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Pressure Cooking

Kitchen security is tight as Alan Wong and his crew present a "Taste of Hawaii" dinner for world leaders

By Joleen Oshiro

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It never gets old to be asked to feed the president of the United States, said chef Alan Wong, whose latest honor on that front was preparing the Leader's Dinner Nov. 12 at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit.

"I'm always flattered when they ask," said Wong. "No. 1, it's an honor to do this not only for the president of the United States, but for the country. It's an honor to represent Hawaii."



Alan Wong: The chef made the names of isle farmers part of the menu at the APEC event

Honor aside, the evening presented numerous challenges even before it began. First, Wong was responsible for another dinner that same night at the Hale Koa, the "Taste of Hawaii" farm-to-table tasting event for other APEC dignitaries.

"We were in someone else's kitchen, something we've done many times before. In that situation the success of the event is dependent largely on how you are received and the help you get," he said.

That night, about 50 staff members covered both events, with the hotel providing 18 cooks to help plate and put out food.

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And those weren't the only extra folks in the kitchen. Members of the Navy were on guard (they're the branch of the military that oversees the White House mess hall), and the state Board of Health "probed everything," joked Wong. Inspectors were "very nice and very supportive" as they checked food temperatures, he said.

Among the dishes were an array of appetizers that featured local produce and seafood as well as island flavors, such as Local Style Yellowfin Ahi Poke and Ho Farms Tomato with Li Hing Dressing. The three-course dinner featured some of Wong's dishes that are Obama's favorites, including Butter Poached Kona Cold Lobster, Twice Cooked Soy Braised Short Ribs and the Coconut, haupia sorbet served in a chocolate shell.

The "Taste of Hawaii" menu read like a who's who of local farmers and ranchers. Served at the grill station was Maui Cattle Company Carved Roasted Ribeye, Honda Family Tofu with Sumida Farms Watercress at the salad bar, Ron and Lita Weidenbach's Tilapia at the fish station, and Shinsato Farms Pork "Tonkatsu" at the fryer-steamer station.

"I'm really proud we got all the farmers' names out there," Wong said of the menu.

Then there was the Secret Service. "With the president, security is the key. You gotta deal with wandings and metal detectors, and there's a constant lockdown of spaces," says Wong.

In the end, though, Wong's biggest challenge was one that everybody faced: traffic.

The Leader's Dinner was held on a Friday, but Wong began preparing at Hale Koa on Wednesday. He left his King Street restaurant at 7 a.m. and would arrive at Hale Koa about 8:30. Some days began earlier, at 6 a.m.

"Every morning was a different challenge," he said.

Wong and crew worked until 1 p.m., when hotel chefs took over the kitchen, and returned again at 7 p.m.

But whatever the challenges, Wong said the honor made it all worthwhile.

"It's always a thrill. Some of my staffers have never seen the president in person before. When I look around, I see they're all happy and proud, and that makes me happy. They can tell their grandchildren they once served the president of the United States."

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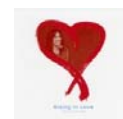
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