

barfly

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La Mariana is South Sea haven



La Mariana Sailing Club

Location: 50 Sand Island Access Road

Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sundays through Thursdays, 11 a.m. to midnight Fridays and Saturdays
Call: 848-2800

IF A BAR were to ever be named a historical place on Oahu, La Mariana Sailing Club's Papeeete Bar and Lounge would be the first choice on the Barfly's list.

When you walk into this watering hole dedicated to all things tiki, it's like stepping through a time warp with a touch of déjà vu washing over you at the same time. Located just off Sand Island Access Road, La Mariana is located on the waterfront of Keelii Lagoon in an area most local residents rarely visit.

Take a seat at the bar and let your eyes wander for a bit — in the 27 years that this place has occupied its current space near the water (La Mariana originally opened in 1955 approximately 50 yards from where it sits today), owner Annette La Mariana Nahinu has kept the South Seas kitsch that made places like Don the Beachcomber's, Trader Vic's and the Tahitian Lanai famous in the '60s, '70s and '80s.

As those restaurants began to close down over the past 10 or 15 years, many of the items used to decorate them made their way to La Mariana. 97.5 KPOJ jock Fil Slash, who also happens to be an aficionado of all things tiki, accompanied me on my visit and quickly pointed out items (like



Take a step into the past at La Mariana Sailing Club, where colorful balloon fish lanterns are among the other tiki-type decorations that fill the bar.

GEORGE F. LEE / GLEE@STARBULLETIN.COM

the balloon fish lanterns hanging above the bar and various tiki throughout the room) that had been "adopted" by Annette and relocated to the sailing club.

"It would be a gigantic loss if this place ever went away," he said as we sat at the bar with our drinks. I was nursing a \$2 draft mug of Budweiser (no Bud Light on tap here) while Fil sipped on a Mai Tai in a tiki cup that he'd brought from home. I asked him what exactly he liked about having drinks here.

"I guess what I like about the place is ... everything!" he said, laughing.

It's hard not to like a bar like this, a true throwback to the days of yesteryear in Hawaii. La Mariana even inherited some of the customers from other establishments that have closed down; regulars from the Tahitian Lanai still meet here every Friday to sing with pianist Ron Miyashiro, who moved to La Mariana when

that restaurant closed in 1997.

While Honolulu's old-timers continue to visit, La Mariana has enjoyed a steady increase of visitors from out of state. Two recent appearances on the Travel Channel have led to a flood of phone calls whenever they repeat on the network, and tourists from around the country regularly seek out the bar for a glimpse of what Hawaii was like decades ago. And according to bartender Tito Calace, cruise ship traffic

packs the joint when the ships are docked at Aloha Tower.

But for some reason, La Mariana remains a secret spot of sorts for the majority of Oahu residents. Local promoter Kristien Amer hopes to change that when she brings "Tiki Lounge Five-O" to the bar on April 26. The legendary Martin Denny will be on hand for a special appearance from 10 to 11 p.m., and the King Pins will perform live at the party. Call 955-0969 for more details.

How much for a Bud Light?

The Barfly drank \$2 draft mugs of Budweiser during his visit to La Mariana. Bud Light and other bottled domestic beers are available, as are wine and cocktails.

Get things to do?

No Megatech game machines, pool tables or video games here — remember, La Mariana is a throwback to the days when you had to actually have a conversation with someone for entertainment. A single television set hangs above the bar itself, and three piano players rotate during the week to provide live entertainment on Tuesdays through Sunday nights.

What about the grinds?

While the kitchen closes at 8 p.m. nightly, it's worth a trip to La Mariana for a bite to eat. Menu items haven't changed much over the decades; the ahi poke (\$1.50) we tried was excellent, and the order of mozzarella cheese (\$9) was amazing. These weren't cheese sticks from Costco that had been heated up in a microwave — we got huge pieces of gooey mozzarella in a crisp crust that were easily the best I've had since starting this column last year. Other menu items include calamari (\$9.25), nachos (\$7.25) and french fries (\$2.50).

And the sail?

Bartender Tito Calace, who also happens to be a member of the sailing club and has a boat moored at Keelii Lagoon, made the Barfly feel like a regular almost immediately. His easygoing demeanor and willingness to sit and chat about the history of La Mariana made our visit both enjoyable and educational. And if you visit, keep an eye out for Annette herself — even though she's pushing 90, she's still the boss and can be found reminiscing with visitors almost every day.

"Barfly" appears every Friday in Star Weekend. E-mail Jason Genegabus with suggestions of neighborhood bars to visit.

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