

an island vibe

Raoul Chee Kee discovers a hideaway in Cebu where island charm meets the flavors of the Mediterranean.

A desire to lead a less stressful life prompted an American chef and his Japanese-Korean wife to make the move to Cebu a few months ago. Until they packed up and left with her children in tow, Jason and Anna Hyatt worked together in Hong Kong. There, he oversaw almost 20 restaurants in Hong Kong's Lan Kwai Fong district while she handled the publicity aspect of the job. California and Luxe were the two restaurants closely identified with him.

The couple's ties with the Philippines can be traced to Jason's uncle, who is married to a Cebuana. Whenever they got the chance, which was not as often as they would have liked, the Hyatts would hie off to Cebu.

"During our annual vacations, we would go to the beach house in Cebu. We enjoyed these trips because it took us out of Hong Kong where we were beginning to feel stifled," Anna said.

The tediousness of their work and the need to deal with bratty customers daily finally forced the Hyatts to take stock of the situation and ask themselves what it was they wanted to do. The answer was simple and serendipitous.

"We realized we had had enough of city life. We wanted to live by the beach but continue doing what we had been doing on a smaller scale. Fortunately, the house in Cebu was avail-



Clockwise from top: abaca's dining area; scallops fetuccine; making squid-ink pasta; and braised lamb shanks.



able," Anna said.

The couple, with the help of architects and interior designers, then began to redesign the place. The restaurant, abaca, was the first to

be finished. It can seat from 80 to 100 persons, many of whom nowadays are members of Cebu's prominent families. A full-service boutique hotel adjacent to the restaurant is undergoing finishing touches and will be ready in a few months.

At abaca, Anna alternately describes the food as "rustic dining" and "Mediterranean with a Californian touch."

They had been open only a few months when this writer first dropped

by, but the menu already had that distinct island vibe.

Appetizers included Crispy cumin chicken, Lamb kebabs and salads with ingredients like organic beets, oven-dried tomatoes, roasted peppers, and organic greens. An antipasto sampler consisting of cold cuts, a side salad, marinated olives, and several cheeses was eaten with the restaurant's bread that is baked fresh daily.

Jason at the time also had six oven-baked rectangular pizzas topped with Italian salami, homemade lamb sausage, roasted sweet peppers, and grilled onions.

The menu is still Mediterranean by way of California, but the chef now comes up with new dishes on a regular basis.

"He updates the menu everyday," Anna said. "Depending on the fresh produce available, he adds or takes out certain dishes. Popular items like our pizzas and pastas, however, are staples." The kitchen staff at abaca now includes Canadian sous chef Melissa Cannons, who joined the team earlier this year. Together, she and Jason have come up with a menu that now includes Whole roasted Australian sea bass, Duck confit risotto, Pappardelle with veal and mushroom, and Braised lamb shanks. In Cebu, however, never forget the US Angus rib eye.

Anna was "very surprised" to find out that while guests were open to trying the new dishes, "people come to abaca to eat meat."

Like most professional chefs, Jason is very particular about his meat, seafood, and fresh produce. Aside from receiving supplies from all over the country, they also have an organic food supplier who provides them with vegetables, pork, and chicken.

"Mr. Hyatt makes it a point to specify

his needs and they gladly agree. They feed their chickens certain things to make them grow fatter than usual, so we end up getting really meaty and juicy chicken," said one staff member.

Another project the chef started recently is an organic farm that will grow vegetables exclusively for the restaurant.

When the hotel finally opens, abaca will continue to accept non-hotel guests during dinner. Breakfast and lunch will be served only to guests.

Aside from the restaurant and the full service of a dedicated butler, guests at the hotel will have several activities to choose from including spa treatments, water sports, and day trips.

This early, Anna said abaca already has a number of confirmed guests this December.

"They don't care about our rates. They just want to stay here," she said. ♦

INCIDENTAL INTELLIGENCE

If you go: For inquiries on Abaca resort and restaurant, call (6332) 495-8456 or 342-8905. The restaurant is located roughly 500 meters from Shangri-La Mactan at Punta Engaño Road, Mactan Island, Lapu-Lapu City.

