

Top chef at Alan Wong's strives to bring out best in staff's skills



COURTESY ALAN WONG'S

From left, pastry chef Vivian Wu, pastry chef de partie Tracy Paulson, sous-chef Kelly Kawachi, chefs de partie Donna Famisan and Nohea Nebeker, and chef de cuisine Miya Nishimura will be featuring their skills at Alan Wong's "Girls Night In" dinner.

By Joleen Oshiro
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For Miya Nishimura, chef de cuisine at Alan Wong's, the secret to success is an attitude of openness — to direction, critique and hard work.

"I like to take 'em in green — to take them from ground zero and mold them. That way, there are no bad habits to break," she said of her kitchen staff of more than 15 people, 90 percent of whom were new last year when she took the helm at Wong's King Street restaurant.

Nishimura has been doggedly determined to bring

out the best in her staff, spending entire shifts doing one-on-one training while the restaurant is open and dishes are prepared. This requires her to start her own workday early so she can complete her tasks before the busy night begins.

"It's definitely a hard thing to do. There have been a lot of growing pains. But the more time I invest, the more I find out later that it was worth it. I look at my staff today, and they've come a long way since they started last year," she said.

The fruits of Nishimura's labor will be in the spotlight Wednesday at Wong's latest

GIRLS NIGHT IN - NEXT GENERATION DINNER

Where: Alan Wong's
Honolulu, 1857 S. King St.

When: 5 to 10 p.m.

Wednesday

Cost: \$85 for five-course
dinner, \$135 with wine
pairings

Reservations: 949-2526

"Next Generation" dinner, "Girls Night In," featuring sous-chef Kelly Kawachi, chefs de partie Donna Famisan and Nohea Nebeker, and pastry chef de partie Tracy

Paulson presenting a five-course dinner; mixologist Mayumi Tano will provide drinks. Wong himself, pastry chef Vivian Wu and beverage director Mark Shishido also shared coaching duties.

"Each woman is from a different ethnic background — Nohea is Hawaiian, Donna's background is Filipino, Kelly is a Japanese-Filipino mix but she visits Japan often, and Tracy is from the mainland — and this contributes to the dishes," Nishimura said.

Menu highlights include appetizers of Keahole lobster,

Please see **GIRLS, D4**

GIRLS: Chefs' varied ethnic backgrounds add to dishes

Continued from D1

and shrimp and chicken lumpia; and entrees of star-anise cinnamon braised pork belly and wagyu rib eye.

Participating in such a dinner is a big commitment for the young chefs, requiring them to work and rework recipes based on regular critiques from Nishimura and Wong. In fact, Wong had them working on menu development through Monday.

"There's also menu writing, learning how to describe their dish; costing out the dishes, figuring out what prices to charge; and teaching someone else how to make their dish because they're going to be walking around (greeting guests)," Wong said.

"What I applaud the most

is that they go through the process," he said. "They're plugging away, plugging away, plugging away. It's not just make a dish and put it on the menu. They can apply this experience and make another dish. In the end, each person develops their own formula for success."

The dinner also exposes Nishimura to another level of mentoring her staff, with Wong coaching the coach.

California native Nishimura started her career with Wong nine years ago after an externship at his restaurant. She helped open Amasia, Wong's new restaurant on Maui, and returned to Honolulu as chef de cuisine after the exit of Wade Ueoka, who opened MW Restaurant last year with his wife, former Alan Wong's pas-

try chef Michelle Karr-Ueoka.

Nishimura is Wong's first female chef de cuisine, and she came in at a critical time for the restaurant.

"Last year a lot of cooks working here were on their way out," she said. "Cooks usually average two years at one location, and we had a higher turnover than usual."

Wong says having female leadership in the kitchen was particularly beneficial.

"Sometimes there's too much testosterone in the kitchen. You don't always have to go to battle to get what you want. Miya sometimes takes a delicate approach, though she sets a high standard and draws the line," he said. "It's a credit to Miya what she built in the kitchen with her demeanor, her work ethic and her relationships with her crew. It makes for a happy kitchen. And you know what they say: A happy kitchen turns out happy food."