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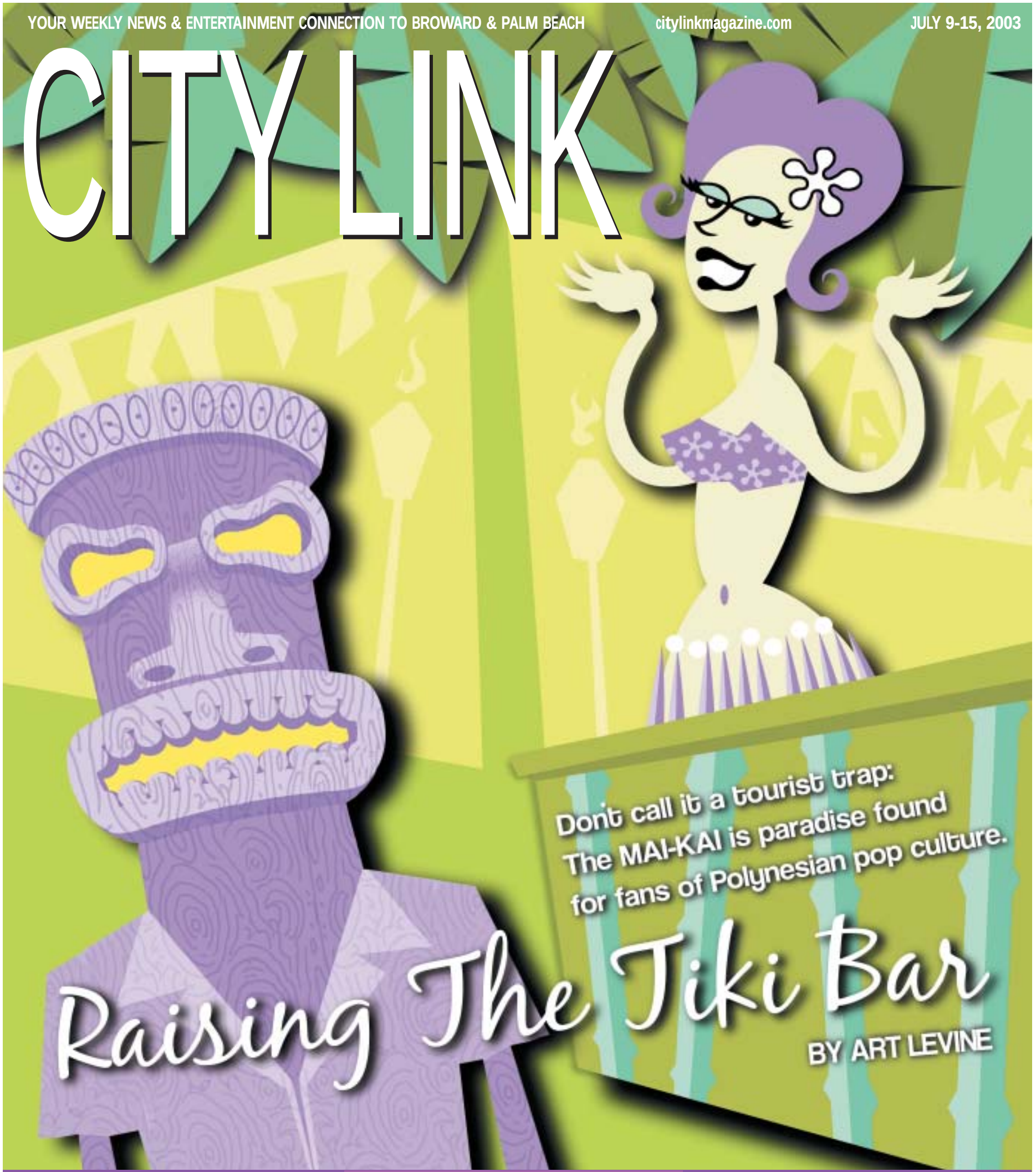

Raising The Tiki Bar

Don't call it a tourist trap:
The MAI-KAI is paradise found
for fans of Polynesian pop culture.

BY ART LEVINE

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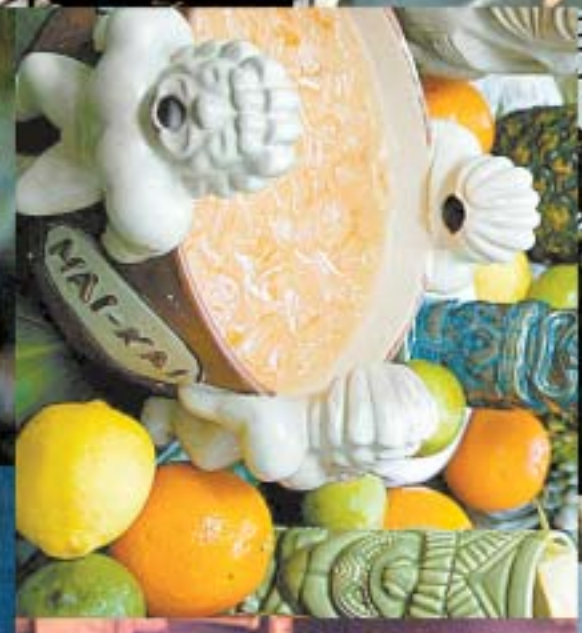
MAI-KAI


Asian Shows


MAI-KAI

Raising The Tiki Bar

Don't call it a tourist trap: The Mai-Kai is paradise found for fans of Polynesian pop culture.

BY ART LEVINE

illustration: W Kelley Lucas

The pilgrims are close to seeing their holy shrine. Christie White and her boyfriend, Tim Glazner, have just driven into Fort Lauderdale on a recent Tuesday from Knoxville, Tenn. They're leaders of a growing retro-chic subculture devoted to all things tiki, and now, they're heading up Federal Highway to finally enter the exotic world of the Mai-Kai, the 47-year-old restaurant that has undergone a surprising resurgence in recent years. "We love tiki culture," White notes. Even before seeing the restaurant in person, she proclaims, "The Mai-Kai is so overwhelming."

Although some locals doubtless still view the place as another archaic tourist trap, these two acolytes, drawn by the Mai-Kai legend, look eager to enter a time warp. Glazner, 39, wears his black hair in a pompadour while sporting a rockabilly-style, black-and-avocado shirt, and White, a jovial 35-year-old spa manager, has a tiki tattoo on her left forearm and wears her dyed red hair in '50s-era bangs above her winged, rhinestone-tipped glasses. The tiki artifacts they so admire were originally based on a variety of carvings of gods and heroes from the Pacific islands, but more broadly, the tiki concept applies to an entire Polynesian aesthetic that represents a romanticized vision of tropical life.

Later that week, nearly 500 tikiphiles, as they call themselves, are scheduled to come to Fort Lauderdale from all over the country, going to a tiki dance party at a Holiday Inn on A1A and attending packed dinner shows at the restaurant. They are arriving for the second-annual Hukilau, co-sponsored by *City Link*, to celebrate the Polynesian pop culture that once flourished in America in the 1950s and '60s but now is best kept alive in high style at the Mai-Kai. (Last year's three-day Hukilau in Atlanta drew more than 2,000 people, but nothing rivals the Mai-Kai.) The term *hukilau* is based on a Hawaiian community feast that gathers fish from the sea, just as event organizer White sees herself doing: "We're throwing out a net and bringing in all the tiki lovers."

"I'm just very excited," says White as they pass the strip malls on the way to the Mai-Kai, and they couldn't be more prepared for their visit. The couple has devoured all the lore about the restaurant and posted awestruck raves about it on the Hukilau Web site (www.thehukilau.com). Now just a few blocks away, Glazner says, "It's the most well-preserved palace of its kind." Indeed, the consensus among such experts as *Tiki News* editor Otto von Stroheim is that the Mai-Kai is "indisputably the finest tiki bar in the world."

Finally, White and Glazner see the Mai-Kai sign towering over the thatched roofs of the restaurant, the torches aglow outside, and she exclaims, "Oh, my God!" As they turn in to the Mai-Kai driveway, the car makes a rattling noise on the wooden bridge to the restaurant's parking lot where valets in Hawaiian shirts greet them. They are at last in tiki heaven.

Before she enters the restaurant, White is drawn to the dark, weather-worn, Easter Island-style carvings outside. "Look at that one!" she exclaims, falling into a Polynesian reverie, even though she's yet to down any of the restaurant's 57 rum drinks.

They're greeted inside by Kern Mattei, the affable manager of the restaurant, who is wearing a well-tailored beige suit. Along with the rest of the staff and the family of the late founder, Bob Thornton, he has been planning for weeks for the invasion of the tiki fanatics on the last Saturday night in June. "We've been waiting for you all day," he says. Mattei, 36, is the half-Tahitian son of a former Mai-Kai dancer and the general manager who helped Thornton run the restaurant for years. He is part of the legacy of long-standing family ties and unrivaled employee loyalty — some have worked here about 40 years — that mark the Mai-Kai as unique. It has all helped keep alive the festive atmosphere, high standards and some of the glamour of the restaurant's swinging heyday, which drew celebrities from Johnny Carson to Omar Sharif. A week before the tiki vanguard arrived, Mattei had boasted of his restaurant's plans for the Hukilau attendees: "This is the mecca for them, and we're going to provide an experience for them that's going to blow their minds."

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White and Glazner are already dazzled when Mattei guides them into the dimly lit Molokai bar, designed to evoke a South Seas sailing ship and portside saloon. Artificial rainfall pours down slanted windows while thick, glazed sailing ropes run overhead, bamboo-ringed lamps suspended above them. Having built her own tiki bar with her boyfriend in their home basement, White appraises the scene with an expert eye and murmurs, "The lighting is … perfect." They order their first round of rum drinks on the oversize menu from a pretty, sarong-clad waitress with a flowered, orange bikini top. These women add a gentle sexiness to the bar that's part of the lure along with the strong rum drinks.

Soon enough, Mattei proudly takes them on a tour of the restaurant and outside garden. "Each room is named for a different island," he says, ticking off such places as New Guinea, Hawaii and Moorea. "Each of the rooms has artifacts from that island, and most are originals," he says. They can see the spears and knives and shields on the walls, the ominous black masks decorated with shells, the carved tiki poles going straight up to the thatched roofs overhead. Outside in the lush 30,000-square-foot garden, they walk along the paths past man-made waterfalls and lagoons, in a setting rich with 100 different palm trees, huge birds of paradise, orchids and gardenias, all highlighted by tiki carvings stationed everywhere. "This is our giant tiki," says Mattei, pointing to a worn imposing figure, topped by a white-and-black face, standing 18 feet tall.

While standing next to one carving, White says with excitement, "It's so beautiful!"

Later, when the tiki-loving couple is back inside the bar, they order the huge fishbowl-size rum special for two, the Sidewinder's Fang, and talk about their tiki fascination with Thornton's stepson, David Levy, who co-owns the establishment with his mother, Mireille Thornton, and sister Kulani Thornton Gelardi. Born in Tahiti, the 48-year-old Levy has traveled throughout the Pacific islands. He asks them, "How'd you get your passion for Polynesian themes and cuisine?"

"We're both into '50s and '60s everything," Glazner says.

White adds, "I got my first tiki at 13, and my father used to take me to different Trader Vic's, and this spawned from that memory."

"Have you ever been to Hawaii?" Levy asks. They shake their heads, because they've never been to any Polynesian island.

Levy tells them how he ended up playing in a musical group with dancers in Waikiki but adds, with some confusion, "I'm fascinated by what you guys are doing."

He laughs with disbelief when White tells him, "The closest we've been to Hawaii is right here."

photos: from the basement

photo: courtesy of the Mai-Kai

Tropical heat wave: For those carrying a torch for all things tiki, the Mai-Kai's flame-twirling dancers are as integral to the experience as its Polynesian décor, cuisine and specialty rum drinks.

It's not a desire to visit today's modern tropical islands that drives the tiki boom, but a longing for the fantasy world of an exotic, carefree life that the tiki culture embodies. In addition, there's the sheer fun these retro styles represent to generations that came of age after the original tiki craze started to fade. No single factor motivates the tiki trendies, but one Hukilau organizer from Orlando, who calls herself Bre-Elle Ishtar, says, "The bottom line is it makes me feel good. It's visually interesting, it's silly, it's exciting. Tiki culture is a mix of many stimuli: the visual, the music, the fun cocktails and the mental transporting of yourself to Polynesia."

It's also having an impact that shows little sign of slowing down. Starting in the mid-'90s on the West Coast, the movement's tiki-themed art exhibits, local parties and weekend resort events have usually been packed or sold-out, luring hundreds and in some cases a few thousand buffs. They're kitsch-loving hipsters drawn from such arenas as the visual arts, punk rock, rockabilly, hot-rodding and tattooing. They're also compulsive thrift-shoppers who seek rattan furniture and discarded tiki mugs with all the zeal of archaeologists unearthing Maya ruins. "We laugh at a lot of it, but then again, I'm also in awe of it," says 35-year-old Anna Kahn, a set painter from Orlando accompanying her husband's band, the Delusionaires, to the Hukilau.

The tiki boom can also be profitable. Some cutting-edge artists who incorporate tiki imagery in the cartoonlike iconography of lowbrow art are having stunning success. Shag (a.k.a. Josh Agle) earns about $1 million a year selling his paintings, limited-edition mugs and other items, according to one business associate. And Los Angeles art dealer Doug Nason notes that the influential Mark Ryden sells his tiki-based paintings for between $50,000 and $100,000 each — as legions of young artists seek to follow him and Shag. "It's a fashionable imagery," Nason points out. Tiki has even spread to clothing and other merchandise at Target and Old Navy.

As one astute observer of the scene, James Teitelbaum, author of the new *Tiki Road Trip*, says, "Tiki is at an underground level, but I feel it's becoming mainstream. It's a tremendous indication of how popular this trend is that all these people are coming from as far away as Seattle to spend one day at a Holiday Inn and one day at the Mai-Kai."

The Thornton family and the Mai-Kai, still flourishing since the restaurant was founded in 1956, are more than ready to catch the new tiki wave. "We were very aware that this is a big plus for us," says co-owner Mireille Thornton of the neo-tiki craze they first noticed a few years ago. "We had [tiki] here all the time, and it kind of brought people back to the Mai-Kai."

The success of the Mai-Kai — even today, it grosses $7.5 million a year and serves more than 1,000 diners on each of its busiest nights in season — hardly seemed foreordained when it started. In the 1950s, two young Stanford University graduates from the Chicago area, brothers Bob and Jack Thornton, decided to build a Polynesian-themed restaurant in a near-barren rural section of Fort Lauderdale. As travel magazine publisher and author Jean Emond points out in his forthcoming book, *The Mai-Kai: The Legend*, "Where the Mai-Kai now stands was a dusty, two-lane unpaved road embraced by a cow pasture to the west." Emond, an old friend of Bob Thornton and his family, says, "It's bizarre when you think about it: trying to bring the South Pacific to Fort Lauderdale." With $100,000 of their own and their parents' money — plus a reluctantly granted bank loan — the brothers managed to open the Mai-Kai in December 1956 in the sleepy but growing tourist town.

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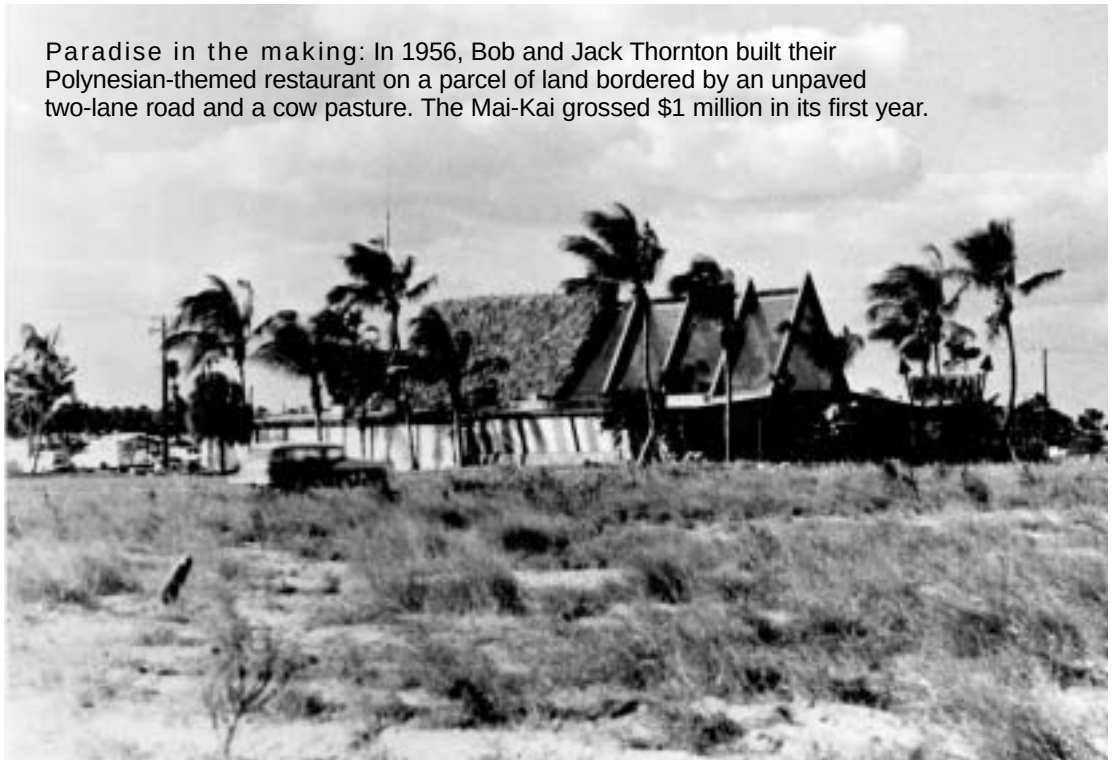
— Bre-Elle Ishtar, a Hukilau organizer



Paradise in the making: In 1956, Bob and Jack Thornton built their Polynesian-themed restaurant on a parcel of land bordered by an unpaved two-lane road and a cow pasture. The Mai-Kai grossed $1 million in its first year.

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The main visionary behind the restaurant, Bob Thornton, then 25, had always wanted to enter the restaurant field and ended up living out a fantasy of postwar American success. A tall, dashing bachelor surrounded by gorgeous women until he settled down with just one, Mireille, he traveled to the South Seas islands to discover Polynesian culture and artifacts, palled around with celebrities in exuberant nights of hard partying and ran a multimillion-dollar business. Yet he also treated his employees generously, offering profit-sharing, health benefits and sometimes providing the down payments for their homes or paying for their kids' college educations. Angel Vega, who started as a busboy in 1963 and is now the maitre d', says, "He was great to work with and very fair."

"He was very warm, so kind and giving, and he was always there for someone in trouble," adds his widow, still at 65 an ageless, dark-haired beauty with the infectious, high-spirited charm of her younger days.

Bob Thornton also had a penchant for hard work, disciplined management and daring business acumen. His interest in the South Pacific was initially spurred by the Polynesian restaurants he saw growing up in suburban Chicago and later while attending Stanford University in California. The Polynesian islands held a special allure for him, as he told Emond in 1974: "These islands represent natural grace to me. … I get much of my inspiration from the carefree welcoming spirit of these people." The brothers chose Fort Lauderdale as the site for their Polynesian dream after they visited the city during leave from an Army camp, attracted by the pleasant area and the niche they could fill.

As Bob Thornton told *The Miami Herald* in 1974, "The region generally was on the move, and Fort Lauderdale had no specialty restaurants outside of steak houses." After leaving the service, the brothers trained at bars pouring drinks and toured all the leading Polynesian restaurants in the country, including Hawaii.

Despite such opening-night snafus as in-house telephone order lines that went dead, the restaurant turned into a booming success. Starting as a four-room restaurant with a small bar, it grossed $1 million in its first year, a huge sum in that era for a new specialty restaurant. Over the years, it grew in size and scope, adding new gardens, rooms and a gift shop, with a major expansion launched in 1969 that increased seating from 225 to 600.

In the restaurant's earliest years, it didn't have the Polynesian revue that has made it a continuing tourist attraction, complete with hip-swinging South Pacific lovelies and flame-twirling dancers. Mireille Thornton became the guiding spirit, costume designer and choreographer of the Islanders Revue, a role she still holds today. But she almost didn't make the cut after she first came to the Mai-Kai on New Year's Eve 1960 after being recruited by a friend of Thornton's while staying in California.

She was invited to join the troupe being assembled in early 1961, but after the first week of rehearsal, she was called in to Thornton's office and told she was being fired because she couldn't dance — and was too fat. She burst into tears and pleaded for a two-week reprieve. She underwent a grueling choreographic regimen directed by a professional Polynesian dancer, and to lose weight, "I wrapped myself in plastic dry-cleaner bags and would lie in the sun sweating," she says. She lost 35 pounds.

Two weeks later, Thornton evaluated her performance, and his jaw dropped in astonishment at her improvement. After being promoted to chief choreographer and costume designer in 1962, she visited the islands regularly to ensure the authenticity of dances and costumes, including the genuine grass skirts made from the bark of hibiscus trees. Romantic sparks would eventually fly between the boss and the dancer. They started dating in 1965 and got married in 1971, honeymooning in Tahiti. Thornton and his flower-draped bride rowed across a lagoon in a two-seat outrigger canoe to her home village; that same canoe now hangs from the ceiling in the Moorea room. They had a ready-made family: By 1963, her two children from her first marriage, David and Kulani, had already moved here from Tahiti, and both became her partners in the enterprise after Thornton's death in 1989. (He had bought out his brother in 1970.)

Bob Thornton's flair set the tone for a restaurant that became so popular in the '60s and '70s that crowds eventually began lining up outside at 5 p.m. for the early dinner show. Sometimes, the lines were so long they snaked down Federal Highway. "This was the 'in'

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place to be," Emond recalls.

The crowds waiting outside were given free Derby Daiquiris, a frosty orange concoction, so by the time they finally got a table, "They were in a pretty good mood and didn't mind where they were seated," manager Mattei says. For instance, even while maintaining attentive service, the place was so jam-packed that during the busiest nights, tables were placed on the stage between shows, and a few diners were even seated at emergency tables in a corridor nicknamed "I-95" because of the waiters whizzing past them to the kitchen.

But it was more than just crowds that made the nights sparkle at the Mai-Kai. "Every night was almost like New Year's Eve," Mireille Thornton says. On weekends especially, the customers dressed to kill: women in their fanciest dresses and jewelry, men in their best suits and ties. After 8 p.m., on nights when the shows started later, Mireille and other dancers swept in one by one to the dining room in their own stylish dresses, creating a stir among the customers and pleas to join them at their tables. The dancers were the stars of the Mai-Kai, and, she says, "We loved it."

As the evening wore on, in those days before worries about drunken driving and health effects took hold, customers became loud and ebullient, even rowdy, as they imbibed the rum potions originally created by Bob Thornton. Some downed as many as five sweet but powerful Rum Barrels each, laced with four shots of rum in every drink. After the shows were over, "They wanted to talk to you and touch you," she says, and the dancers visited the customers who called out to them. Or Mireille and a few musicians led the revelers out of the Molokai bar in a conga line snaking throughout

Pilates of the Caribbean: (above) The Mai-Kai dancers and waitstaff have long been a trademark of the place, lending an air of exotic sensuality. Recruited in 1961, Mireille Thornton (below) almost didn't make the cut. However, she regrouped, eventually married founder Bob Thornton and now runs the place with her children.

the restaurant. The festive nights often continued after the restaurant closed at 4 a.m., and Mireille, other dancers and staff, and Bob Thornton and friends kept the party going at the late-night club Porky's up the road. Talking about it all now, she claps her hands together and suddenly bursts out, "It was great!"

With all the glamour, exotic drinks and, of course, beautiful women, the Mai-Kai became a magnet for celebrities. Some, such as Johnny Carson, were regular visitors and after-hours friends of Bob and Mireille Thornton's. Carson and a few buddies — including Ed McMahon, who usually left around midnight — were especially fond of the fabled Mystery Drink ritual. When they ordered the drink, a gong was struck, and a sinuous Polynesian maiden silently delivered a huge, flaming bowl packed with 13 shots of rum while undulating before the lucky customer, placing a lei around his neck, then kissing him on the cheek before gliding away. Carson was so taken with the sensuous presentation he even featured a Mai-Kai Mystery Girl on *The Tonight Show*. The Mai-Kai continues to perform the Mystery Drink ritual to this day.

Near 5 a.m., Carson and his pals usually ended up at the Thorntons' to play bumper pool, drink and party some more. On the wildest nights, Mireille and her husband wouldn't get to bed until noon. She says of Carson, "He was very friendly and so funny. You see the personality he had behind the desk [on his show]? He was crazy like that." On some nights, she recalls, "We raced in the pool to see who was the fastest swimmer with all our clothes on. Imagine these guys swimming with water pouring out of their shoes. I got in, but if you have a dress on, you swim slowly."

The heady atmosphere at the restaurant was

heightened even more as other celebrities came to visit. Its allure drew not only celebrities from show business but sports, as well: Joe Namath, Mickey Mantle and Joe DiMaggio visited, as did Bob Hope and Jackie Gleason, among dozens of others. Johnny Weismuller of *Tarzan* fame, who lived nearby, often stole the show in the late 1960s when he stood up near the stage during the revue, pounded his chest and let out with his patented Tarzan yell. The dancers, in turn, pounded their chests and yelled right back. For Mireille and the other women on staff, one of their biggest thrills was the night that Omar Sharif, the swarthy heartthrob from *Dr. Zhivago,* dropped in for dinner and gladly hugged the beauties who surrounded him. So during a Tahitian dance that involved selecting an audience member, Mireille brought Sharif on-stage. She placed his hands on her hips as she shook them, and while he followed along, he exclaimed about her swaying hips: "It's alive! It's alive!"

Most customers knew not to cross the line when dealing with the sarong-clad barmaids and dancers, but if they didn't, Mireille Thornton stood up for herself. When actor George Hamilton was getting carried away kissing all the waitresses and dancers in the Molokai bar, she resisted his advances and pushed him away. He then stumbled back into a corner of the bar. Everyone was surprised, but Thornton replied, "Do you think he can kiss me any way he wants?" Hamilton quickly apologized and calmed down.

The waitresses in the Molokai bar were handpicked by Thornton (and by David Levy today) in large part for their beauty and even appeared on cheesecake calendars in scanty sarongs and bikini tops. "In those days, they were always big, beautiful girls, beautiful all around," Mireille Thornton says. And Bob Thornton checked them regularly to make sure they stayed svelte. The Molokai cocktail waitresses were sex symbols. Most remained loyal employees, but valet-parking manager John "Butch" Dewar recalls, "They had a hard time keeping hold of them, because rich guys would be taking them off to Vegas."

Today, waitresses often stay for years, such as Chatcharat Funk, known as "Fon," who has worked there since 1983. "They treat us like family," she explains.

For nearly 25 years, the Mai-Kai's sex appeal was part of a total entertainment-and-dining package that kept it at the top of the restaurant game. At its height, the Mai-Kai served 1,600 patrons a night for seven nights a week in season. For local politicians, businessmen and professionals, the Mai-Kai's Christmas party, when the drinks were on the house for employees and guests, was Fort Lauderdale's "social event of the year," Dewar says.

But by the early 1980s, the Mai-Kai was hit by a number of blows that dimmed its luster. The managers faced a recession that hurt tourism and big spending everywhere; competition from newer, more-varied restaurants; and changing laws and attitudes that discouraged heavy drinking. "It slowed all around, not just us," Mireille Thornton insists. But over time, while the Mai-Kai remained popular among tourists, it fell out of fashion among local residents. Indeed, it still served many of the same Cantonese dishes that could be found at any Chinese restaurant. And they were obviously wounded by the sudden death from cancer of Bob Thornton in 1989.

"They had a hard time keeping hold of them, because rich guys would be taking them off to Vegas."

— valet-parking manager John Butch Dewar, on the Mai-Kai's waitresses

They started slowly to recover, but the turnaround didn't really kick in until after Levy made drastic changes to the menu in 1995 following a global tour to discover new Asian-influenced recipes and trends. "People thought of us as a tourist trap, and we've had to work to change that view," he says. While upgrading the menu, the proprietors were also buoyed by the booming economy of the late '90s and then the neo-tiki craze, marked by a new type of tourist obsessed with the Mai-Kai.

The fad has helped it recover from the blow of Sept. 11 and, says Mireille Thornton, "It's motivated us to do a greater job. We're really blessed to carry on with all the ups and downs we've had."

In fact, Levy estimates that with the growth of year-round tourism, business is down only 15 percent from the peak years. "I'm glad we are in the right place at the right time," he says.

On some nights, the Mai-Kai's bar is still a

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Tiki chic: Works by artists such as Shag (left) are currently fueling a tiki revival with the help of Hukilau organizers Tim Glazner and Christie White, pictured with Mai-Kai co-owner David Levy.

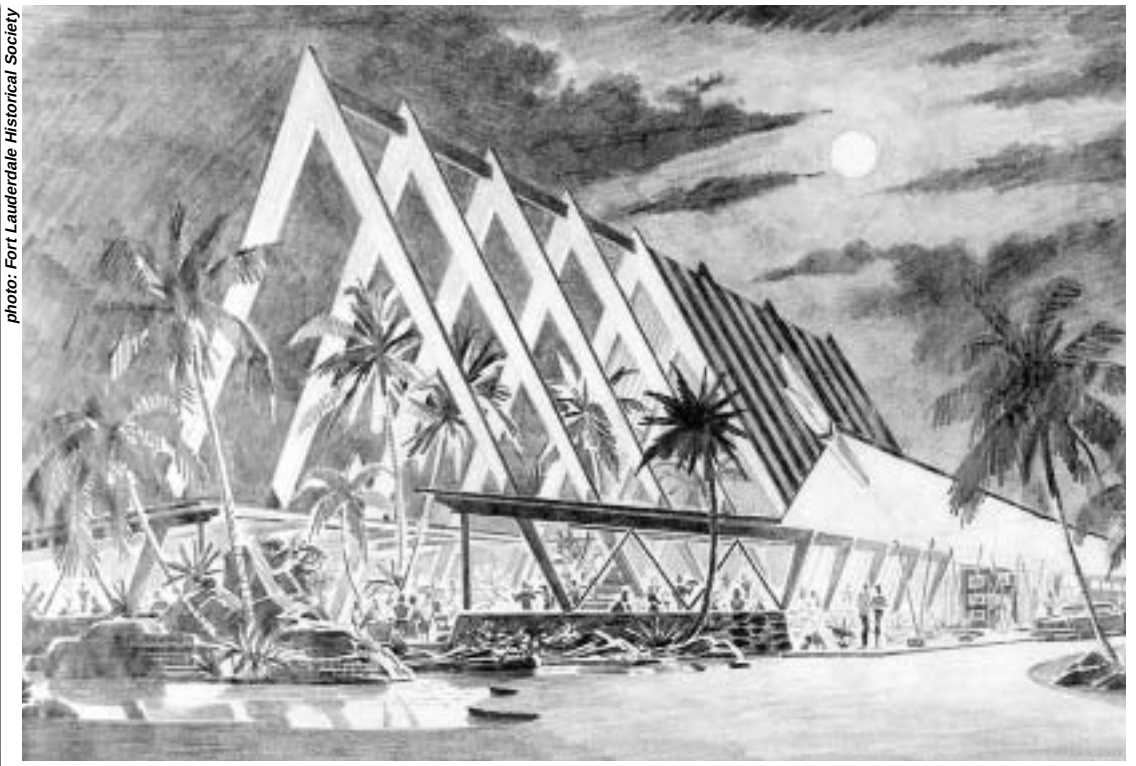

photo: Fort Lauderdale Historical Society

Fantasy island: This 1950s architectural drawing of the Mai-Kai offers a slightly different concept.

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hot spot for locals, especially during its Wednesday-night free sushi and Friday happy hour. But there's still only a small coterie of tikiphiles in this area who dig the Mai-Kai in the same way as the hundreds of Hukilau devotees descending on Fort Lauderdale. A few nights before the Hukilau, musicians Pablo Jacobson and Brian Naples are celebrating Naples' 31st birthday by sipping from a Mystery Drink with two female companions while lamenting the dearth of tiki spirit in town. Dressed like a rockabilly cat with greased-back hair, Naples says the hardcore tiki fans in South Florida are "just us and five people we know."

It's actually broader than that — only a few dozen or more, perhaps — but 23-year-old Erin McTee, dressed all in black with a Bettie Page hairdo, hopes the Hukilau will raise awareness: "It's just awesome that they're finally doing something at the Mai-Kai to appreciate it. People come here and don't really appreciate its history and that it's totally original."

The same sort of local reverence for the Mai-Kai and tiki culture comes from an unlikely source: a small Miami collective of Hispanic illustrators and carvers in their 20s named Kreepy Tiki. Led by a 27-year-old tattoo artist who calls himself Jaksin, they've blended traditional tiki styles with influences from hot-rodding and tattoo art, selling several hundred carvings since 1997 for as much as $800 or more. Jaksin says, "I got into tattooing and then saw how big tikis were in Polynesian culture."

Kreepy Tiki, in fact, sells most of its smaller samples and wins new customers on the first night of the Hukilau at the Holiday Inn in a suite crammed with browsers picking through tiki merchandise. Weak local publicity, though, has dampened the turnout.

Yet down the hall, the raucous spirit of the Mai-Kai era is unleashed in a crowd of 350 or so when a rockabilly/Hawaiian music group from Italy finally hits the stage. Known as I Belli di Waikiki, the musicians look like Roberto Benignis with guitars, wearing yellow towel skirts, leis draped over their bare chests. And when they play arcane, upbeat '50s songs such as "Bop A Lua," the tikiphiles' fantasy world of innocent good times comes alive with an explosion of dancing.

But that is all just a prelude to their evening at the Mai-Kai itself. Before the first show, they look around the grounds in dazed wonder, then fuel themselves with Barrels o' Rum and other potions in the bar. They've been drawn together largely through an Internet message board known as Tiki Central (www.tikiroom.com) with 1,125 members. Kelley Gray, 39, a cable-TV producer from Maryland with two tiki bars in his home, marvels over the Mai-Kai while sipping his drink: "I've never seen anything like it."

Their excitement builds to a fever pitch when the dancers in the Polynesian revue go onstage before this crowd of 200 tiki fanatics; 200 more will enjoy the second show. Four female dancers, wearing orange leis and grass skirts ringed with leaves, are met with eager applause when they come on bearing torches, backed by pounding drums and two male dancers. Soon, they return to dance provocative Hawaiian hulas, swaying their hips and arms, while the audience roars in approval. The crowd gets wilder, and when the dancers in tight-fitting sarongs compete against one another by shimmying their hips to drum solos, they're greeted with whoops and hollers. And something close to rapture takes hold when the tikiphiles witness the two male dancers twirling flame-tipped swords in rapid circles, then hurling them up in the air and sweeping them between their legs. At the end, the dancers and musicians are met with an ovation from the Hukilau hipsters, any lingering retro irony overcome by amazement. The glory days of the Mai-Kai are back, at least for tonight.

In the Tahiti room afterward, they achieve a genuine sort of paradise. Underneath a thatched roof with soft, aqua-blue and green lights suspended overhead, they drink their exotic cocktails and listen to I Belli di Waikiki, who are dressed this time in white sailor suits, play lilting Hawaiian songs with a ukulele and steel guitar. The group sings a 1940s song, "Oh, we are going to a hukilau … We throw our nets out into the sea/And all the 'ama'ama come a-swimming to me."

Everyone is smiling. White says it's the best night of her life and tiki expert von Stroheim concludes: "If tiki fanatics concocted a dream experience, this would be it."

Contact Art Levine at alevine@citylinkmagazine.com.