COOK TIME: 40 minutes, plus 2 hours chilling time

NOTES: Char siu sauce from a jar makes this recipe extremely easy. Look for it in the Asian foods section of your supermarket. Serve this pork in the fried rice below or sliced as part of a plate lunch.

MAKES: 3 to 4 servings

- 1½ pound boneless pork butt, with moderate fat and marbling
- ½ cup char siu sauce, such as Lee Kum Kee brand
- ¼ cup honey

1. Cut pork into long, thick strips. Place in a glass dish and smear all surfaces with char siu sauce. Refrigerate, covered, for 2 hours.

2. Place a wire baking rack in a shallow roasting pan. Pour water into pan to just below the level of the rack. Remove pork from sauce; place on rack. Roast in a 375° oven for 20 minutes.

3. After 20 minutes of cooking, turn strips over, brush with honey, and continue to roast about 20 minutes more, until the thickest part of the meat is no longer pink and the internal temperature reaches 145°. Let rest 5 minutes before slicing, so the juices settle.

Per serving: 556 cal., 44% (243 cal.) from fat; 30 g protein; 27 g fat (9.3 g sat.); 45 g carbo (0 g fiber); 2,048 mg sodium; 121 mg chol.

- ¾ cup soy sauce
 - 2 large eggs
 - 1½ teaspoons crushed garlic
 - 1 cup sugar
 - 1 cup cornstarch
 - 1 cup mochiko sweet rice flour or all-purpose flour
 - 4 pounds boned, skinned chicken thighs
- Canola or peanut oil for frying

1. In a blender, mix soy sauce, eggs, and garlic until well blended. Add sugar, then cornstarch, and then rice flour, blending well after each addition. Pour into a large bowl.

2. Remove silver skin and fat from chicken. Slice each thigh into 1-inch strips across the grain of the meat. Fold strips into flour mixture, turning well to

coat all surfaces. Refrigerate, covered, for 24 hours.

3. Before frying, thoroughly toss chicken in flour mixture. Fill a 10- to 12-inch pan with straight sides with ½ to 1 inch oil (or fill a deep-fryer with oil according to manufacturer's directions). Heat oil to 350°. Using tongs, fry chicken in batches, gently placing pieces into hot oil so they fit comfortably (do not crowd the pan or oil temperature will decrease, resulting in greasy chicken). Fry chicken pieces 3 minutes on each side, until internal temperature of pieces reaches 160°. Place on towel-lined plates to drain. Serve hot.

Per serving: 579 cal., 27% (154 cal.) from fat; 49 g protein; 17 g fat (3.2 g sat.); 54 g carbo (0.6 g fiber); 1,756 mg sodium; 242 mg chol.



SAM CHOY'S FAMOUS FRIED RICE

PREP AND COOKING TIME: 30 to 40 minutes

NOTES: Rice must be hot, not cold, when this dish is assembled. Look for char siu (Chinese-style barbecued pork) in the

hot deli section of your supermarket or make it using the recipe that precedes. For a more substantial dish, stir in thin strips of freshly cooked beaten egg and frozen peas and carrots, thawed.

MAKES: 6 servings

- ¾ cup soy sauce
- ⅓ cup oyster sauce
- 2 tablespoons cooking oil
- ½ pound char siu (see notes; recipe precedes) or canned spiced ham, such as Spam, cut into ¼-inch dice
- 6 cups hot cooked long-grain white rice
- ⅔ cup thinly sliced green onion

1. In a small bowl, thoroughly whisk soy sauce and oyster sauce; set aside.
2. Heat oil in a hot wok or frying pan. Add char siu. When it starts to sizzle, fold in rice and stir for 2 minutes.
3. With a spoon or spatula, fold in soy sauce mixture and green onions until rice is a light brown color. Serve immediately.

Per serving: 402 cal., 34% (138 cal.) from fat; 13 g protein; 15 g fat (4.4 g sat.); 52 g carbo (0.9 g fiber); 3,207 mg sodium; 26 mg chol.

“Best Drive-In truly makes the best macaroni salad in Honolulu,” says Choy. Owner Daniel Lee, who has run the restaurant with his wife for more than 10 years, prepares everything from scratch daily.

BEST DRIVE-IN'S MACARONI SALAD

PREP TIME: 20 to 30 minutes, plus at least 1 hour chilling time

NOTES: It's important to chill the cooked pasta for as long as you can before making this recipe, to let it cool and dry out a bit. Otherwise the mayonnaise can make the salad soggy. (At the restaurant, they chill the cooked macaroni for up to 17 hours.) Fortunately, cooking the pasta ahead makes this recipe easy to do in steps when you're having a big party and don't want to make everything the same day.

MAKES: 6 to 8 servings (10 cups)

- 1 pound elbow macaroni
- ⅓ cup minced carrot
- ⅓ cup minced onion
- ⅓ cup minced celery
- ½ cup frozen peas
- 2 hard-cooked eggs, shredded
- 2½ cups mayonnaise
- ⅓ cup finely diced canned spiced ham, such as Spam

1. Cook macaroni according to package directions for al dente or until just done (tender yet slightly chewy). Rinse with cold water, then drain well in a colander. Transfer to a large bowl and cover with damp cheesecloth or towels. Chill until pasta is thoroughly cooled, from at least 1 hour up to overnight.

2. In a large bowl, combine carrot, onion, celery, peas, eggs, mayonnaise, and spiced ham. Using a large spatula, fold in pasta. Cover tightly and chill an additional 2 hours before serving.

Per serving: 753 cal., 69% (522 cal.) from fat; 11 g protein; 58 g fat (9.2 g sat.); 47 g carbo (2 g fiber); 507 mg sodium; 98 mg chol.

Edmund Pang's succulent Kung Pao Shrimp is just one of the homemade dishes he offers for plate lunch at Asiamanoa, his Chinese restaurant located in the hills above Honolulu. Pang offers an extensive menu of Chinese and island dishes, many of which you won't find anywhere else in town.

Where to Eat Plate Lunch

“No visit to Hawaii is complete without sampling lunch at a few different restaurants, because each experience is unique and loads of fun,” says Choy. Here's a list of his favorite Honolulu-area plate lunch palaces (area code is 808):

Asiamanoa, 2801 E. Manoa Rd.; 988-2828.

Best Drive-In, 111 Sand Island Access Rd.; 847-2378.

Cooke Street Diner, 605 Cooke St.; 597-8080.

Kapolei Korean BBQ, Kapolei Market Place, 590 Farrington Hwy. #508, Kapolei; 674-8822.

Pongo's Kitchen, 414D Mokauea St.; 845-6008.

Sam Choy's Diamond Head Restaurant, 449 Kapahulu Ave., 2nd Floor; 732-8645.

Sam Choy's Breakfast, Lunch, Crab, & Big Aloha Brewery, 580 N. Nimitz Hwy.; 545-7979.

Sugoi, 1286 Kalani St., Ste. 106; 841-7984.

ASIAMANOA'S KUNG PAO SHRIMP

PREP AND COOKING TIME: 30 to 40 minutes

NOTES: Ranges are given for the amounts of chili sauce and chilies, so you can make this dish to your liking. Start with the lowest amount and increase gradually after tasting. Look for the canned vegetables in the Asian foods section of your supermarket.

MAKES: 6 to 8 servings

- ½ cup chicken broth
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon rice vinegar
- 2 tablespoons oyster sauce
- 1 to 2 teaspoons chili-garlic sauce
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- 2 tablespoons Chinese rice wine
- 2 tablespoons peanut or vegetable oil
- 1 onion (3 to 4 oz.), cut into ½-inch dice
- 2 to 6 dried red chili peppers, halved
- 1 bell pepper (6 to 8 oz.), cut into ½-inch dice
- 6 ounces button mushrooms, sliced
- 1 can (5 oz.) water chestnuts, drained
- 1 can (5 oz.) bamboo shoots, drained
- 1 cup frozen petite corn kernels
- 1 pound raw shelled, deveined shrimp (31 to 40 per lb.)
- ⅓ cup thinly sliced green onions
- ⅓ cup salted peanuts

1. In a small bowl, whisk broth, soy sauce, rice vinegar, oyster sauce, chili-garlic sauce, and sugar; set aside. In another bowl, whisk cornstarch with rice wine until dissolved; set aside.

2. To a 10- to 12-inch nonstick pan or a wok over high heat, add oil. When oil begins to shimmer, swirl it to coat all surfaces.

3. Add onion and stir-fry 3 minutes, until edges are golden brown and onion begins to become tender. Halfway through cooking time, cover, if desired, to help soften onion.

4. Add chili peppers, bell peppers, and mushrooms; stir-fry an additional 3 minutes. Halfway through cooking time, cover, if desired, to help soften vegetables.

5. Add water chestnuts, bamboo shoots, and corn; stir-fry 1 minute.

6. Add broth mixture and shrimp; stir to coat all ingredients. When broth mixture begins to boil, stir in cornstarch mixture and green onions. Cook until sauce is thickened and shrimp are opaque but still moist-looking in center of thickest part (cut to test), 2 to 3 minutes. Serve immediately on a platter, garnished with peanuts.

Per serving: 189 cal., 37% (69 cal.) from fat; 16 g protein; 7.7 g fat (1.2 g sat.); 15 g carbo (2.6 g fiber); 585 mg sodium; 86 mg chol.