

## Lilikoi Cafe: Hawaiian Food In North Portland

By Polo Catalani,  
Special to *The Skanner News*

Many Portlanders go home to Hawai'i. Checkout all our smiling faces at the far end of PDX Gate D. Hawai'i is home to original kanaka who long ago navigated twin-hulled sailing canoes by distant constellations, but she's also home to families from cities and seashores all along that grand sweep of Pacific wind and wave that have always carried starry-eyed families from chilly Korea and packed Japan; from unkind Mother China and Vietnam's divided brothers; ambitious families from Guam and Tonga and a thousand more pearly shells in a knotted string across our deep blue sea.

So when we do score a ridiculously cheap ride on a Boeing jumbo, with a nice movie and two light meals in between, in tight triage here's what we do: hold tight our tutu, muscular matriarch of 19 souls conceived in 4 countries and 4 American states; pause humbly by our passed-on opa's empty kitchen table chair; lay orchid lei at the statue of Hawai'i's last monarch, Queen Lili'uokalani.

That done, we nip quick as Ko'olau wild piggies over to King's Bakery for an armload of Hawaiian Sweet Bread, sliced as thick as you want. Then and only then do your tense state-side shoulders drop down from around your ears, and you're ready to draw a deep-deep fill of windward ocean air. Paradise.

### Get it here

Now, here's the cool thing about living in damp-to-da-bones Portland, Oregon: much of what we miss about home, you can buy here. Right here, on the confluence of Rivers Willamette and Columbia and all our circulating Pacific wind and wave.

Many things we believe scarce

Their commitment is 16 hours every day and night except Sunday. By lunchtime Monday, they're at it again

on our chaotic new continent, are actually abundant in River City's recent arrivals. As our elder aunts never tire of saying: Always cultivate whatever precious little soil you hold, because all those things we miss, we grow in people. In us.

Take my Minimum Daily Required Allowance (MDRA) of Hawai'i soul food. How do I top my tank? Easy. I fill up at Lilikoi Café. Lunchtime, dinnertime, anytime six days a week.

"Hawai'i comfort food," owner Dekin Hom calls it. Dekin's a Kailua local boy who washed up on Western Oregon University

campus almost 15 years ago. Lucky for North Portlanders, his family's here now.

Every time I walk hungry and homesick onto their café's lanai, under their billowing Oregon blue tarp: there's Deke, outdoor-grilling and stir wok-king. His wife Veth pats my back, she knows what I want. Deke says she's the brains of the operation.

Veth is my wife's kind of home-girl; Veth's family fled pulverized Laos after those crazy Commies marched in. She fell for Dekin at college. Today their combined resumé includes their son Aveh (always busy making more art for their walls), and their café Lilikoi.

### We know what to do

Like I said, Veth knows I need my MDRA of soul. Though she's got a full menu of savory sandwiches and wraps, fried noodles and fried rice - I'm here for her hot Signature Style Sandwich. Carlton Farms Kalua pork piled like Mt. Kohala on top of two grilled squares of Hawai'i Sweet bread. Secret recipe. Bread that can bring the baddest NFL Samoan to tears. Creamy Asian coleslaw on da side. All that, plenty for my wife and me (two average-size ricepickers) to share. All that for five bucks.

Little Aveh brings us frosty lilikoi ice tea, then a heavenly slice of haupia. Passion fruit drinks and a coconut jello dessert.

Lilikoi, the place, is on N. Killingsworth, just east of Interstate Avenue. Lilikoi, the



PHOTO BY BRIAN STINSON

idea, is Veth and Dekin's commitment to closing that circle of optimistic communities round and round that grand sweep of deep blue sea described earlier.

Their family commitment is 16 hours every day and night except Sunday. By lunchtime Monday, they're at it again: cultivating culture, rich as Willamette Valley soil. Recreating home. A bigger house for all of us.

Lilikoi's success is our city's success. If this family thrives -

Portland thrives. Of course Portland, the city of leafy sidewalks and streetcars without a whiff of carbon in their tidy wakes. But also Portland, a city of people. People making this place and keeping their commitments.

What goes around, goes round and round.

Lilikoi Café: 1324 N. Killingsworth. (503) 964-8434.

Full menu and lots of reviews at [lilikoiportland.blogspot.com](http://lilikoiportland.blogspot.com).

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