

PALM BEACH

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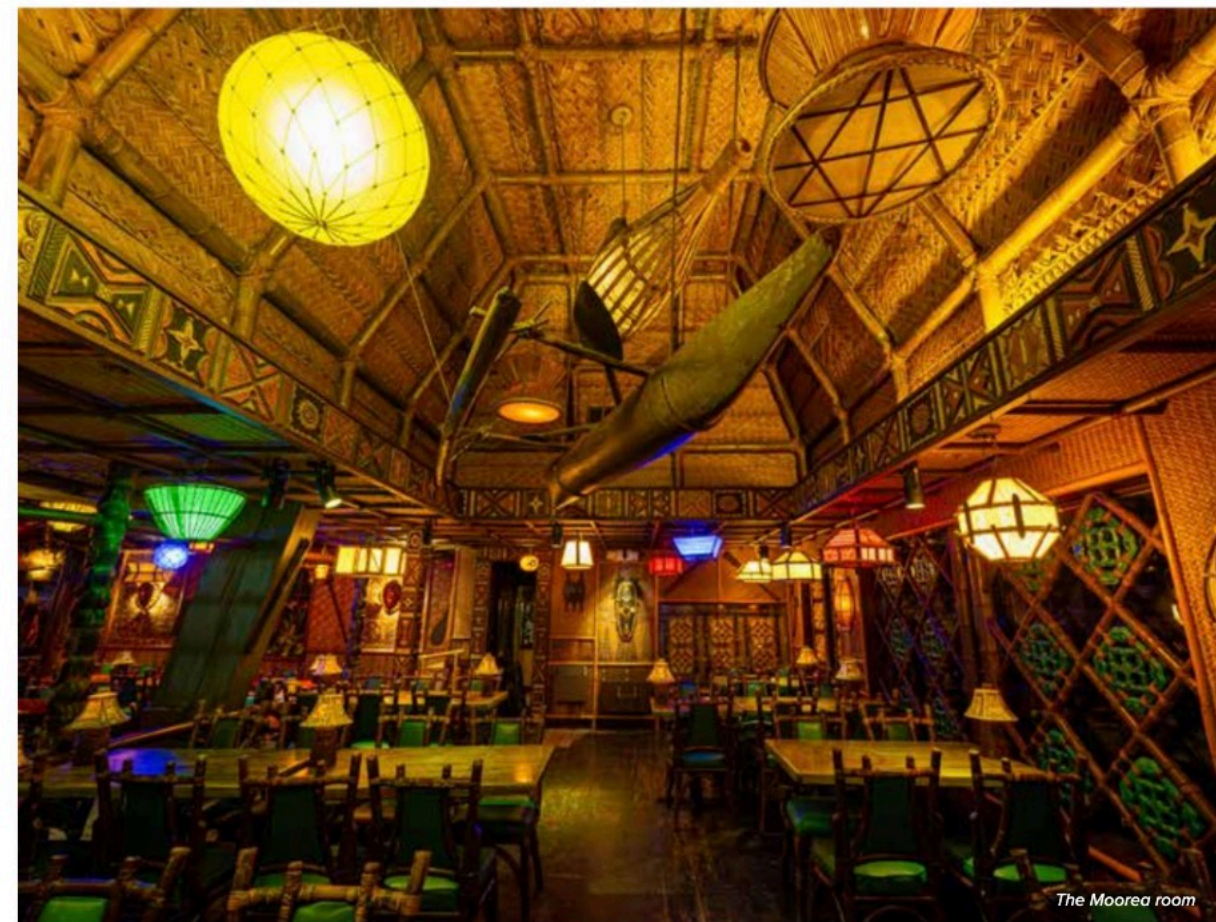
THE
EXPLORE
ISSUE



JULY 2025
CITYLIFESTYLE.COM



The New Guinea room



The Moorea room

THE MAI-KAI REAWAKENS

Photo by Arsine Kaloustian



Barrel 'O Rum

The iconic Polynesian palace returns, restored to mid-century splendor and tropical glory.

ARTICLE BY ARSINE KALOUSTIAN
PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF MAI-KAI

There are restaurants that serve cocktails—and then there are restaurants that serve legacy. For nearly seven decades, The Mai-Kai in Fort Lauderdale has stood as a hallowed temple of Polynesian Pop, where waterfalls rush beneath torch-lit palms, rum flows like ritual, and time slips away somewhere between the sound of drums and the rustle of a grass skirt.

But in 2019, a catastrophic water main break collapsed part of the kitchen roof—damaging the famed Chinese brick ovens and shuttering the iconic restaurant indefinitely. To many, it felt like the final curtain for a place that had long been more experience than eatery.

It wasn't. It was just intermission.

FROM RUIN TO REBIRTH

Enter Bill Fuller, the Miami-based hospitality visionary whose childhood memories of The Mai-Kai burned bright. With his partners at Mad Room Hospitality and in collaboration with the Thornton family, who have operated the Mai-Kai since 1956, Fuller led a three-year, \$20 million+ restoration that would transform not just the building, but the entire guest journey.

"This wasn't just a renovation—it was a preservation," Fuller says. "Every lamp, every tile, every carving was protected,

restored, or rebuilt. We even sourced the original slate from a Connecticut quarry to match the floor." Over 275 handmade lanterns were meticulously reengineered, now fitted with LED lighting. Plumbing, electrical, HVAC—all brought to modern code while leaving the soul intact.

Even the gardens got a dramatic glow-up, and a smoking volcano in the new valet roundabout sets the stage before guests even step through the doors. And from the moment you arrive, you're greeted with a resounding "Aloha" and "Mahalo," ushering you into a world untouched by time.

FOR GM KERN MATTEI, IT'S PERSONAL

Mai-Kai General Manager Kern Mattei didn't just help steward the rebuild—he *lived* it. His parents met at the restaurant in the 1960s: his mother, a Tahitian dancer; his father, a manager. "I grew up at The Mai-Kai," he says. "To see it brought back to life with such care—it's emotional. I watched crews pouring their blood and sweat into it. I was lucky to be part of that."

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WHERE THE SECRETS STAY SECRET

Much of The Mai-Kai’s mystique lies behind the bar. Though every drink is hand-mixed or blended to order, the recipes themselves are part of a carefully guarded tradition. Since 1956, only six bar managers have ever known the full formulas behind the signature rum blends and tropical elixirs that fuel icons like the Barrel ‘O Rum and Black Magic.

And while the classics remain, the updated cocktail list introduces inventive newcomers like the **Paniolo Old Fashioned**, tantalizing with hints of banana and browned butter, and the **Tahitian Drum**, full of tequila, coconut and island fruits.

“All of our syrups are made in-house,” Mattei adds. “The recipes are completely proprietary—it’s all crafted, nothing is off the shelf.”

A MENU WITH ROOTS AND REACH

The food menu is intentionally leaner now—partly due to the roof collapse that destroyed the area housing the original Chinese ovens. Those vintage ovens, including their bricks, were carefully salvaged and are slated for rebuild in Phase 2 of the renovation.

Yet the flavors that made The Mai-Kai famous endure. The **Pupu Platter** still arrives sizzling and celebratory, complete with egg rolls, Shanghai chicken, and Tahitian cheese tangs. New additions, however, offer modern flair: the **Bourbon**

Lobster Pad Thai layers fresh lobster with bourbon butter noodles, tomato and cucumber; while the **Crying Tiger Skirt Steak** is a standout with chimichurri and carrot butterscotch puree.

A REVUE LIKE NO OTHER

At the heart of the experience is *the show*—a thunderous, transportive performance that first debuted in 1961 under the direction of Mireille Thornton, former dancer and later co-owner. It is the longest-running Polynesian floor show in the United States, including Hawaii.

Now under the direction of Teuruhei Buchin, the nightly revue has been

reimagined with deep cultural care. Costumes feature hand-painted tapa cloth, mother of pearl, feathers, abalone, and flowers. Each year’s show honors a new facet of South Pacific life at the turn of the century, blending traditional storytelling with vibrant, heart-pounding choreography.

It’s not just entertainment—it’s ancestral memory, danced into the present.

A LEGEND THAT LIVES ON

With Phase 1 complete and future expansions to come, The Mai-Kai is once again what it was always meant to be: not just a place to dine or drink, but to *disappear*—into another world, another time, another rhythm entirely.

Because true escapism doesn’t need reinvention. It just needs reverence—and a few good secrets kept.

