



A TASTEFUL AWAKENING ON MAUI

by THELMA FAYLE

After 18 years of living without a sense of smell or taste due to a rare fungal infection, extensive sinus surgery reclaimed two long-forgotten sensory pleasures. But the surgeon cautioned: the awakening would likely be temporary.

I took from that: Enjoy the moment.

The first moving experience felt like my sense of smell was being commandeered by a rare work of art – although the intoxicating smell of the sea seemed to elude everyone else walking on Victoria’s breakwater that sunny afternoon.

A hint of human sweat at the bus stop, a whiff of cigarette smoke on a walk down the street, fuel at the gas station or an unexpected bakery breeze blowing in my face. Everywhere I go, scents abound. I have become the vigilant and aware wine-sommelier-like connoisseur of everyday scents. Like an unrestrained puppy, I long to smell it all.

As the surgery meant I could fly again, my partner and I headed to Maui to celebrate the awakening. On the recommendation of a friend, we chose to stay at the Napili Kai Beach Resort.

On our first day, we are greeted by the sounds of tropical birds in full-throttle morning song as we head to the Sea House restaurant for breakfast. The Sweet Potato Frittata is so tasty I nearly jump out of my chair and scream. I could have given Sally a run for her money – you know, Sally, from the famous *When Harry Met Sally* movie scene. The flavour is unbelievable. I would try to tell you how sensational it tasted, but words won’t carry my meaning. Just go there and order it.

Sorry, let me calm down.

In the perfected Frittata recipe, with spinach, caramelized onion, cheese and a spicy hollandaise sauce, the purple sweet potatoes are loaded with antioxidants and nutrition as well as phenomenal flavour. Hawaiians have had plenty of time to get this recipe right as sweet potatoes, all 24 varieties, are one of their oldest staples – right up there with the traditional poi dish.

At our first dinner, we watch a sunset from the resort restaurant and raise our glasses to toast Dr. Javer, the sinus surgeon who gave me back my senses and made our trip possible. After 18 years of having very little alcohol – tasteless drinks had little appeal – chardonnay with dinner is delicious. As we finish our meal, we hear the call of a conch shell summoning guests to look up. A young father near our table picks up his toddler son and stands to watch the sensational sunset together. My partner grabs his camera and captures the lovely scene.

Before we go to bed, I spread coconut oil on my skin. I can’t get enough of the tropical smell and want my skin to breathe it in all night long.

In the middle of our second night, I wake up thinking about the homemade cinnamon buns with crushed macadamia nuts and a not-too-sweet cream cheese icing. I recall the muscle memory of my eyes widening to tooney-size, as I sank my teeth into that fresh and flavourful pastry.

ABOVE | The author and her partner enjoy a scrumptious meal (her first in 18 years) by a sensational sunset on Maui. Photo: Daryl Jones

With the salient sensation of saltwater on my mouth, Daryl and I enjoyed bobbing in the warm surf for a couple of hours every day. Sea bobbing, chatting with people, reading, eating and tasting, tasting and eating, and just sitting on the lanai, staring at the sea, we enjoy smelling Maui.

I cannot recall ever smelling anything like the 11-acre parcel of perfumed property that is Napili Kai Beach Resort. One part ocean, one part fragrant flower, one part pineapple, one part sand and one part Sea House restaurant aroma. It all adds up to "a unique and fruity blend" as the sommeliers say.

We buy unfamiliar fruit at the market, wait for it to ripen, peel the skin and dive into the unknown. I taste sweet little bananas and pink dragon-fruit with tiny black seeds. An eggfruit tastes sweet, with its bright yellow flesh, crumbly in texture, like a hard-boiled egg yolk. I wish we had bought a dozen instead of just two. I was fruit-famished for anything new to my awakening buds.

Maui pineapples are referred to as "Maui Gold" for good reason. They don't taste like pineapples we get back home. They are sweet and juicy on the tongue and tantalizing on the nose. Each time I open the fridge door, the pleasing fragrance smacks me with a cruel reminder: you won't get this experience anywhere else.

Every morning at 10:00 in the beach cabana, the staff present a tray filled full of just-cut pineapple chunks, along with a huge pitcher of fresh lemonade.

Ofa, one of the resort staff, takes on the daunting-looking

task of cracking open a fresh coconut for us to munch on. He begins by skewering the hard, brown ball on a sharp steel pole, breaks the fruit in half and then gently carves out chunks of the white meat. "Coconut is full of nutrition," he reminds us as he shares the platter with guests. The unusual nutty flavour is incomparable to the desiccated stuff we get at home.

Kai, another staff member, informs us about local snacks like li hing powder made of dried plums and sugar and salt. I frantically write down the names of all the snacks he mentions. I want to taste them all, except for the "Hawaiian Power Bar" made of sushi rice and spam. That one doesn't grab me.

The communal snack offers a chance to sit and chat with other guests all lounging in our casual beachwear. Collectively, we chew and sip and take in the beach pageant. We are mesmerized by the pounding waves and captivated by the sight of fearless nine-year-olds diving straight into the surf – as though they are meant to be there and are totally unbreakable.

There is something primal about nibbling on tropical fruit and watching kids squealing with delight, having the time of their lives in the water. The frolicking gets ferocious when a set of big waves lands. We sit and watch the kids and laugh at their antics and enjoy the powerful sounds of the surf. The sight of the sea action trumps social media for adults and kids alike; and the taste of the juicy pineapple pieces and lemonade is gravy.

Barbara, one of the seniors among us, doesn't realize I am watching her as she stares and smiles thoughtfully at two young lovers walking along the beach – his arm tucked tightly around

her back, where it has likely been for most of the night.

The ambience reminds me of my 97-year-old mother's favourite old Dean Martin song: "Memories are Made of This." Most of the guests we meet are second and third generations who keep returning to the resort.

Along with the morning refreshments, a staff person gives a 10-minute presentation each day on a variety of topics. Lorene talks about the damage done to coral reefs by chemicals in many brands of sunscreen lotion. She describes the pink coral reefs she knew as a child growing up on Maui. "They are mostly brown now and dying," she says, "the brightly coloured fish are disappearing, too." She is doing her best to get the word out. Luckily, by fluke, we had one of the recommended sunscreen lotions, a Canadian product called Badger Chamomile SPF 30.

As we near the end of our sensory-savouring holiday, we go for a walk in the exotic hibiscus-laden landscape and come across two little boys sitting in a tree. With his chin high in the air, and mum and dad close by, the younger of the two bravely calls out to us: "My dad jumps very high and I can too," he says. We nod and smile with great approval. "Jumping high can be very helpful at times," I shout back.

All senses sated by the bounty of tasty fruit, the smells of rare flowers, the sounds of kids playing, the sight of Maui sunsets and the soothing feel of our bodies immersed in the warm ocean water for hours each day – we are ready to return to cold Canada.

I think back to how my world existed for so long without smells and tastes and realize there was some denial about the loss of those two powerful senses. I forgot how much pleasure comes of them. But there is no denying the 15 pounds I have gained since the sinus surgery last spring. Food smells and tastes so good. |

Thelma Fayle is a Canadian freelance writer. She was a paying guest of Napili Kai Beach Resort; they did not review or approve this article.

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