

Diners hooked on fresh fish at Uncle's

BY SIMPLICIO PARAGAS
DINING OUT EDITOR

After supplying many local restaurants with fresh Island fish, Bruce Johnson finally decided to open up his own place last June at Pier 38.

And since then, he has been repeatedly asked if he's the "Uncle" in the Uncle's Fish Market & Grill.

"Yes, I'm an uncle, but it's not about me," said Johnson, who also owns Fresh Island Fish Co. Inc. "It's about all the uncles who've influenced me and changed my life since I moved to the islands when I was 18 years old."

And blood relations doesn't matter, either. In fact, Johnson refers to Harry Kojima, Gabriel Garcia and Geoffrey Arakawa, among 12 others, as some of his closest uncles, and none of them is related to him by any blood-quantum count whatsoever.

While Garcia and some of Johnson's other elderly uncles have passed on, Kojima can often be seen in the climate-controlled warehouse inspecting the fish and Arakawa runs the show in Uncle's kitchen.

"We've got the best and freshest fish anywhere in town," smiled Arakawa, who was the onetime corporate chef for Spencecliff Corporation. "It comes from the boat to the plate."

Lunch crowds are lured here by fish tacos (\$9.50 for two flour tortillas) and sandwiches (\$8.50), and baskets of chips and fish (market price), which are "never frozen" as trumpeted by the menu.

The fish part of last Monday's fish and chip of the day was ono (\$14.95), a white delicate fish that retained its flaky texture beneath the crunchy exterior of the panko batter. A side of coleslaw and some homemade tartar sauce are the mandatory accompaniments. However, a bottle of malt vinegar, Tabasco, ketchup, shoyu, Cholula hot sauce, salt and pepper are also readily accessible at each table.

Baskets of calamari (\$12.95), shrimp (\$13.95) and oysters (\$14.95) are other alternatives,

Uncle's Fish Market & Grill

Where: Pier 38, 1135 N. Nimitz Hwy., at the Costco and Home Depot Intersection

Call: 275-0063

Hours: Lunch daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; dinner Tuesday through Thursday from 5 to 9 p.m., and until 10 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays

Web site:
www.unclesfishmarket.com

as are "Big Uncle" combos (\$13.95-\$14.95). Portions are generous, not only with the amount of fries but also with the pieces of seafood that's piled in the checkered-paper-lined basket.

For those who would prefer a non-deep-fried dish, fresh fish plates (market price) can be prepared in three different ways (charbroiled, sauteed and blackened Cajun-style) and with three different sauces (Uncle's special, teriyaki or tartar).

Burgers (\$8.75), Uncle's backyard hibachi-style chicken (\$9.95) and a 12-ounce rib-eye steak with grilled onions (\$17.95) are the options for those preferring to eat from the land.

By day, Uncle's is self-service, plastic plates and utensils, but by night, it turns into full service, flatware and silverware.

"This was going into an abyss," said Johnson, referring to dinner service, which they started this past April. "It was uncharted territory for us."

The decision to open up for the evening, though, could prove to be a wise one.

A larger menu, with an emphasis still on fresh fish, lists an array of dishes, including fresh clams with linguine (\$21.95), grilled rib eye (\$23.95), Pacific lobster tails (market price), jumbo sea scallops in miso-butter sauce (\$23.95) and king crab legs (market).

"Ahi is still the most popular item," Arakawa said. "But all our fish is fresh."

Last week's onaga was prepared with a classic beurre-



Above: Chef Geoffrey Arakawa and Bruce Johnson specialize in offering fresh fish. **Right:** Hide Takahashi is responsible for slicing the sashimi that's used at Uncle's.

blanc-and-caper sauce, while the mahimahi was finished with a presentation that pays homage to Lanai's heritage of pineapples and macadamia nuts. Both were clean in flavor and didn't mask the briny taste of the fresh fish.

Other preparations include "Uncle's Style" with soy sauce, butter, spicy pickled pepper, green onions and capers; and "Uncle Sing-Chao Style" with lup cheong, cilantro, green onions and hot peanut oil.

As can be expected from a restaurant that specializes in seafood, Uncle's decor is all maritime with photos of old local fishermen, bamboo fishing rods, nets and Johnson's personal fishing trip videos playing on suspended large flat screen televisions.

Pointing to a large dated photo depicting three fishermen, Johnson said that someone started weeping when they saw it because it turned out to be an old relative.

"These photos all come from friends, families and the fishing community," he said. "These are all the uncles that make up Uncle's."

