

## Restaurant's mission at festival to teach about poke, not to win



COURTESY PHOTO

Nino Camilo

A local poke restaurant participated in the annual I Love Poke festival in San Diego, but it didn't come home with a first-, second- or third-place win.

Da Hawaiian Poke Co. wasn't there to compete, said organizer Nino "Neens" Camilo. "They came to educate," he said. "That's what I invited them out here to do."

The Kapahulu shop's co-founder Troy Wada staged a poke demonstration, not just at the May 24 event, but on morning television.

The aim, Camilo said, is to uphold standards while spreading knowledge of the culture and the history of the dish.

Poke has exploded across the mainland as a new and trendy food item, but it's nothing new to Camilo. "I grew up in California with strong Hawaii ties," dancing hula, surfing and living Hawaii's culture, he said.

CAMILO IS A FOUNDER of Ono Yum, an online directory of poke-serving venues around the mainland, and a source for poke- and musubi-related merchandise. He and friends in the California food and beverage industry have staged the San Diego I Love Poke festival since 2010, as well as similar events in Orange County, Calif., and Seattle.

"Before, I think it wasn't as much on the chefs' radar, but now it's an everyday conversation on the mainland," he said. This awareness was reflected in the contestants' dishes.

"Over and over again, just the level of food, the level of poke that everybody brought, was levels above everything we've ever done before."

Camilo was alarmed to learn that some popular food websites have published poke recipes that call for chunks of pineapple. "You can eat a pineapple pizza and it might be delicious, but that doesn't make it Hawaiian," he said.

He chooses festival participants who respect the roots of the dish and strive to keep it authentic: "No one is coming with that

tourist attitude." There was no pineapple in the poke dishes served at the festival, he said. "If you put pineapple in your poke, I hope you lose."

Da Hawaiian Poke Co. had a table at the festival, offering tastings along the "Poke-land" stretch of the event space, while vendors offering non-poke dishes such as shave ice, malasadas, Hawaiian chili sliders, Korean chicken and Spam musubi were in the "Foodland" stretch of the festival.

"It's like a small play on the word 'Foodland' for people who actually know," Camilo said. "It's in honor and an ode to, you know, where people really go to get poke in Hawaii."

Competitors came from as far away as Australia, though the three top finishers all hailed from California.

First place went to chef Austin Roberto and the crew of Sushi on a Roll, second place to chef Billy Joyce and the crew of Surside Cuisine, and third to chef James Montejano and his team from Cardiff Seaside Market.

It wasn't a home-field advantage that netted the all-Cali wins, Camilo said, as the judging was done by blind tasting.

THE FESTIVAL hosts Hawaii families with seriously ill children who are staying at the Ronald McDonald House in San Diego, inviting them to attend the event, but "it's not just about that night, it's about taking care of them, period," Camilo said.

Camilo is working with sponsors to get rice cookers and care packages for the families and to "fill their kitchens with the right ingredients so they don't have to try and figure out where to get them." Restaurant chefs have pledged to deliver specialty foods to the Ronald McDonald House monthly.

The next Ono Yum-organized poke festival will be July 24 at Pacific Catch in Mountain View in Northern California. "It's about 45 minutes away from San Francisco ...

part of the tech capital of the world," Camilo said. He hopes to get top corporate chefs from tech giants and educational institutions to compete for poke superiority.



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