

*Tahiti*

WHERE ON EARTH

Tantalizing TAHITI

by MICHELE PETERSON

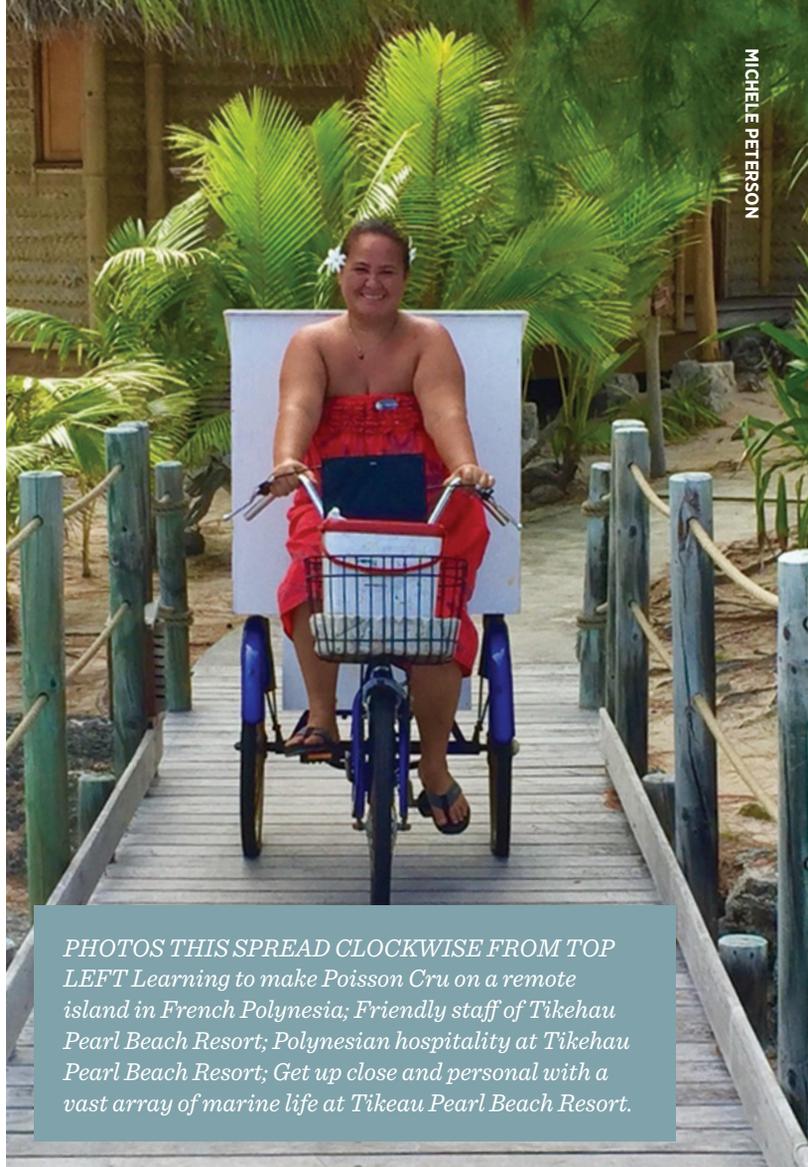
“FOR US, SHARK, TURTLE AND EEL are sacred, so we don’t eat them,” says Bachou our chef as he chops a slab of tuna into chunks on his cutting board.



MICHELE PETERSON

FRENCH POLYNESIA

*PHOTO THIS
SPREAD Beautiful
Le Taha'a Island
Resort & Spa offers
5-star luxury.*



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Learning to make Poisson Cru on a remote island in French Polynesia; Friendly staff of Tikehau Pearl Beach Resort; Polynesian hospitality at Tikehau Pearl Beach Resort; Get up close and personal with a vast array of marine life at Tikehau Pearl Beach Resort.

«I can't say I'm disappointed to hear eel won't be on the menu. A few days earlier, I'd encountered a swarm of sacred blue-eyed eels on the island of Huahine. Each the size of my thigh, they floated languidly in a roadside creek only writhing into action to feed on fish tossed into the water as offerings by local villagers.

Fortunately there are lots of other foods to eat. I've arrived in French Polynesia at the beginning of the rainy season, also known as the Period of Abundance. According to ancient Polynesian tradition, Austral Summer is a period established according to the position of the Pleiades constellation in the Southern Hemisphere. It's a time of bountiful crops, which makes it ideal for culinary adventurers like me.

My explorations into the country's cuisine begin on Huahine, a 75-square-kilometre volcanic isle located northwest of Tahiti, within the Society Islands of French Polynesia's 118-island archipelago. Nicknamed the Garden of Eden due to its fertile soil and sacred mountain resembling a reclining pregnant woman, it's actually two islands connected by a bridge.

My home base is Hotel Le Mahana Huahine on the smaller, more secluded island of Huahine Iti, where I'm welcomed with a lei of fragrant gardenias to my bungalow set on the resort's magnificent beach. After settling in, I meet up with Chef Jean-Frederic Markacz. Born in France, he mastered his craft with great chefs such as Cyril Lignac of Michelin-starred Le

Quinzième, then visited French Polynesia, fell in love with the islands and decided to stay.

"Coconut, vanilla and fresh fish are available here year-round," he explains, placing the trio of ingredients on the workspace.

While lagoon fish and moon fish are popular, we use mahi-mahi, dredging it in flour, then egg and coconut before frying it. It's served with plain jasmine-scented rice. As someone more familiar with Mexican cuisine, I'm surprised to see no chiles or spice except for Espelette pepper, an import that's a legacy of being an overseas collectivity of France.

"Normally in hot countries, people like spice," Chef Markacz explains, "but here they prefer sweet flavours."

There's lots of sweetness in the next dish, a dessert of flambéed pineapple and banana in rum with vanilla Chantilly cream.

"With 12 varieties of bananas on the island, they're also a typical food," he says, passing me a small *amoa* banana to peel.

After enjoying the fruits of our labour, I head out with Island Eco Tours to visit Huahine's *marae* (ancient stone temples). Among the oldest in French Polynesia, they're often surrounded by ti-plants, a shrub known for its magical properties. We watch fishermen tending their stone traps within Fa'Una Nui saltwater lake, gawk at the blue-eyed eels, visit a vanilla plantation and explore the open-air market in the village of Fare. That evening,



a traditional dinner is prepared within an *ahima* or earth oven with fish, chicken and suckling pig tucked in banana leaves and roasted on volcanic stones. Wrapping up the evening at Hotel Le Mahana Huahine with warm Polynesian hospitality, I watch as dancers tell the stories of the islands through Ori Tahiti, a swaying dance movement similar to hula, done in perfect unison to mesmerizing ukulele and drum music.

Next up is Le Taha'a Island Resort & Spa accessed via boat from the larger island of Raiatea. The draw? A member of the prestigious Relais & Chateaux portfolio, this luxurious five-star collection of 57 suites and villas is known for its gourmet dining.

I begin with a beachside lunch featuring Teahupo'o shrimp — a sweet crustacean harvested on a coast known for its epic surf breaks — and a swim in the freeform infinity pool. That evening, cocktails are served in Le Vanille, an open-air lounge-restaurant that feels like a treehouse suspended from the night sky. The lights are low and the dinner menu inspired at Ohiri Restaurant. Upon learning that Taha'a is known for its vanilla, I opt for the vanilla tasting menu. Botanist John W. Moore first identified Tahitian vanilla or *Vanilla tahitensis* in 1933 and noted it as a new species, a natural hybridization that is softer, shinier and plumper than other varieties. It's also more fragrant, I realize, with the first»



ERIC CHAN

FRENCH POLYNESIA

SERVES 4 AS AN APPETIZER

Tahitian-Style Poisson Cru

HERE'S MY INTERPRETATION of the marinated raw fish dish I sampled during the island picnic with Tikehau Pearl Beach Resort. You'll find versions of this dish throughout the South Pacific including Tonga where it is known as 'Ota 'Tka.

Tomatoes 2, diced

Cucumbers 2 medium, peeled, seeded and diced

Limes 2, juiced

White Onion 1 small, finely diced

Raw Ahi Tuna 500 g

Fresh Coconut Milk¹ ¾ cup

Salt and Pepper to taste

1 CUT the tuna into bite-sized chunks and marinate in the lime juice for five minutes. Mix the cucumber, tomatoes and onion in a large glass bowl. Mix in the marinated tuna and lime juice. Let sit for a few minutes, then add the coconut milk, season with salt and pepper and serve immediately.

¹ *Grate ripe fresh coconut and squeeze the milk out of the pulp through cheesecloth or use light canned coconut milk.*



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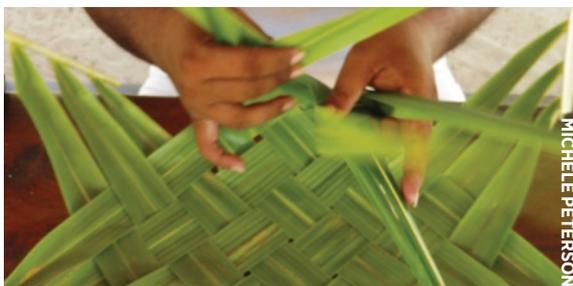


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PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Picnic excursion at Tikehau Pearl Beach resort; Lemaire Heipua sous chef at Hotel Le Mahana Huahine prepares fresh coconut for lunch; Plates, totes and purses are still woven by hand throughout French Polynesia; Enjoy 12 or more varieties of bananas in French Polynesia; Grilling fish on the beach.



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bite of incredibly tender lobster bathed in a coconut milk royale infused with single-source vanilla. I appreciate the subtleties of its sweet floral scent, quite different from the heady caramel-forward Mexican vanilla I'm more familiar with.

Later, back in my overwater bungalow, I open the glass-bottomed floor and witness a school of blue fish swimming in sapphire waters. It's a piece of paradise.

More watery wonders await on the tiny coral ring of Tikehau, 350 kilometres northwest of Tahiti. From there, a boat whisks me to the Tikehau Pearl Beach Resort, a luxury resort set on its own *motu* (tiny island) tucked within a wild coconut grove and surrounded by pink sand beaches. My thatched-roof bungalow is steps to the water.

"The lagoon surrounding this island is one of French Polynesia's richest in marine life," says Anne Tran-Thang, the resort's General Manager, as we walk across the wooden pathways suspended above the shallow blue waters.

Peering down, I see brain coral as large as a submerged VW Beetle and a ring of brilliant Bénéitier coral as bright as a sapphire necklace. Donning a snorkel mask, I step into the crystalline waters and

«within minutes am welcomed by schools of sergeant majors, a bright blue parrotfish and a Titan fish seemingly intent on lifting its head out of the water.

The next morning it's time for a private cooking class on an even more remote island. We travel across the endless expanse of the Pacific to a speck of sand ringed by coral and dotted with spiky Pandanus shrubs. Our guide, aka chef Bachou Raufau, totes the provisions to a shady spot and builds a fire to grill the red snapper. While it grills, he demonstrates how to handcraft serving trays out of palm.

"Weaving is still very much a tradition among the Mamas of our village," he explains, as he deftly weaves leaves into sturdy utensils.

Then we learn how to make Tahitian-style Poisson Cru, a traditional dish of raw tuna marinated in lime juice and coconut milk that's similar to Latin ceviche.

"To get the freshest *miti haari* or coconut milk, you grate a ripe coconut and then squeeze the milk out through a cloth," he explains.

The Poisson Cru is velvety, with the tender cubes of tuna tasting as fresh as the sea. The coconut milk adds a touch of sweetness while the crunch of cucumber and red tomato makes it an especially memorable dish. It's followed by grilled red snapper, a hearty main course with a smoky flavour drawn from the open fire.

We enjoy it all at a table set in the shallow water's edge where sleek lemon and black-tip sharks glide past, hoping for a handout. I watch my table scraps get snapped up by a flurry of snapping jaws and decide to lift my toes out of the water; for while Polynesian tastes and traditions might preclude eating shark, the feeling might not be reciprocal. 

Official Tahiti Tourism
www.tahiti-tourisme.com

Hotel Le Mahana Huahine
www.relaismahana.com

Le Taha'a Resort & Spa
www.letahaa.com

Tikehau Pearl Beach Resort
www.spmhotels.com

Air Tahiti Nui
Air Tahiti Nui flies direct from Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) to Faa'a International Airport in Papeete, Tahiti.
www.airtahitinui.com

Hilton LAX
A great option for travellers who want to unwind during their LAX layover, is a day pass to the upscale Hilton Los Angeles Airport Hotel, near the airport.
www.losangeleshilton.com

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FRENCH POLYNESIA

SERVES 2

Coconut Fish

THIS RECIPE COMES from Hotel Le Mahana Huahine, located on a small island between Tahiti and Bora Bora.

Fresh Mahi Mahi or Halibut 2 thick fillets

All-Purpose Flour for dredging

Salt 1 tsp

Pepper a dash

Egg 1 large, beaten

Freshly Grated Coconut Meat¹ for coating

Vegetable Oil for shallow frying

Orange Slices for garnish

1 **RISE** the fish and pat dry. Mix the flour with the salt and pepper. Preheat a frying pan with oil. Dip each piece of fish into flour, then into beaten egg and then grated coconut, pressing the coconut onto the fish to affix. Fry at a medium temperature until golden brown, being careful not to burn the coconut. Garnish with orange slices and serve with white rice.

¹ Or desiccated shredded coconut that's been rehydrated in a steamer.