

Dine / Royal Hawaiian



Top left: Royal Hawaiian dishes including (from left) grilled rib-eye, curry pineapple rice and Huli-Huli Half Bird Inasal chicken; clockwise from top right: the renovated interior, inspired by the eatery's original decor; the Triple Happiness cocktail; a pupu platter with chicken skewers, lumpia pork egg rolls, crab rangoons and crispy coconut shrimp



A Tropical Throwback

BELOVED EATERY ROYAL HAWAIIAN ROLLS BACK INTO TOWN WITH A VINTAGE NOD TO ITS HISTORY.

By ASHLEY RYAN

Step back in time to the 1940s, when Royal Hawaiian first opened in Laguna Beach. Tiki culture was just gaining popularity and the laid-back, tropical vibe was the perfect fit for this coastal town.

Though there have been multiple iterations over the years, the opening of the new Royal Hawaiian aims to re-create the vibe of the original restaurant, with a vintage design, detail-oriented renovation and a menu of favorites. Los Angeles-based Boulevard Hospitality Group worked with Ignacio “Notch” Gonzalez of Top Notch Kustoms

on the rebuild, incorporating artifacts like lamps, mugs and more from the original restaurant while woodcarver Vic Hernandez crafted new Tiki statues to stand guard at front, modeled after the 1960s versions.

With a giant clamshell bench in the lobby, jade tiles, colored lights, thatched elements and a 45-foot bar with stunning lit shelves, the interior is a sight to behold—and so are the cocktails. The original Royal Hawaiian made the rum-filled Chief Lapu Lapu famous, and now it's back and better than ever, with fresh passion fruit placed on top and served flaming. Other throwback

drinks include the ingredient-heavy Singapore Sting and the Deep Sea Diver, another rum-forward option sweetened with a house-made honey cream.

Modern concoctions are on the menu as well. Don't overlook the Triple Happiness, a sweet and smoky cocktail of tequila and mezcal that is served in a skull-shaped dish of dry ice for a foggy show. The two-person Bali Bali bowl is another fun one, so strong that it's meant for sharing.

When it comes time to order, you'll find an array of island-inspired dishes from Hawaii and beyond crafted by Head Chef JaeHee Lee, a native of Guam. Make sure to try the pupu platter, which allows you to select four appetizers to sample. From seafood options like the crispy coconut shrimp and creamy crab rangoons to grilled chicken skewers, empanadas to Spam musubi, there is something for everyone, but the true highlight is the lumpia egg roll, stuffed with braised pork and vegetables and served with a sweet chile dipping sauce.

For the main course, there are a number of flavorful dishes to choose from. For a light lunch, try the tuna poke, where ahi tuna is served alongside a bed of mixed greens, or even the grilled Huli-Huli Half Bird Inasal, a perfectly marinated, boneless half chicken. Heartier options include the grilled teriyaki rib-eye with crispy onions on top, the Royal Ribs (another throwback to the past) and the curry pineapple rice, in which fried jasmine rice is mixed with peas, scallions, Portuguese sausage and curry then topped with shrimp—all served in an actual pineapple half. The menu also offers a Japanese-style burger, veggie kabobs, Atlantic salmon and a creamy macaroni salad (it can be ordered by itself or as a side with an entree) that you simply must try.

Whether you end the meal with pineapple or coconut cake or another cocktail, you're sure to leave feeling refreshed and maybe a little nostalgic, too. ■

ROYAL HAWAIIAN: 331 N. Coast Highway
949-549-4354; royalhawaiianoc.com

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday;
11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday