



# The Dinners of Yesterday

What can old restaurant menus tell us about the health of Hawai'i's oceans? Ask Kyle Van Houtan.

STORY BY DAVE CHOO  
PHOTOS BY DANA EDMUNDS

## If you dined at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel's Surf Room

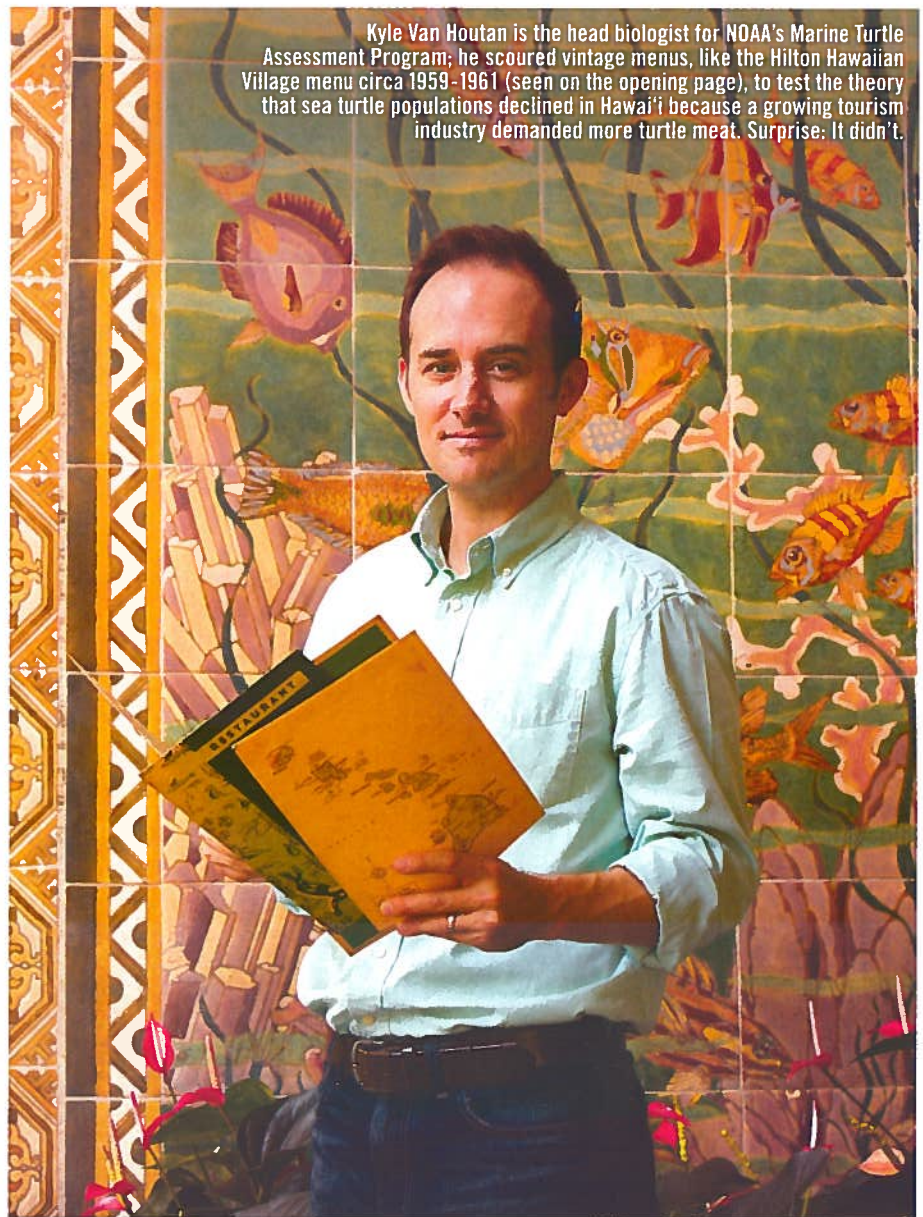
On the evening of Saturday, August 4, 1951, you'd have heard the music start at 8 with the Royal Hawaiian Serenaders, who roamed the Surf Room playing by request. At 9:15 the Ku'uiipus would have started their hula show, followed by Bill Akamuhou and his Royal Hawaiian Hotel Orchestra, who kept the dance floor open until midnight. Your hors d'oeuvre might have been the poi cocktail, the canapé of smoked Kentucky turkey or marinated herring in sour cream. For your entrée you could have chosen roast saddle of spring lamb, salami of mallard duckling or the only local seafood on the menu: aiguillette of 'ōpakapaka.

You can learn a lot about Hawai'i's good old days by reading a menu. In 1928 a popular breakfast item at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel was a fish you don't often see these days: broiled Hawaiian kūmū (goatfish) with melted butter. Another now-rare fish—in restaurants anyway—



made an appearance on Honolulu's Black Cat Café's lunch menu in 1945: fried ulua, tartar sauce and potato salad. Cost? Only \$.55. And guess what was Honolulu's most popular entrée from the 1930s to the 1970s? If you guessed 'ahi, guess again. It was ham and pineapple.

**Even though** he moved to Hawai'i just five years ago, Kyle Van Houtan knows a lot about those good old days in the Islands—and a lot more—from looking at those menus. A population ecologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Van Houtan heads the agency's



Kyle Van Houtan is the head biologist for NOAA's Marine Turtle Assessment Program; he scoured vintage menus, like the Hilton Hawaiian Village menu circa 1959-1961 (seen on the opening page), to test the theory that sea turtle populations declined in Hawai'i because a growing tourism industry demanded more turtle meat. Surprise: It didn't.

Marine Turtle Assessment Program, where he is working on determining healthy baseline populations for hawksbill and green sea turtles. That's no easy task: Historical data on the turtles, both of which are now on the endangered species list, are scarce—state and federal agencies started monitoring nesting populations of green sea turtles only in 1973 and hawksbills in 1990. So Van Houtan and his colleagues looked for creative ways to fill in the gaps: They referenced journals of early Western explorers, diaries of shipwrecked sailors and articles drawn from nineteenth-century Native Hawaiian newspapers. They also interviewed more than a dozen local fishers, historians, retailers, fishery managers and Native Hawaiian kūpuna (elders).

In his time at NOAA, Van Houtan noted a commonplace belief within the agency that the reason turtle populations had

declined in Hawai'i was the growth of tourism—it had created a demand for turtle meat in Island restaurants, so it was said. This article of faith wasn't part of just the cultural record; it showed up in the scientific one as well, having been mentioned in several research papers. But Van Houtan wasn't so sure: "It struck me as odd because commercial jets didn't start arriving here until 1959, and tourism started to grow dramatically only after that," he says. "But we knew that turtle populations had declined long before then. I couldn't find any real justification for this belief; it was just something that everyone seemed to know."

After reading a local cookbook that featured vintage restaurant menus, Van Houtan hit on a way to test his theory. He contacted the book's publisher, who had a small collection of Island menus from the

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The menus offered Van Houtan another interesting glimpse into Hawai'i's changing fishery. Near-shore reef fish, like kŭmŭ (goatfish), ulua and mullet were once popular in Island restaurants, but they disappeared over time, replaced by the pelagic species like 'ahi, ono and mahimahi that are now staples in Hawai'i restaurants. "When I was reading the older menus, the ones from the 1920s and '30s," says Van Houtan, "I realized that I was looking at a totally different world."

mid-1950s. Van Houtan reviewed more than three dozen menus, from high-end restaurants like the Royal Hawaiian Hotel's Surf Room and Trader Vic's to once-venerable Island institutions such as The Tropics and Stewart's Family Restaurant. But he couldn't find a single menu featuring turtle.

Van Houtan went further: He examined menus from the 1920s through the mid-'70s in the libraries at Honolulu's Bishop Museum, the University of Hawai'i and Kapi'olani Community College. After reviewing more than one hundred menus, he found his first turtle entrée: a bowl of soup on the menu of a cruise ship out of San Diego, which meant that the turtle meat probably came out of a can and not from Hawai'i waters. In the end Van Houtan and his team found that turtle was among the rarest Island menu offerings, showing up on only 3 percent of nearly four hundred

menus from more than 150 different restaurants. Frog's legs, hardly an Island staple, showed up twice as often. One of the kŭpuna Van Houtan had interviewed asked why Van Houtan was looking for turtle in restaurants at all; it wasn't sold in them, he'd said. If you wanted turtle meat, you went to Chinatown.

As he was busy overturning the conventional wisdom about turtles, Van Houtan realized that his menu research could have broader applications. If people weren't eating turtle, what seafood were they eating, and what might that tell us about Island fisheries? The most common menu item from the prewar period was, predictably, ham and pineapple, but there were dozens of unusual seafood items on hotel menus, like "Butter-fried Weke Alibaba" at the Royal Hawaiian (1931) and "Filet of Uku Sauté with Cucumbers Doria" at the Moana

(1939). Van Houtan also recalled that when he conducted his interviews, many Island residents had spoken wistfully about a favorite fish that they once enjoyed eating but that was now rarely caught, much less found in restaurants. “When I was reading the older menus, the ones from the 1920s and ’30s, I realized that I was looking at a totally different world,” says Van Houtan.



“They had all kinds of reef fish on the menu, things like mullet, kūmū and weke [goatfish], hāpu’u [grouper] and pāki’i [flounder], things that you don’t see anymore.” For example, the “Baked Pond Mullet in Ti Leaves, Shredded Cocoa nut and Straw Potatoes” at the Moana in 1928.

Van Houtan had detailed catch records reported by Hawaiian fishing guilds in the early 1900s and later in the 1920s, but reliable records weren’t kept again until 1948. The menus, he reasoned, might fill some of the holes in that forty-six-year gap. While others have used menu analysis to evaluate changes in seafood popularity, using it as a tool in population research is rare. However, Van Houtan points out that Hawaii’s isolation—especially pre-WWII—makes it an ideal place to use menus in that way. In the days before jetliners and refrigerated container ships, a locally consumed fish was almost without exception locally sourced. And the menus themselves were information rich. For instance, high-end restaurants like the Surf Room changed (and printed) their menus daily, sometimes three times a day, and offered a wide variety of reef and near-shore fishes.

It helped, too, that so many of those old menus are still around. “Because coming

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to Hawai'i was such a big deal, especially in the early days of tourism, people kept these menus as souvenirs. It also helped that many of these menus are just cool to look at," says Van Houtan. "So we've had the opportunity to look at collections that had two weeks' worth of menus. On Monday the catch of the day might have been flounder, Tuesday it was mullet and Wednesday, ulua or Kona crab. They used to serve mahimahi and rice for breakfast." He smiles. "That's a great breakfast."

**Van Houtan says** that his menu research has been his most intuitive and accessible project to date, the only one that he can easily discuss with people outside of the small circle of family and friends who are familiar with his work. Certainly the Royal Hawaiian's stunning menu on Sunday, January 29, 1956, and its offering of "Lancette of Ulua, White Wine Sauce, Avocado Ring, Parmesan Cheese au Gratin, Mornay des Provençale" (all for \$5.75) can be appreciated by the non-scientist. But for the scientist, Van Houtan's findings are what make these menus really compelling.

Van Houtan discovered that reef fish, jacks and bottomfish (like onaga and 'ōpakapaka) appeared on 100 percent of the menus prior to 1940; after that, however, these fishes quickly disappeared from dining rooms. By 1959 they were listed on fewer than 10 percent of the menus, and by the 1970s they were almost wholly absent from restaurants, replaced by large pelagic species like 'ahi, ono (wahoo) and mahimahi — fish that appeared on 95 percent of the menus. That's a stark and rapid change: In the 1920s fewer than 10 percent of menus offered pelagic fish. By 1975 reef fish, near-shore fish and bottomfish appear on about 5 percent of menus, a figure that has been constant, says Van Houtan, for the past forty years.

That surge in the consumption of pelagic species, says Van Houtan, is part of a postwar global trend. The industrialization of the fishing industry meant larger and more technologically advanced boats could journey farther from shore and remain at sea longer. Fishing equipment and methods became much more efficient—in some cases too efficient. So it was clear that after the war, people began eating more tuna because it became more available. But what drove this change? Was it because of a shift in popular tastes? Did people in Hawai'i stop eating weke because they had barbels and start eating 'ahi because they were more steak-like?

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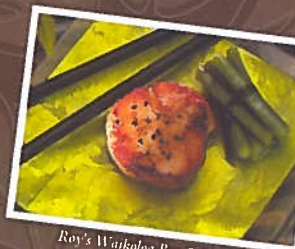
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To answer such questions Van Houtan and his colleagues hit the books and the menus again, poring over catch statistics from 1948 to 1970 and then comparing the numbers and types of fish to what restaurants were serving at the time. They found direct correlations: The pelagics were showing up on menus more often because fishermen were catching many more of



them. Near-shore and bottomfish were featured less often because fewer were being caught. So mahimahi didn't necessarily win a popularity contest with Island diners — it just filled a void.

While Van Houtan's research has dispelled some commonly held assumptions, it's raised deeper questions about the health of Hawai'i's reefs and the sea life that depends on them. Conventional wisdom held that WWII and statehood, periods when the Islands experienced unprecedented economic growth, had greatly affected the larger environment. Van Houtan's research suggests, though, that things were already in decline before then and that the numbers of reef and near-shore fish were falling decades before WWII.

"We started with a few questions about turtles and answered those but ended up kicking up a hornet's nest in the process," says Van Houtan. "What happened? It's hard to say. There was no tipping point. It was a precipitous decline, but like most ecological patterns it's probably a combination of things: agricultural runoff, the way we dispose of our sewage, invasive species and overfishing, among other things. One thing that we can say for certain is that those 'good old days' — they were a lot earlier than we thought." **HH**

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