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Kapa'a restaurant wins PETA award By Lester Chang - The Garden Island

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KAPA'A -- When Mark Reinfeld and Gabriel Zingaro opened the 30-seat Blossoming Lotus restaurant in 2002 and offered "vegan world-fusion cuisine," the type of food primarily drew the curious.

Two years later, the cuisine, seen as a graduated version of a generic vegetarian diet but which uses no dairy products, has brought national attention to the restaurant.

Leaders with the Norfolk, Va.-based People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), with more than 800,000 members, has recognized the Kapa'a restaurant as the top vegan cuisine restaurant in the nation for August.

Founded in 1980, PETA is dedicated to protecting the rights of all animals.

PETA leaders also bestowed the honor on the restaurant in recognition of "Vegan World Fusion Cuisine," a book written by Reinfeld, founder and executive chef of Blossom Lotus, and Bo Rinaldi, co-founder of "Vegafusion."

The book consists of 200 recipes, pulled together by Reinfeld and others. The book boasts an introductory message by Dr. Jane Goodall, the founder of the Jane Goodall Institute and a world-renowned naturalist who had done research on chimpanzees.

Because of the rising popularity of vegan cuisine on Kaua'i, the restaurant will be relocated into a commercial building mauka of its current location by Beezers Old Fashioned Ice Cream parlor on Kuhio Highway.

When it opens, possibly in mid-September, the restaurant will be able to accommodate up to 80 diners at any given time, Reinfeld said.

In the 1960s, vegetarian food was on the "fringe of the culinary world," Reinfeld said in an interview with The Garden Island.

From his point of view, vegan cuisine, in a way the next step up from vegetarian cuisine, is at the forefront of that industry, worldwide.

Vegan cuisine is plant-based, using organic vegetables and fruits, and excludes the use of animal-based products.

"The food symbolizes healing, and is inspirational," Reinfeld said. "It is natural food that is a part of international cuisine."

Those who follow a vegan-dish diet can almost be assured of good health, Reinfeld contends. "If you follow an optimal diet, you will have energy and stamina," he said. "The food is rejuvenating, healing and creative (in the way it is made)."

Reinfeld said the many dishes that are created by him and employees he calls "angels," because he appreciates their energy and creativity, contain no "chemical additives or preservatives, (or) artificial coloring."

Reinfeld said vegan cuisine is aimed at providing diners the healthiest meal possible.

"A major focus is to present food as close to its natural state as possible," Reinfeld said. "We are just mindful of trying to ensure good health through food, so we put our love and care into it."

Reinfeld said the food "is bursting with flavor," and the "unique creative dishes" can rival the best in international cuisine.

"We use the highest-quality ingredients possible," Reinfeld said. "We get our produce from local organic farmers, and other vegetables at the farmers' market."

On the Web site, PETA leaders pointed to some of the most popular dishes, including Govinda's curry dish, a tropical-paradise salad, and Kala Lu's green-papaya salad.

"We use soy products such as tofu and tempeh (a soy-based, cultured product that is similar to tofu)," Reinfeld said. "We use local ingredients like ulu (breadfruit). We use purple potatoes (for salads)."

Because meat is not used, the chefs and other food-preparation folks are pressed to their highest creative levels, Reinfeld said.

"We have basically turned the vegetarian dishes into the main dish (of a meal)," he said. "Our chefs are extremely stellar. They are extremely creative."

Reinfeld said Gia Baiocchi and Jennifer Murray, whom he describes as "my two main chefs," create dishes that constantly bring delight to diners.

The restaurant also specializes in "live foods," the kind not cooked above 118 degrees so that "all the enzymes are preserved," Reinfeld said.

Enzymes are biological catalysts that support almost all chemical reactions, and help maintain life processes.

In a way, the live foods are a subset of the vegan world-fusion cuisine, and are served nightly, but are highlighted on Fridays, he said.

Live food comes in the form of "live samosa," a variation of an East-Indian dish, and "live-fruit pies," Reinfeld said.

His recipes are the result of having developed gourmet vegan and live-food cuisine recipes for the past 10 years, and having traveled through 18 countries in his lifetime, said Reinfeld, who is 37 years old.

Vegan cuisine is actually a blend of cuisines and cultures of the world, Reinfeld said.

So when a customer sits down and eats his food, he, in essence, is eating the foods of the world, minus the meat.

"It is ethnic cuisine. Like foods from Mexico or Italy. There is East-Indian food," Reinfeld said. "Through vegan cuisine, we

synthesize world cuisines and serve them in a setting that honors the art and the wisdom of the cultures of the world."

Reinfeld said his offerings appeal to all types of people, with all types of eating requirements.

"Visitors have come as far away as Po'ipu and beyond to taste our food, and the comments I hear is that it is the best they have ever eaten," Reinfeld said.

Reinfeld said that one doesn't have to be a vegetarian to appreciate his food.

"Just someone who is looking for a healthier dining alternative without compromising quality or service," Reinfeld said.

Reinfeld was born and raised in New York, where he worked as a chef. At age 25, Reinfeld wanted a change, and moved to San Diego, where he worked in a natural-food kitchen.

He then moved to Malibu, Calif., and started Blossoming Lotus, a company that trained chefs. Reinfeld also did consulting work related to foods for corporations, and eventually came to Kaua'i in 2002 to start the Blossoming Lotus restaurant. Reinfeld has a master's degree in holistic nutrition from the Clayton School of Natural Healing.

Blossoming Lotus is collectively owned and managed by more than 10 people.

The owner-workers are Zingaro, Chris Vaughn, Jeremy Mohlenkamp, Baiocchi, Murray, and Jessyka Murray.

Other employees are Amber Fox, Terranc Planty, Rose Miller, Janan Seymour, Aquarius, Suzanne Barnes, Joe Zingaro, Kaleo Saflor and Chris Junior.

The restaurant opens from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. for lunch, and from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. for dinner, seven days a week.

Reservations can be made at 1-888-445-6883.