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Loco Moco: An Epitome of Hawaii's Multicultural Identity and Culinary Tourism

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Abstract

Loco Moco as a must try dish for tourists to Hawaii, its variation of ingredients and format shows the story of layered immigration, adaptation and identity transformation. Loco Moco's dual role as spirit of local Hawaiian and culinary experiences for outsiders have been developed through the process of globalization and development of economics. Through the recipes and official food guides, the change of Loco Moco's format and ingredients showing the effect of globalization on Hawaii as a tourist and cultural center. The ethnography and social science resources prove details of Hawaii cuisine development. This research paper argues that Loco Moco has evolved into an epitome of Hawaiian identity shaped by tourism from a working-class comfort food, its transformation also reflects the dynamic interplay between local identity, cultural hybridity and the commodifying forces of the global food economy.

Keywords

Food Anthropology, Cuisine, Culinary Tourism, Hawaiian, Food Economy, Globalization

1. The Origin of Loco Moco, a Symbol of the Working-Class

On a scoop of white rice, topped with a hamburger patty, a fried egg, and rich brown gravy, is the "must-try" dish for tourists to Hawaii—"Loco Moco." At first glance, its ingredients are basic and standard, but combined, they tell a story of immigration, adaptation, and identity. According to James Kelly, the Loco Moco originated in Hilo on the Island of Hawaii by Mr. and Mrs. Richard Inouye in 1949, primarily for a group of American teenagers who wanted some comforting snacks on a limited budget. It was spread dramatically within the neighborhood, other parts of the Big Island, and more recently to Honolulu. It has grown into one of the most recognizable symbols of Hawai'i's cuisine.

The dish Loco Moco reflects Hawaii's long and layered history of immigration, which brought together laborers from Japan, China, the Philippines, Korea, Portugal, and other places to work on sugar cane and pineapple plantations. These groups combined indigenous and cooking techniques, leading to a unique food culture where rice replaced taro and became the central staple. Loco Moco is a fusion of the Western diet and Hawaiian ingredients. The continuous movement of people and ideas also created a lot of variations of Loco Moco. For example, substituting the hamburger patty with spam, sashimi, or Korean BBQ reflects multiculturalism and localized revolution on Loco Moco.

Noticeably, Hawaii is one of the most important islands with beautiful scenery and developed tourism, which has elevated Loco Moco from local comfort food to a must-try dish for visitors seeking a taste of Island authenticity. Promoted in guidebooks, cooking shows, and travel blogs as a must-try local dish, restaurants, and chefs have begun elevating Loco Moco with gourmet ingredients and more novelty and refined options. Loco Moco now serves a dual role: as a source of cultural pride for locals and a curated culinary experience for outsiders. This duality raises questions about how a dish rooted in multicultural, working-class origins has evolved under the influence of tourism and shifting cultural expectations.

This research paper explores the evolution of Loco Moco as a product of Hawaii's multi-layered immigration history and local values, reflecting its transformation into a tourist-driven symbol of Hawaii's cuisine. By examining how Loco Moco shifted in meaning, ingredients, and cultural significance, this research argues that Loco Moco, originally a working-class comfort food born of Hawaii's multicultural plantation history, has evolved into an epitome of Hawaiian identity shaped by tourism. Its changing ingredients, meanings, and modes of presentation reflect the dynamic interplay between local identity, cultural hybridity, and the commodifying forces of the global food economy.

2. Multicultural Foundation of Hawaiian Cuisine

The ample flavor of Hawaii's cuisine today is deeply rooted in the Island's immigration history. Rachel Laudan has traced the culinary history of Hawaii back to the mid-nineteenth century. The Hawaii Islands saw successive waves of laborers from China, Japan, and the Philippines, alongside Portuguese, Korean, Puerto Rican, and other nationalities, as the main labor force working in the sugar cane and pineapple plantations. Each group brought unique culinary systems, including tools, flavor profiles, and beliefs about food, morals, and health (Laudan, 2016: p. 439). These cultural practices did not remain separate. Instead, under the pressures of plantation life, they exchanged and created what Yamashita called "one of the most distinctive hybrid cuisines in the United States" (Yamashita, 2019: p. 13).

Plantation workers often lived in ethnically segregated camps but cooked in communal kitchens, where resource sharing was essential. With limited access to familiar ingredients from their home countries, they adapted their diets with local

ingredients and mutual borrowing from others (Laudan, 2016: p. 439). This created a kind of blended food culture-food was simple, quick to cook, and familiar ethnic lines (Laudan, 2016: p. 444). Over time, this intercultural exchange became the foundation of what is now known as "local food." Hawaii's cuisine was born not from one culinary tradition but from the layering and adaptation of many. One of the clearest examples of this blending style is the plate lunch, a food format that includes a meal of rice, macaroni salad, and meat that originated in the lunch wagons that served plantation workers and evolved from the Japanese obento (Laudan, 2016: p. 444). According to both Lauden and Yamashita, the plate lunch reflects the egalitarian spirit of local cuisine and its ability to unify diverse food traditions (Laudan, 2016: p. 444, Yamashita, 2019: p. 14).

3. The Invention of Loco Moco

Although invented much later than the plate lunch, Loco Moco follows the same composition and structure: rice, protein, and sauce. As Kelly describes in her ethnographic works, Loco Moco is a "new dish derived from contact of different foodways, and therefore, comparable to a pidgin language" (61). Pidgin is a simplified hybrid language developed in Hawai'i to enable communication among speakers of different native tongues. There is a parallel creative logic between them; Loco Moco emerged as a culinary language of practicality and inclusion, formed through everyday encounters between diverse ethnic traditions. Loco Moco and pidgin language represent a local response to cultural diversity, born from necessity and sustained through community use.

Loco Moco was first created on the Big Island in 1949 at a small local restaurant called Lincoln Grill. According to Kelly's documents in her ethnographic study, "Loco Moco: A folk dish in the making," the dish originated when a group of local teenagers, who were tired of eating American-style sandwiches, asked the cafe owner, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Inouye, for something new and satisfying for their whole afternoon (62). They created a quick combination of ingredients always on hand: rice, hamburger patty, fried egg, and gravy. The name "Loco Moco" was chosen partly for its rhyming sound and partly for its playful appeal, adding a layer of local humor and linguistic hybridity. This origin myth is an improvisation by American children, further enhancing Loco Moco's "American national" identity but less Asian in origin. The Loco Moco is a creative variation and a natural evolution of the plate lunch tradition, multicultural foodways, and available ingredients in Hawaii's blended food practices.

After its creation, Loco Moco spread throughout the community and was considered the main dish for the working-class identity. During the mid-20th century, as plantation jobs declined and new service-sector industries like tourism began to dominate the economy, the working class needed fast, filling, and affordable meals that supported them for the physical demands of labor-intensive jobs. Loco Moco is a good answer to this; its ingredients are common and inexpensive enough to be served in school cafeterias and lunch counters, and its preparation

steps are flexible enough to be adapted by small, family-owned restaurants across the islands. Loco Moco became the culinary solution for economic hardship, providing nourishment and comfort at minimal cost and showing its status as a food of Hawaii that is not exclusive to elites. Loco Moco is more than an innovative culinary invention; it is a working-class icon shaped by historical transition, cultural adaptation, and everyday necessity. Loco Moco is deeply embedded in the shared culinary language of Hawaii's local communities and reflects their values.

4. Loco Moco as a Cultural Symbol to Represent Local Identity and Values

Hawaii has a unique definition of local; it is more than a geographical term. As Costa and Besio explain, Hawaii's local identity is rooted in the Island's plantation history, referring not just to long-term residency but also to shared cultural experience formed through generational workers of Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Portuguese, Puerto Rican, and Native Hawaiian descent—a diverse group sharing food and forage communities across ethnic lines. Local identity is built on multiculturalism, working-class solidarity, and everyday cultural practices. Loco Moco is a representative creation of the local identity of Hawaii; it did not arrive via immigration or global food chains; it was born entirely within Hawaii and crafted to meet local needs. As Kelly explains, Loco Moco directly responds to Hawaii's teenagers' hunger and limited resources. It was born with the needs of Hawaii's local teenagers and embodies the ingenuity, practicality, and multicultural spirit of local Hawaii.

Additionally, the composition of Loco Moco itself reflected Hawaii's layered multicultural local identity, composed by residents out of the diverse culinary traditions brought to the islands. According to a Loco Moco recipe on "Ono Hawaiian Recipes" (2025) the dish includes a bed of steamed white rice, a staple in Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino diets; the hamburger patty is seasoned with garlic and opinion power, and the brown gravy includes beef broth thickened with a roux—drawing from Western techniques and local flavor expectations. The gravy is especially revealing; it includes mushrooms, ketchup, Worcestershire sauce, and Shoyu (Japanese soy sauce), a mixture of Western umami flavor, British condiments, and Japanese seasoning, which reflects Hawai'i's history of culinary borrowing and adaptation. Using Shoyu instead of just salt in the gravy subtly shifts the flavor profile away from classic Western gravies toward something distinctly Hawaii, familiar to Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino palates. Including ketchup and Worcestershire, it suggests the mainland of the U.S. and colonial legacies embedded in everyday cooking. Local identity in Hawai'i is place-based and layered, built on shared experience rather than ethnic origin (Costa & Besio, 2011: p. 841). In this way, Loco Moco serves as a culinary expression of Hawai'i's hybrid identity from the concrete daily practice of people who live, cook, and eat together across cultural boundaries.

Moreover, Loco Moco also vividly represents Hawai'i's creativity and resource-

fulness, particularly as an industrious group, which reflects their ability to make something satisfying, nourishing, and culturally meaningful out of simple, accessible ingredients. Rice, hamburger, gravy, and egg are not extravagant components, but their combination in Loco Moco shows a clever use of what was available to meet the real needs of local people, affordable and comfortable. This culinary improvisation speaks to the resilience of Hawaii, many of whom faced economic hardship and limited resources following the decline of plantation labor. Rather than relying on imported or costly foods, locally developed dishes like Loco Moco were practical, hearty, and rooted in everyday life. In this way, Loco Moco expresses not only culinary inventiveness but also the values of determination, adaptability, and pride of Hawaii.

5. The Rise of Culinary Tourism in Hawaii

Since achieving U.S. statehood in 1959, Hawaii has experienced rapid and sustained growth in tourism, transforming it from a relatively remote vacation spot into a global travel destination. By 1970, the state welcomed 1.7 million annual visitors, and by the end of the 20th century, tourists outnumbered residents nearly six to one (Miller-Davenport, 2017: p. 825). In the 1960s and 1970s, tourism was framed mainly around idyllic beaches, hula shows, and resort leisure. Aims to provide familiar comforts to mainland visitors, often lacking representation of Hawai'i's local cultures. As Miller-Davenport notes, early promotional efforts by the Hawai'i Visitors Bureau emphasized passive enjoyment—"eating, drinking, loafing, relaxing" but offered little engagement with local life beyond superficial images (825-26). However, as visitor numbers grew and travelers began seeking more immersive experiences, tourism evolved into a more complex cultural economy. By the 1980s and 1990s, scholars and industry leaders began calling for tourism that reflected the multicultural reality of Hawai'i. One result of this shift was the increasing emphasis on food as a cultural expression. As Costa and Besio explain, food became a powerful tool of "place-making," allowing tourists to access narratives of authenticity through local dishes (841). Tourist promoters gradually spread the idea of showcasing Hawai'i's regional cuisine, highlighting dishes like Loco Moco that evoke the everyday life of working-class islanders and ingredients tied to Hawai'i's plantation heritage and multiethnic communities (Miller-Davenport, 2017: p. 825). By the late 20th century, tasting the authentic flavors of Hawai'i had become central to the visitor experience, not just as sustenance but as a curated form of cultural immersion during travel.

As tourism in Hawaii increasingly emphasizes the experience of the local authentic culture, Loco Moco, the once unremarkable working-class cuisine, has become a local symbol of Hawaii and is widely promoted as a must-try culinary experience for tourists. On the media platform like *"Ono Hawaiian Recipes,"* Loco Moco is visually elevated, topped with a glossy, golden egg yolk and garnished with chopped green onion; it is not only framed as a plain dish but also as an aesthetic symbol of Hawaii. This transformation reflects broader expectations of

an authentic local experience. Yamashita observes that such dishes were increasingly spotlighted in post-statehood efforts to showcase Hawai'i's distinctiveness from the U.S. mainland, not through Indigenous traditions but through grassroots, multicultural foodways that reflected the local population (Yamashita, 2013: p. 197). This reframing allowed Loco Moco to be appreciated as a cultural symbol and altered its meaning from simply working-class comfort food to mainly culinary tourism of Hawaii. The dish's popularity among tourists thus illustrates both the pride locals take in their unique food culture and how outside expectations continually reshape that culture.

6. The Evolution of Loco Moco

As Loco Moco has become increasingly popular among tourists, the ingredients and presentation of this dish have also evolved. The original version, a simple combination of white rice, hamburger patties, brown gravy, and a fried egg that reflects the local dinner's practical and budget-friendly demand, became a tourist-facing dish and diversified in form and flavor. The restaurant started offering creative variations, substituting the hamburger patty with Spam, Kuala pork, or Korean Barbecue and adding fusion elements like kimchi, garlic aioli, or even sashimi to reflect both multicultural innovation and culinary trendiness (Ku, 2014: pp. 220-221; Kelly, 1983: p. 63; Costa & Besio, 2011: p. 849). These changes and evolving versions of Loco Moco are a response of tourists to the novelty of traditional food. At the same time, they have planned diverse travel experiences in Hawaii in a form that attracts the tastes and curiosity of outsiders.

The rise of "Chefism" in Hawai'i, defined by the elevation of local dishes through fine-dining techniques and locally sourced ingredients, has significantly impacted how Loco Moco is prepared, presented, and perceived. This movement was formalized in the early 1990s through the Hawai'i Regional Cuisine (HRC) initiative, which sought to establish a distinctive island culinary identity that honored local ingredients while appealing to gourmet standards (Yamashita, 2013: p. 198). The author mentions that chefs such as Alan Wong, Roy Yamaguchi, and others led this effort, drawing on their training in classical techniques to reimagine dishes like Loco Moco in an upscale context (198). "Alan Wong's Loco Moco substite famously expensive wagyu beef for the hamburger, uses Kawasaki sauce, the thick, soy-based sauce used in Japanese broiled-eel dish, instead of the brown gravy, and adds a fried quail egg (Yamashita, 2019: p. 66)." Loco Moco began appearing on fine-dining menus in stylized forms, featuring ingredients such as foie gras, short ribs, or truffle gravy (Yamashita, 2019: p. 68). These redesigns define "Loco Moco" as the epitome of Hawaiian culinary culture by maintaining its basic structure. Integrating luxurious elements and complex cooking techniques effectively transforms Loco Moco into a symbol of Hawaii's tourism economy and attracts more tourists. As Costa and Besio argue, such innovations signaled a broader attempt to reshape Hawai'i's image in the tourism economy from a place of cheap leisure to one of cultural and culinary sophistication (845).

While these chef-driven variations celebrate the dish's adaptability, they also raise questions about accessibility, authenticity, and whether the original spirit of Loco Moco as an affordable, working-class meal can coexist with its reinvention in elite culinary settings. Loco Moco's transformation into a dish featured on travel blogs, television shows, and fine-dining menus has elevated its status and generated economic benefits for local chefs and restaurants. As Yamashita notes, the Hawai'i regional cuisine movement successfully positioned local food like Loco Moco as vehicles of cultural and culinary sophistication, helping to differentiate Hawai'i's identity from the U.S. mainland and expanding opportunities for local culinary professionals (Yamashita, 2013: p. 198). However, these developments also involve significant rate-offs in rebranding the dish for upscale audiences. As Laudan discusses, such reinterpretations risk disconnecting the dish from its original social and economic context, turning it into a stylized emblem of "local culture" more than a continuation of working-class foodways (444).

7. A Living Dish: Loco Moco in the 21st Century

In the 21st century, Loco Moco adapted to contemporary Hawai'i's ongoing multiculturalism and chased social values, and it became a contemporary dish. Although its core ingredients, such as rice, protein, eggs, and gravy, are still popular, Loco Moco has various variations to suit different tastes and dietary needs. The original version of Loco Moco is beloved for its comforting flavor, but it is also notably calorie-dense and high in sodium and saturated fat. As public awareness around health and nutrition has increased, particularly in Hawai'i, where obesity and diet-related illnesses remain disproportionately high among Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander populations, Loco Moco has become a subject of nutritional critique and culinary reinvention. In response, the accommodation of vegan and gluten-free dietary restrictions, versions that replace meat patties with plant-based alternatives or tofu, offer mushrooms or miso gravies, and swap white rice for brown rice or quinoa. At Sam Choy's Breakfast, Lunch& Crab restaurant in Honolulu, patrons can choose from options such as the "DA Hilo original or vegetarian Moco with tofu, spinach, and mushrooms (Ku, 2014: p. 221).

These innovations make Loco Moco more accessible to diners concerned with health, environmental sustainability, or ethical food consumption. As Ku suggests, dishes like Loco Moco serve as "a cultural text" that reveals tensions between cultural identity, pleasure, and dietary policies (191). The emergence of a healthier Loco Moco indicates that this dish has not been frozen in time but has found its meaning, memory, and restraint in line with the development of the times through active negotiations between locals and tourists. Loco Moco's continuous progress endows its identity as a flexible lifestyle that allows culture, taste, and health issues to constantly collide and coexist.

8. Acknowledgements and Conclusion

In conclusion, Loco Moco is the epitome of Hawaiian layered immigration history and evolving cultural identity. From its creation at Cafe Lincoln Grill on the Big

Island to its upscale chef's restaurant menu, Loco Moco tells the story of the adaptation and innovation of Hawai'i that transcends geographical and racial boundaries, intriguing Asian, American, and Hawaiians. With the expansion of culinary tourism, Loco Moco has transformed from a comfortable working-class cuisine to an elaborate tourism calling card of Hawaii. Although this transformation has enhanced the popularity and economic value of Loco Moco, it has also raised questions about its authenticity and the loss of its original cultural background. While this paper has drawn on scholarly and culinary sources to trace Loco Moco's evolution, it is limited in direct ethnographic data and the lived experience of local communities. Future research might explore interviews with chefs, diners, or community members to better understand how they negotiate local and authentic meanings through food. As Loco Moco continues to adapt in response to global trends, dietary policies, and identity expression, it remains not just a dish but a living archive of Hawai'i's complex cultural and historical journey.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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