



destination: THE ISLANDS OF FRENCH POLYNESIA

Paradise Found

EXPLORING THE CUISINE OF FRENCH POLYNESIA

BY CLARE KLEINEDLER PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD HORTON

FROM AN OVERHEAD VIEW, the islands of French Polynesia sit like pebbles in a vast territory of sparkling aquamarine waters—the kind that vacation dreams are made of. Visions of flower necklaces, fruity cocktails and ukulele music come to mind as the airplane descends



onto the runway. But these islands on the southern end of the Pacific Ocean are much more than a tropical paradise—they are a captivating blend of the native Tahitian and the inhabiting French cultures.

OPPOSITE: Overwater bungalows at the St. Regis in Bora Bora, with Moorea's famous mountain in the backdrop.

Perhaps nothing captures the melding of two societies better than the cuisine. On any given menu, there can be raw fish dressed with coconutmilk alongside grilled veal covered in cream sauce, and both are often eaten with a crusty French baguette. It's perfectly common to see a quaint bistro straight from the Champs-Élysées situated on a street bustling with old-model farm trucks and Tahitian fishermen selling their day's catch.

It's 6 A.M. and a half-dozen burly men are stacking firewood into a deep, dark, underground pit. It's hot and humid, as evidenced by the beads of sweat forming on the brows of everyone here. A couple of stray dogs, drawn by the scent of yesterday's feast, jump back as the fire roars up from the just-lit wood pile. This is the ritual of the *ahima'a*, or "earth oven," the traditional Polynesian underground cooking method typically used to prepare large quantities of meat and vegetables.

Many resorts feature this well-known style of food preparation at weekly, elaborate dinner parties complete with Polynesian dancers and drum circles; for Edmond Tamahoa, it's more about food than fanfare at his **Botanic Garden Restaurant** in Papeari, on the main island of Tahiti. The outdoor kitchen of this local favorite is basic: a handful of large knives, dozens of well-seasoned cast-iron pots and a staff of no-nonsense, local Tahitian cooks. When the oven is ready, the cooks load it with two whole pigs, chicken and vegetable stews, root vegetables and an assortment of *po'e* (puddings)—enough to feed about ninety people at Tamahoa's restaurant today.

I am here with Paulette Bennett, a local woman known affectionately as Popo. She and her mother, Bella, give tours around the main island in Popo's



THIS PAGE: Poussin cru: tuna tartare with coconut milk, vegetables and sea salt.

minivan, "Happy Taxi Popo." Both women have plenty of insight on the traditional culture, and as we wait for our meal to cook, they tell stories about everything from local delicacies—including the pungent *fafaru*, which are pieces of raw fish marinated and fermented in sea water—to Marlon Brando (Bella worked as a costumer on *Mutiny on the Bounty*, filmed in Tahiti).

After three hours of waiting, Tamahoa signals that the feast is ready, and we move quickly to our table out

on the patio. Soon we are brought plate after plate of cooked pork, roasted taro, sweet potato and tapioca, and bowls of Tahitian spinach and chicken stew. The pork is so tender and succulent that it falls right off of the bone; it needs nothing more than a sprinkle of salt. The most surprising dishes are the desserts: sweet, sticky puddings made from tapioca root and taro, baked and cut into cubes and served with sugary coconut milk. The texture is that of dense gelatin, and the flavors are rich and starchy and delightful.



THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT: Freshly baked cookies at the St. Regis; Chef Damien Rinaldi-Dovio and wife Vaihere of La Villa Mahana in Bora-Bora.

After working off my heavy brunch with an afternoon of swimming and snorkeling, I retreat to the **Vaitohi Restaurant** at the **Manava Suite Resort**. The resort is just a few miles away from the main airport in Papeete, and boasts the largest infinity pool on the island. Chef Bertrand Jeanson, who hails from France, uses local ingredients like mahi mahi and pineapples to create refined, French-inspired Tahitian dishes. “I try to use the variety of local produce but with the influence of what I learned from my region on the east side of France,” says Jeanson. His exquisite “Polynesian trilogy of tuna,” featuring locally-caught tuna, coconut milk and green lemons, captures the island’s flavors in one artfully-prepared dish.

There are many chefs like Jeanson who have made the move from their native France to live, indefinitely, in French Polynesia. Many of the chefs here, like Chef Francois Courtin of **Le Mahogany Restaurant** on the island of Moorea, decided to stay after falling in love and marrying a local. “I’ve been here since 1978, and I stayed because I fell in love,” says Courtin.

“I now have two kids and I am used to this place...this very special place. We have to work to make money, but in France you wake up every morning and it’s just another day. Here, it’s different.”

Just one look at Courtin’s cozy little bistro and it’s easy to understand why he would never go back to the high-stress kitchens of his native country. The bistro’s dark wood interior is bathed in sunlight thanks to large, wide-open windows, and the kitchen is small but nicely appointed. His restaurant is frequented by locals, and Courtin’s wife, Blondine Agnie, who runs the front of the house, seems to know many by name. Courtin casually works in the kitchen, slicing local avocados with one hand while swirling oil in a hot sauté pan with the other. He gets his fish from a local fisherman down the road, to use in dishes like grilled swordfish with pomelos in a light cream sauce. For dessert, he whips up a perfect pear tarte Tatin with rich vanilla ice cream—a nod to his long-ago but not forgotten life in Paris.

Similarly, Chef Bertrand Papin and his wife Laurence also enjoy a quieter

life on the island of Moorea. The two own and operate **Le Mayflower Restaurant**, a fantastic little eatery on the northwest coast of the island. Known for its lobster ravioli, the restaurant serves up a lighter version of typical French cuisine at a bargain price. Of life in Moorea, Laurence says, “It’s very different here than in France. There is no cinema, no major shopping center, just the beach. We finish work very early, like 10 P.M. We have more time with our children, and the weather is always beautiful.”

The Courtins’ and Papins’ home of Moorea is an understandable choice for the idyllic life; the island is only a thirty-minute ferry ride from the main island of Tahiti. It has just one main road, so a rental car is the ideal form of transportation as it is nearly impossible to get lost. I zip around in my tiny car and marvel at the natural beauty. There are fields of pineapples, jackfruit, coconuts and mangoes. A quick stop at the Belvedere Lookout, which overlooks the panoramic Opunohu and Cook’s bays, reveals the crystal-clear lagoon and lush green landscapes of the island. On

the drive back to the hotel, I spy a few fishermen, knee-deep in the ocean, skillfully working their fishing lines by hand. The serenity here is palpable.

I'm staying at the **Sofitel Moorea Ia Ora Beach Resort**, in an over-water bungalow. The view from the deck is breathtaking; though I've seen the clear waters of French Polynesia in many photographs, there's really nothing like being here in person. Since every over-water bungalow has a private deck and ladder, I can climb right down into the warm ocean and swim among the fish and coral. The sea world is truly amazing; I see puffers, black-and-white humbugs, black-and-yellow Moorish idols and bright blue chromis. And since each bungalow has a large window in the floor, you can see marine life even if you're squeamish about jumping into the ocean.

The Sofitel has two restaurants on the property. **Pure**, with its casual atmosphere, offers spectacular buffets for breakfast, lunch and dinner that include a mix of local flavors and French favorites. The **K Restaurant**, open only for dinner, is where executive chef Gerard Mosiniak showcases his flair for using natural cooking methods like outdoor charcoal grilling to bring out the best in local fish and imported meats. An uncomplicated dish of grilled local lobster tails with a mild saffron sauce is out of this world, and a white tuna appetizer shines in a straightforward presentation of just raw medallions topped with a spicy mayonnaise. The restaurant itself, with its sand "floor" and glittering crystal candleholders, strikes the perfect balance between island casual and elegant sophistication.

On my way out of Moorea, I stop by the Jus de Fruits de Moorea factory. Here, many of the island's naturally grown fruits like pineapples, pomelos

and coconuts are hand-peeled for juices, liquors, creams and candies. The on-site store offers liquor tastings, and I sample some delicious ginger, banana and coconut cream liqueurs. The flavors are surprisingly light and refreshing—nothing at all like most liqueurs I've tasted. I also grab a few boxes of dark chocolate-covered pomelo rinds and Tahitian vanilla pods to take home with me.

I board an Air Tahiti flight for Bora-Bora, perhaps the most famous of all the islands in French Polynesia. It's a quick trip; only forty-five minutes from Moorea. At the airport taxi pick-up area I know I'm in for a treat: all of the area hotels send boats, not cars, to pick up newly-arrived guests. The **St. Regis Bora-Bora Resort**, my hotel, has an actual yacht to ferry over guests. The check-in process is all taken care of during the boat ride, so when I arrive I'm whisked via golf cart straight to my over-water villa.

The villas at St. Regis are, in a word, spectacular. Each is at least 1,500 square feet and features beautiful furnishings made from exotic woods, fresh flowers and hand-carved artwork. The thatched-roof design reflects a mix of Polynesian and European elements, and

The serenity here is palpable.

the shimmering lagoon that surrounds the villas is awe-inspiring. With such magnificent natural beauty and the no-request-too-great approach of the staff here, it's easy to see why many guests prefer to stay within the resort during their entire Bora-Bora visit.

However, I manage to pry myself away and catch one of the hotel's water taxis to the other side of the lagoon for dinner. I find myself at **La Villa Mahana Restaurant**, a quaint and cozy



THIS PAGE: Chef William Pradeleix of the Lagoon Restaurant at the St. Regis, Bora-Bora.

restaurant in a small Mediterranean-style villa. Chef Damien Rinaldi-Dovio, who hails from Corsica and once worked at the famed La Orangerie in Los Angeles, coaxes glorious flavors from unfussy ingredients. For an appetizer, I enjoy seared ahi tuna with Tahitian vanilla oil and sea salt, potatoes with lemon juice and a mixed green salad; it's fresh and lovely. The main course of filet of beef tenderloin in a red wine vanilla sauce is

paired with creamy hand-made gnocchi that melts on the tongue. Everything is served with a crusty French round, baked by Rinaldi-Dovio's wife, Vaihere, and Tahitian coconut bread.

For Rinaldi-Dovio, it's all about celebrating the ingredients. "I use a lot of the local vanilla, and the fish straight from the lagoon," he says. "I get my meat from New Zealand, foie gras and caviar from France; anything you can find at a



THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT: Potato cake with celery-root slaw; Crusty baguette sandwiches at a road-side stand in Moorea.

fine dining restaurant in New York or Paris, I have here.” It’s no wonder that La Villa Mahana has drawn raves from food critics around the world.

Daytime activities in Bora-Bora range from simply lying on the beach and spa treatments to scuba diving and deep-sea fishing. While I spend a good few hours at the St. Regis spa getting a specialized Polynesian massage, our photographer takes in a day of snorkeling and beach-side cooking with Temanava Tours.

Marona, his guide and a native of Bora-Bora, owns a small *motu* (private island) where he takes visitors for a demonstration in Tahitian donut-frying after they’ve worked up an appetite snorkeling off his small boat. With flour, sugar, leavener, water, coconut milk and a little salt, Marona and his brother make a simple dough that they roll out on a rough wooden board and form into circles and figure 8s. They dunk them into hot oil to make moist and crispy cake donuts called *firifiri*. They also makes *taioro*, a *mélange* of coconut milk, fish, shellfish and vegetables.

This combination of coconut milk and raw fish is found nearly everywhere

in French Polynesia in the form of *poisson cru*, which, by all accounts, is practically the national dish. Every chef and home cook has his or her own take on it; some add bell peppers while others keep it “pure” with just raw tuna, coconut milk, onions, tomatoes and lime juice. Islanders eat this dish for breakfast, lunch or dinner, and it’s available at fine restaurants, roadside snack shacks and every eatery in between.

I have the opportunity to make *poisson cru* with chefs William Pradeleix and Remi Barthe of the **Lagoon Restaurant by Jean-Georges** at the St. Regis. The fine dining establishment, part of famed chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten’s restaurant empire, offers private cooking classes to guests during the morning hours. For our version of *poisson cru*, I mince shallots, scallions, cucumber, Thai chile and red bell pepper before mixing them with diced sashimi-grade ahi tuna, coconut milk and lime juice. The flavors are fresh and bright, with just a hint of the coconut coming through. Unlike Asian tuna tartare, which is often dressed with salty soy sauce,

poisson cru is very light and clean with a real emphasis on the fresh fish and vegetables.

Later on that evening for dinner at the restaurant, I feast on the work of the pros: fresh tomato salad with fried onions and Russian dressing; succulent red snapper in a sweet and sour sauce; tender roasted lamb chops, and a dessert for all desserts: a caramelized banana cake with salted caramel ice cream and a rich chocolate cookie—a delicious showcase for a common local fruit.

The chefs at the Lagoon Restaurant are constantly inspired by their lush, tropical surroundings. Bianca Henry, sales manager of the hotel, recounts the day she saw one of the chefs entangled in a large bush on the side of the tennis courts. “Apparently it was a wild berry bush, and he was completely inside of it picking the fruit,” says Henry. “I had never even noticed there were berries on those bushes before, but he took them and created this amazing dessert that went on the menu. He was walking, saw it, and literally jumped at the chance to do something new with it. I think this place is full of inspiration.”

From Chef Damien Rinaldi-Dovio, La Villa Mahana Restaurant

FILET OF BEEF TENDERLOIN WITH TAHITIAN VANILLA SAUCE AND CREAMY GNOCCHI

SERVES 4

Make fresh gnocchi (see our recipe on page 46), or buy premade ones. They are available in the refrigerated section with other fresh pastas.

- 3½ tablespoons plus ⅔ stick unsalted butter
- 1 vanilla bean, preferably Tahitian, split lengthwise
- Four 4-ounce beef tenderloins (filet mignon)
- Sea salt, preferably fleur de sel
- 2 cups good red Bordeaux wine

For gnocchi

- 40 fresh gnocchi
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 3½ tablespoons finely grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
- 1 teaspoon black truffle oil

1. In a medium skillet over medium heat, melt 3½ tablespoons butter and add split vanilla bean.
2. Season beef with salt only (pepper will break flavor of vanilla) and place filets into butter. Cook beef on each side for 4 to 8 minutes, depending on preference (5 minutes on each side for medium-rare is recommended).
3. Remove steaks and butter from pan and set aside to keep warm. Keep vanilla pod in pan. Add red wine and reduce over medium-low heat until texture is syrupy; remove from heat. Stir in remaining ⅔ stick butter, until sauce is creamy. Set aside.
4. Cook gnocchi according to package or recipe directions.
5. Meanwhile, in a large sauté pan, heat heavy cream and Parmigiano-Reggiano until cheese has melted into cream. Add truffle oil, remove from heat and immediately toss with gnocchi. Serve with steak, drizzled with sauce.

From Chef Bertrand Papin, Le Mayflower Restaurant

SHRIMP DUMPLINGS

SERVES 8 AS AN HORS D'OEUVRE

- 2 pounds shrimp, shelled, deveined and finely diced
- 1 stalk celery, minced
- 1 small carrot, minced
- 1 small shallot, minced
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh ginger
- 1 teaspoon minced pickled sushi ginger
- 2 tablespoons oyster sauce
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 1 package premade square wonton wraps

For sauce

- 2 tablespoons minced fresh ginger
- Juice from ½ lemon
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 2 tablespoons oyster sauce

1. Mix shrimp with celery, carrot, shallot and fresh and pickled ginger. Add oyster and soy sauce and mix until thoroughly blended.
2. Place 1 wonton wrapper on a flat work surface. Place 1 tablespoon of shrimp mixture into center. Using your fingers, wet edges of wrapper with water and press all 4 corners together at the top, making a square, cone-like shape. Repeat to fill all wontons.
3. Place dumplings in a bamboo or other steamer and steam over simmering water for 5 minutes. When done, transfer to serving plates.
4. While dumplings cook, make sauce. In a saucepan, combine all ingredients and bring to a boil. Lower to a simmer and reduce for about 3 minutes. Pour over dumplings and serve.

From Chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten, the Lagoon Restaurant by Jean-Georges

POISSON CRU

SERVES 4

- 1 pound of fresh, sushi-grade ahi tuna
- 1 coconut
- ½ red bell pepper, finely minced
- 1 shallot, finely minced



THIS PAGE: Sizzling shrimp at Le Mayflower Restaurant, Moorea.

- 2 scallions, thinly sliced
 - ¼ cucumber, peeled, seeded and finely diced
 - 1 green Thai chile, minced
 - Salt
 - Freshly ground white pepper
 - Juice of 1 small lime
 - Microgreens or mixed greens, for garnish
 - Extra virgin olive oil, for garnish
1. Dice tuna and transfer to a bowl. Cover and refrigerate while you prepare seasonings.
 2. Over a medium bowl, knock on coconut with a hammer until a crack forms. Keep knocking the crack as it goes around nut and it breaks open. Catch and reserve water.
 3. Remove coconut meat with a spoon or a knife. Cut into big chunks and blend in a food processor until puréed. Put puréed meat into a cheesecloth and squeeze out coconut milk into a bowl. Set aside.
 4. Fill a large bowl with ice. In another smaller bowl set over ice, combine tuna, bell pepper, shallots, scallions, cucumber and chile. Season gently with salt and white pepper, and then add about 1 cup of coconut milk and lime juice. Taste and adjust seasoning.
 5. Spoon mixture into a bowl and garnish with greens. Drizzle with extra virgin olive oil and more coconut milk to finish.



THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT: Rolling out dough for firi firi, a Tahitian donut; Chef Francois Courtin and wife Blondine of Le Mahogany Restaurant, Moorea.

A Traditional Polynesian Dessert

FIRI FIRI

MAKES ABOUT 20

- 4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1½ cups water
- 2 tablespoons active dry yeast
- 2 cups fresh or canned coconut milk
- ⅔ cup sugar, plus extra for sprinkling
- Pinch of salt
- 4 cups peanut oil, for deep frying

1. Place 1 cup of flour in a bowl; add half of water and yeast. Stir well until dough becomes firm. Allow to sit for 1 hour.
2. Add remaining flour and water, coconut milk, sugar, and pinch of salt to dough. Knead lightly and roll into a ball. Set aside for 2 more hours.
3. Cut pastry into pieces large enough to shape into figure 8s, circles or twists. Set aside for another 30 minutes.
4. In a skillet or deep fat fryer, heat oil over medium heat to 375°F. Add dough shapes but do not crowd pieces together. Turn as needed and fry until cakes are golden brown. Drain well and sprinkle with sugar; serve immediately, while hot.

If You Go

Tahiti Tourism provides detailed contact information for many of the vendors listed here. Please visit www.tahiti-tourisme.com for assistance.

GETTING THERE

Air Tahiti Nui

www.airtahitinui-usa.com

Each passenger is welcomed by the fragrance of Tahitian gardenia, the sounds of island music and friendly service.

MOOREA:

Albert Transport
(689) 55-21-10

Sofitel Moorea Ia Ora Beach Resort and K Restaurant
www.sofitel.com
(689) 55-12-12

Avis Pacificar
(689) 56-32-68

Le Mahogany Restaurant
(689) 56-39-73

Le Mayflower Restaurant
(689) 56-53-59

Jus de Fruits de Moorea

www.manuteatahiti.com
(689) 55-20-20

BORA-BORA:

St. Regis and Lagoon Restaurant by Jean-Georges
www.starwoodhotels.com/stregis
(689) 60-78-98

La Villa Mahana
www.villamahana.com
(689) 67-50-63

Temanova Tours
(689) 67-72-26

TAHITI:

Manava Suite Resort & Vaitohi Restaurant
www.manavasuiteresorttahiti.blogspot.com
(689) 50-84-45

Intercontinental Tahiti Resort
www.ichotelsgroup.com/intercontinental
(689) 86-51-10

Happy Taxi Popo
(689) 71-17-77

Botanic Garden Restaurant
(689) 57-17-59