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Side-Dish Kitchen

Japanese American Delicatessens and the Culture of Nostalgia

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Sagara Store. The simplicity of the name evokes an earlier era in Hawai`i, before ubiquitous talk of branding, fast food outlets, and endless meal choices made the question of where or what to eat a ponderous issue. To get to Sagara Store from downtown Honolulu one has to take the H-1 freeway past the Honolulu International Airport turnoff, through middle-class subdivisions that creep up mountain ridges. One then takes a fork in the road to the H-2 freeway that plows through former pineapple fields toward surfing beaches of world renown. After several miles, one

Figure 4.1 *Okazuya* in downtown Honolulu. Photo credit: Christine Yano.

Figure 4.2 *Okazuya* in downtown Honolulu. Photo credit: Christine Yano.

takes another major fork in the road that veers away from those surfing spots toward the sleepy plantation town of Waialua and beyond that, to the end of the paved road. Waialua is about as far away as one can get from the hotels of Waikiki on an island where tourism rules. Sagara Store in Waialua is the eatery where locals go. In an unmarked wooden building (directions: "across from the high school"), Sagara Store has been serving its version of home cooking since 1922.

This chapter examines Sagara Store and other similar eateries called *okazuya* (literally, "side-dish house/business"), Japanese American take-out delicatessens in Hawai`i.[1] The food that Sagara Store serves has its origins in rural southwestern Japan; but the menu has expanded to meet the needs and appetites of the evolving local clientele in Hawai`i. I analyze Sagara Store and other *okazuya* as sites of nostalgized discourse, discussing ways in which these take-out restaurants have become emblematic of the past and the distant in highly specific ways. Sagara Store may be considered, in the words of Kathleen Stewart, a "space on the side of the road," both literally and figuratively (1996). Related to Stewart's concept is Svetlana Boym's notion of "off-modern," which she describes as a "critical reflection on the modern condition that incorporates nostalgia. . . . The adverb *off* confuses our sense of direction; it makes us explore sideshadows and back alleys rather than the straight road of progress" (Boym 2001: xvi–xvii). The side-road space and back alleys are not narrative or architectural ones, as in Stewart's or Boym's study, but culinary sites. Through interviews with owners, workers, and customers at several *okazuya* in Hawai`i and archival research, I analyze *okazuya* as "a gap in the order of things" that produces both an alternative to mainstream American society, and also its intensification through issues of nostalgia and sense of home (Stewart 1996: 3). Furthermore, the "sense" of which I speak carries the double meaning of general feeling and bodily impression. Home, therefore, adheres often specifically through sensate mnemonics. It is the smell and the taste of *okazuya* food that evokes home (typically conflated with the past) for many customers. In this chapter, I intersperse the ethnographic specificities of Sagara Store (in italics) with more general discussion of *okazuya* as what I call "side-dish kitchens," culinary sites in Hawai`i akin to a "space on the side of the road."

Okazuya Primer

Okazuya arose in the early twentieth century in Honolulu and other semi-urban (and in the case of Sagara Store, small town) areas of Hawai`i as a direct response to a largely blue-collar population. With homecooked meals for lunch as a Japanese model, but without women in the home cooking those meals in working-class Hawai`i, a niche developed for the birth of *okazuya*. For its proprietors, opening an *okazuya* became a humble means to own a small-scale business, "build up social networks and new social spaces, and to improve his or her position within a dominant system" (Ferrero 2002: 198–9). The humbleness of the business is often reflected in its physical plant: at their most elementary, some *okazuya* even today are strictly take-out establishments, with little more than a counter where food is displayed.

It is important to note that *okazuya* do not exist in this exact form in Japan. Instead, there are establishments in Japan known as *sōzaiya* (delicatessens) that sell numerous ready-to-eat dishes primarily for busy housewives to create or supplement a meal. Although some of the dishes may overlap, in their format, as discussed below, these *sōzaiya* are not *okazuya*. Rather, *sōzaiya* offer dishes in multiple serving portions to be shared by a number of people. *Okazuya* thus constitute a local Hawai`i adaptation – its own kind of "space on the side of the road" *vis-à-vis* Japan – of a take-out delicatessen.

In the 1920s, persons of Japanese ancestry constituted over 40 percent of the population in Hawai`i, including thousands of former plantation laborers who left the fields for the urban center of Honolulu. Even as many left the fields, still others remained in plantation towns to fuel the sugar and pineapple industries that were the rural economy's mainstays. The birth of *okazuya* catering particularly to the needs of Japanese American urban male blue-collar workers is reflected in their hours, menus, and types of service. The extension of clientele to include

persons of different ethnicities, white-collar workers, and females has not altered the fundamental structure of *okazuya*.

The current hours of operation are typically from 6:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. (or until the food runs out), six or seven days a week.[2] The opening hours reflect the early start of work and school in Honolulu, where construction crews gather at 6:30 a.m., offices open at 8:00 a.m., school starts at 7:30 or 8:00 a.m., and morning rush-hour traffic extends from 6:30 to 8:30 a.m. Some early-morning customers buy food to eat for breakfast, while many others purchase food to eat later for lunch. Some *okazuya* close as early as 11:30 a.m., while others stay open as late as 2:00 p.m. The early closing hours explicitly place these eateries well outside the service of dinner, or even a late lunch.

Sagara Store opens at 5:30 a.m., five days a week. Its closing hours depend on whether or not school is in session – in the summer when there is no school the owners close their doors at 1:00 p.m., but during the rest of the year it stays open until 2:30 p.m. to accommodate students who might want to pick up an after-school snack. Whereas it was once both a general store and an okazuya, the general store half of it has closed. In the dimly lit room, the shelves of the general store section lie empty; footsteps produce a faint echo on the bare concrete floor. The empty shelves reflect in part the shrinking population of former plantation towns in Hawai`i. With the closing of sugar plantations in the 1990s, towns such as Waialua have seen significant depopulation, especially among the youth. But even the youth have more options and travel more easily than in the past, and may choose to drive to the neighboring surfing town Haleiwa for a range of fast foods. The customer base for Sagara Store is thus shrinking by both numbers and preferences, as well as growing older. Supplemented by the occasional tourist who wants to see the end of the road or an errant surfer scouting for big waves, the store manages to stay afloat through a small but steady clientele.

The food that *okazuya* serve typically does not change during the day. As is true with many Asian cuisines, specific foods do not mark particular times of day. In delicatessen style, *okazuya* food is all ready-made and portable. The fact that the day's entire menu must be available by the *okazuya*'s opening means that food preparation and cooking begins in the middle of the night, for some as early as 1 a.m., for others as "late" as 4 a.m. The arduousness of the work for which *okazuya* are known lies not only in the long hours, but in the early (or middle of the night) hours. Because *okazuya* workers toil while others sleep, their labor is seen as particularly difficult.

Work at Sagara Store begins at 1:00 a.m. with cooking and food preparation in time for the store's opening. In talking to the yonsei *[fourth-generation Japanese-American] sister proprietors on a languid Friday morning in August 2003, the elder of the two leads the conversation. In the dim light of the store, she speaks wearily of the daily grind, her head often resting against her outstretched arm. To my surprise, she is a prep school graduate who left Hawai`i at eighteen to study social work at Colorado State University. She never expected to be running this family business, but finds herself, along with her sister, at its helm for the past ten years. This is a far cry from her dreams of a career, but she say she has gotten used to it. Nevertheless, in the lull before the lunchtime rush, a pause in her busyness gives her body time to wind down, and all she would like to do right now is to sleep.*

Okazuya do not necessarily place ethnic boundaries around food: in general, proprietors cook whatever they think will sell. The food thus constitutes a culinary-based social history of immigration to Hawai`i centered on Japanese-Americans.[3] Each customer selects from an array of dishes to create a customized plate that always includes rice (sticky Japanese rice) and some combination of *teriyaki* chicken or beef, "butterfish" (Japanese-marinated and grilled cod), *nishime* (Japanese stew), *namasu* (marinated vegetables), and other Japanese-based dishes. Most *okazuya* also serve Chinese-style stir-fried noodles, reflecting the long history of Chinese laborers in Hawai`i that predates the Japanese immigration. Some *okazuya* offer foods based in other ethnic groups' cuisines, such as *kal-bi* (Korean short ribs), chicken or pork *adobo* (Filipino vinegar-seasoned stew), and sweet and sour spare-ribs (Chinese). American-based dishes have also become staples of the *okazuya* menu:[4] potato-macaroni salad, grilled hot dog, luncheon meat, corned beef hash patties. The inclusion of processed and/or tinned meats reflects the American milieu of Hawai`i, as well as the Pacific island location, where the emphasis lies on imported meats with a long shelf-life. These foods also reflect the overall blue-collar base of *okazuya* and their clientele.

Sagara Store presents its food in bowls, plates, and pans on a counter. There is no steam tray or refrigerated display in sight. Instead there is simply a glass-encased wooden cupboard with two shelves. It evokes pre-war pragmatism, with little thought given to presentation. The quantities of food that are taken out at any one time are not huge, and spoilage does not seem to be a concern of the proprietors. The food is typical okazuya *cuisine and does not differ much from pre-war offerings. The exception is one of the most popular items among younger customers – Spam* musubi *– a grab-and-go favorite that appeals to the local taste for rice and salty meat.*

Rice at *okazuya* is a staple, as at other Japanese eateries. But one cannot typically order a scoop (or two) of rice. Instead, rice is served as finger food in the form of sushi or *musubi* (rice balls). What distinguishes *okazuya* is that it is specifically for take-out, rather than what one would eat at a sit-down restaurant.[5] Therefore, it may be classified as picnic or "lunch-box food" – portable food that may be served either hot or at room temperature. The *Japanese concept of obentō (a ready-made meal packed in a container) shapes the okazuya's* food offerings. In *obentō*, rice is accompanied by dishes that can be served at room temperature. *Obentō* is typically eaten not at home, but outside the home when traveling or at school or work (see Allison 1997).[6] So, too, the food served at *okazuya* is meant to be like that from home, but eaten elsewhere. This is reputedly home-cooking, rather than "restaurant" food. In fact, the dishes served at *okazuya* have become sufficiently codified for it to

constitute its own genre of cuisine – "*okazuya* food" – not restaurant food, but labor-intensive foods associated with the Japanese American home in Hawai`i.

Further evidence that *okazuya* cooking is not necessarily food that is found in homes lies in the fact that in some cases, owners had to learn how to cook "*okazuya* food." For example, the proprietor of a now-defunct establishment explains: "My mom [the original *okazuya* owner] didn't know how to cook *okazuya* food. ... All she used to cook [when the *okazuya* first opened] was beans – lima beans, kidney beans. Gradually, the customers started telling her to make other things, like *chow fun* [=*chao fen*, a Chinese rice-noodle dish]" (quoted in Ohira 1999: A4).

Most *okazuya* serve only individual portions. One walks up to the counter and faced with an array of dishes on display, orders specific foods from a server. Portions are flexible rather than fixed, within limits. Therefore, one server may scoop a large portion while another may dish a smaller quantity, depending on the vagaries of whim, mood, generosity, and personal relationship with the customer. Furthermore, one server may opt to select prime pieces of meat or chicken, for example, while another may pick at random. Yet another server may know a customer's preferences and cater to these. (All this is done without any tipping.) What results is a variable plate of food that reflects a specific social relationship (or lack thereof) at a particular point in time and space.

The *Okazuya* as a Site of Sociality

What these practices suggest is that *okazuya* are not only businesses, but more importantly sites of sociality, whether biologically based or interactionally constituted. The sociality exists on both sides of the counter and in the transactions between them. For one thing, *okazuya* are primarily family-run operations. The biggest problem that *okazuya* currently face is a lack of family members willing to take over the business. When confronted with this problem, *okazuya* owners prefer to shut down rather than sell to non-kin. Particularly with an ethic of a family business, the reputation adheres as much to the name of the establishment (often with the family's name being a part of it, as in "Sagara Store") as to its products.

In the early days of *okazuya*, all or nearly all workers were family members. Today, most larger *okazuya* hire non-family workers, especially to service the counter, clean up, and do elementary food preparation. But the central feature of the *okazuya* – the food and its making – is typically only entrusted to family members. The cultural rationale given to this is that the food served at an *okazuya* carries with it the "flavor of the family," entrusted to the succeeding generations through treasured recipes.

Sagara Store's current proprietors are two yonsei *sisters in their forties, the great-granddaughters of the store's founder. They work with the part-time assistance of their retired parents. The store was handed down along female lines – great-grandmother to grandmother to mother to the two sisters – even if some of the workers and cooks have been men. Learning the trade of Sagara Store took place incrementally: while growing up the sisters helped out at the store whenever it was busy, but they didn't do actual cooking until much later. The transition between mother and sister owners has been gradual. Mother and father still pitch in and help prepare food in the morning, and the sisters keep cooking and replenish the foods throughout the working hours, often with the help of the younger sister's husband. The sharing of responsibilities is both clear-cut and flexible, like choreographing an improvisational ensemble: each one knows what she has to do because of an overall structure, but if one needs help, the other one fills in, often without being asked. This kind of adaptable kitchen requires mental, emotional, and physical coordination that people say is achieved best or most "naturally" within the family. There is no contract that specifies duties and responsibilities; instead there is an unspoken agreement on the overall goal of the enterprise and a commonly shared pact and understanding as to what it takes to achieve that goal.*

Relying on the "flavor of the family" extends to other aspects of the business. In interviews with *okazuya* owners, several of them comment that they cannot place responsibility for day-to-day operations on anyone but the family. Using "blood-is-thicker-than-water" idioms of expression, several of them mention that by virtue of being in the same family, a person possesses the following kinds of characteristics: dependability, trust, long-term knowledge, quality control, diligence, commitment, and easy familiarity. For example, one *okazuya* owner explains:

> The family members that worked [in the old days], they were around it for so long that they knew what [to do]. They kinda had a head start, I guess. They always made sure that things were done properly, quality-wise. Now you gotta watch more [with non-family employees] to make sure things are coming out the way you want it.

Okazuya owners draw such a clear boundary around family in terms of the workplace that the kin group becomes a trope of positive qualities and a source of nostalgia. One trusts kin; by contrast, one must approach non-kin with caution and constant vigilance. This kind of talk further dismisses uncooperative family members as mere exceptions, while praising exemplary non-family workers as "just like family."

Nevertheless, family-run businesses come with their own set of problems. As an enterprise run outside contractual business procedures, the family-run business stands in danger of exploiting its worker-members. Thus, *okazuya*, at least in the past, had a cadre of flex-workers who worked on an as-needed basis, often receiving little or no pay. One retired *okazuya* owner recalls:

> During the generation before, in my father's time and aunt's time, we had lots of relatives. There were so many people they could call [to work], and they were willing to come and wanted to come. Many, many, you know, [came to work when called] – the

> elderly Japanese ladies. They were willing to come to roll sushi [specifically *makizushi*], like that. ... But now, nobody, especially of Japanese ancestry... The elderly Japanese people, they go to classes, and they do other things. ... The relatives were so many, but now there's not too many.

According to this former owner, the labor problems of *okazuya* stem from the following points: (1) ties to the extended family are diminishing, and therefore the labor pool of relatives is shrinking;[7] and (2) family members are involved in their own individual activities and have less time or willingness to commit it to the family enterprise. Furthermore, this owner extends the family more broadly to persons of Japanese ancestry, manifesting not only a kin preference, but also a racial bias preference for workers. In doing so, she subtly implies a cultural knowledge that comes from growing up within a Japanese (American) household (i.e. an achieved awareness) and possessing Japanese blood (i.e. an ascribed awareness). Successfully running an *okazuya* relies on both.

To the above labor problems of *okazuya* one might add the passing of generations and the disinclination of younger family members to engage in the hard work, long hours, and early rising that *okazuya* ownership demands. The younger generations' dismissal of *okazuya* work comes in part as a result of higher education (although one Sagara Store owner is an exception), especially since, proportionally speaking, Japanese-Americans have attained post-high school education in increasing numbers. Thus parents – though some may be *okazuya* owners themselves – do not necessarily encourage their offspring to engage in this kind of work. According to them, they have sent their children to college specifically to avoid the *okazuya* lifestyle of hard labor. One *okazuya* owner looks to his long workdays and concludes that he would not want his children to take over the business: "It's better if you work regular jobs with eight-hour days and weekends off" (quoted in Oi 1999b: D1).

I ask the elder sister, "What do you see for the future of your okazuya*?" She pauses, the air hanging heavily. Then she responds in a halting monotone. "I don't know ... I don't even know ... We don't even know if we want to keep doing this like my grandmother did, 'cause it's hard work. I really don't know. But I told my daughter, 'You better not do this, because it's...'. People always say, 'Oh, you folks make a lot of money.' That's what they think. But there's not a whole bunch of money in it and the work is really tiring. It's long hours.... We'll see how long we can last." She gives a half-hearted smile and leaves her last sentence dangling in mid-air.*

Within a family business, workers who are relatives often have little recourse for complaint and must interact according to family dictates. In this sense, a disgruntled family-member worker stands to lose his status within both the company and the family if things do not go well. Employee relations thus take on a different sense when family is involved. One young female *okazuya* owner in a brother–sister team explains: "A lot of people tell us, 'It must be hard to work with your brother.' Of course we fight and stuff, but you know how they say, blood is more forgiving afterwards than having it out with a friend." In this way, the blood-is-thicker-than-water dictum provides stability within the company even though it may restrict options for its workers.

Among the *okazuya* I visited, several were small operations that only involved family members. In the case of the brother–sister operation, it was only the two of them (one to do the cooking, the other to man the counter), with another (unpaid) sister handling the accounting. When asked if they would hire additional workers, the sister-owner replied, "If anything, it would be relatives that we'd hire. It wouldn't be somebody, just put in an ad, and have somebody come out here [to work]... It's trust, yeah. We cannot be watching them every time." Her brother added, "Especially not for work. I don't think I would let anybody touch the cooking part [of the business]."

In these small-scale businesses, the load of responsibility falls squarely on everyone's shoulders, not only to conduct business, but to do so while maintaining workable relations. The traditional Japanese *ie* (household) serves well here as a model of a corporate household, rather than a biological unit.[8] Although the *ie* may be easily interpreted as a family (a kin group of parents, offspring, and other "relatives"), in day-to-day functioning it included non-kin elements of a household, including outside workers. In Hawai`i *okazuya* embrace some of the problems of the *ie* model by insisting that persons related by blood or marriage maintain positions at the helm of the business, but forgo the pragmatism and flexibility of past *ie* management in Japan that included non-kin members. *Okazuya* also differ from a strict *ie* model in the relative gender-neutrality of work roles. In contrast with the strong patrilineality of the Japanese model, the Hawai`i business is run with some gender flexibility. Therefore, although some *okazuya* are headed by male cooks (as is signified in their names, such as George's Delicatessen and Masa's Foods), others have female cooks, such as Sagara Store (as well as Caryn's *Okazuya* and Ethel's Delicatessen).

Owner/worker–customer relations form an essential component of the sociality of *okazuya*. The fact that *okazuya* are generally small and none are franchised means that the owner is not a distant head, but intimately involved in day-to-day operations. Customers thereby have the opportunity to establish a relationship with the owner/worker. Furthermore, the owner is often the cook, so that the customer's relationship with the owner is not only social and transactional, but also gustatory. The customer knows the owner/worker/chef through their cooking. That culinary relationship is often longstanding. Each owner I interviewed proudly mentioned "regulars" – customers who have frequented their establishment for years, exhibiting loyalty that often extends to succeeding generations. One retired *okazuya* owner recalls:

> The same people come every day, some people almost every day. ... I mean for years and years and years. And then their relatives come, too. So there's this kind of bond or

> something. I hardly go in there [now], but if I go in today, I'll see the same people and say, "Oh, how are you? How you been?" The same people are there. And they'll come and eat.

The sociality of *okazuya* rests in the culinary habitus of customers.

*The proprietress of Sagara Store explains, "The secret to staying in business for so many years is good, loyal customers. The community is one big family. Some people come to visit us straight from the airport" (quoted in Dela Cruz and Chai 2002: 20). In other words, for "regulars," eating the food from a place such as Sagara Store establishes and affirms the fact that they are home. In a one-*okazuya *town such as Waialua, "regulars" and "the community" are one and the same, creating "one big family" centered on the* okazuya *and its foods. Sagara Store is thus coterminous with Waialua town, its resident-customers bound together by the fact that they share food from the same kitchen.*

Several customers note the close association between *okazuya* and a sense of home (or hometown). One litmus test of "home" lies in considering what one misses when one is away, and concomitantly, what one wants to do or where one wants to go upon return (cf. Hannerz 1996: 27). As Susan Kalcik points out, "food links people across space and time, so that it helps create a bond with past members of the group as well as between living ones" (Kalcik 1984: 59). It is this bond that is expressed in the airport reference given above. One former resident of Hawai`i who now lives in Seattle talks about her favorite *okazuya*: "'I love this place. When I came home [to Hawai`i] on vacation, this is the first place I came.' … In her one-week stay, she's eaten there twice and will likely be back for another dose before flying back to the mainland" (Oi 1999b: D1).

Fans of *okazuya* talk about favorite establishments. In other words, they are fans not of *okazuya* food so much as of specific *okazuya*. When the question of what to have for lunch comes up, customers choose between their favorite *okazuya* and other fast-food establishments, not from among *okazuya*. The competition for *okazuya*, then, is not with other *okazuya*; rather it is with other genres of fast food. Where *okazuya* win the competition may lie not so much in the food itself, but in the close relationships between owner/workers and customers. One *okazuya* owner explains:

> You know it's much more expensive [to eat at an *okazuya*] than eating like in McDonald's. So there must be something else about it that they [customers] like. … The clientele, it's a personal relationship. … It's a little personal touch, I think, that is there. It's not just a business thing.

One customer of a now defunct *okazuya* explains: "When you came in, they were always smiling. The chow fun [Chinese rice-noodle dish] was the best, not oily or greasy. And Flora's mac salad with onions, celery and cabbage was really good. I'm missing it already" (quoted in Ohira 1999: A4). The food – and the appeal – then, are not generic, but specific: not macaroni salad, but "Flora's mac salad." The "regular" comes back to *okazuya* within the context of a longstanding relationship with both food and people. Choosing to eat at an *okazuya* for a "regular" means purchasing not only food, but also the guarantee of a greeting, a familiar face, and the ease of intimacy.

The longstanding relationship between owner/worker and customers is part of what makes the job satisfying. One *okazuya* owner explains, "It's hard work but when you see people who enjoy our food, people who always come back, that's what keeps you going" (quoted in Oi 1999b: D1). One worker says, "You know what I enjoy most? It's greeting the customers, because you know they say I'm always smiling." The owner of an *okazuya* that closed in 1999 remarks, "We'll miss our customers, but there's gratification knowing that they enjoyed our food all these years. I was the cook and could never miss a day of work. I'm thankful that God took care of me and let me do this for so long" (quoted in Ohira 1999: A4).

As it gets closer to 11:00 a.m., the number of customers at Sagara Store gradually increases. They are all locals of indeterminate ethnic origin (Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, or mixtures of these). The lunchtime rush at Sagara Store translates into older men, women, and children wearing t-shirts, shorts, rubber slippers, shuffling in singly or in groups of twos or threes. They barely constitute a line, even at the peak of busyness. The sisters know pretty much what these folks will order. The customers' pace and rhythms are slower, gentler, softer than mine. They are greeted by the sisters with a slow smile that is not effusive, but quietly sociable. McDonald's corporate perkiness is nowhere to be seen. Occasionally conversation in the store picks up around tidbits of news: so-and-so getting married, so-and-so diagnosed with cancer, so-and-so hitting it big in Las Vegas. Gossip is served up as a side-dish to the food, which, like the talk, does not shout but beckons quietly with its familiarity. The children, too, are old friends of Sagara Store, since the walls and servers have borne witness to them even before they were born.

What "regulars" gain by their loyalty is the special treatment of an intimate. In some cases, the worker dishes out only the customer's favorite pieces of chicken, for example, or parts of a stew (for example, "no carrots"). In other cases, the worker knows that a female customer may be on a low-carb diet, dishes out smaller portions, and charges accordingly. One *okazuya* owner says, "You kind of know who to give plenty and who not to give. Like the guys who work around here, you know they like plenty, right?" Another *okazuya* owner explains, "After awhile you kind of know who's the one that likes certain things … like not wanting the gravy touching the rice or the salad." Yet another *okazuya* owner declares, "We have some customers who come in every day. The people on the counter – when they see them coming – they get their plate ready [filling it with the customer's favorites even before the customer orders] so by the time they get to the window [*okazuya* counter], their food is ready to go" (quoted in Oi 1999b: D1). This kind of empathic knowledge derived from long-term interaction simulates the environment of home rather than of business. In

fact, it is the inculcation of a "home" atmosphere that becomes the model of *okazuya* operation.

For one, most *okazuya* display an array of food, but no prices. Some *okazuya* post prices, but I have never seen these placed near the foods to be served. Furthermore, even where prices are listed, it is often not made clear the quantity of food that might be served for a particular price. The ambiguity retains flexibility in the transaction, especially for foods that do not come in discrete units. I have also rarely seen a local customer ask the price of an item. Based in the ethos of familial trust and intimacy, the customer selects and the server dishes out, no questions asked. As one *okazuya* owner explains, "Nobody really questions our pricing." (The typical cost of a full plate at an *okazuya* is from $4 to $7.)

Second, *okazuya* workers – kin and non-kin – generally show considerable loyalty to the business. There is not a high turnover rate of workers, as is the case with many fast-food establishments. *Okazuya* workers tend to be older, long-term residents of Hawai`i. In fact, workers (kin and non-kin) often develop familial relations with each other through daily interaction. One newspaper article describes the overlapping dialogue of two unrelated *okazuya* workers: "The words fold over each other so it's unclear who said what. This is typical of conversations with them. After a decade or so on the job, they move and talk in a rhythm to which both are tuned" (Oi 1999a: D6). With such long-time workers, a customer can expect to see the same workers at a particular *okazuya*. The customer's experience is thus one of familiarity, not only in the food that is served, but also in the workers.

Third, *okazuya* food is interpreted as "homestyle cooking," even if this is not food that is typically made at home these days. Rather, it is food more closely associated with young people's parents' or even grandparents' generation. One proprietor recalled a woman in her twenties peeking into the store and commenting, "Oh, that's the kind of food my grandmother used to make." Thus, the sense of home invoked by *okazuya* may not be one's actual home, but a nostalgized sense of kitchens past and the grandmothers who inhabited them. This is associative memory tied up in food.

Fourth, learning how to make *okazuya* food is done primarily by observing other previous cooks within the family, helping out in the kitchen as an informal apprenticeship, and sometimes consulting recipes that have been passed down through generations. In my various interviews, I have yet to come across an *okazuya* cook who had formal training (in fact, one might say that boasting formal training might detract from the "homespun" quality of the food). Instead, most watched their parents (or other relatives), helped at the business, and gradually picked up the trade in what David Sutton calls "embodied apprenticeship" (2001: 126). They learned incrementally through bodies and bloodlines, rather than through cookbooks or formal lessons (as at Sagara Store). Learning in this way teaches the basics of a family's version of *okazuya* food. At the same time, each individual cook may put his or her own stamp of flavor upon the dishes or introduce new items. Thus, what one eats at *okazuya* bears the stamp of a family's cooking, even while allowing for individual expression, variation, and sometimes innovation.

Seeing the customers arriving, I thank the sisters and gather my things to leave. Again, the older sister speaks up, motioning to the food. "Okay, what do you want to eat?" Without waiting for an answer, she takes it upon herself to load a plate with sushi, nishime, namasu, kimpira gobo, and shoyu chicken, wrapping the plate with paper and securing it with a rubber band under which she inserts chopsticks and a napkin. It is one of the more assertive acts from either side of the counter that I witness while visiting Sagara Store. In true okazuya *style, the paper-wrapped plate of food looks much as it might have seventy years ago in pre-war days. Of all the* okazuya *I visited on O'ahu, the owners of Sagara Store, with their warm-hearted, low-key, country ways, are the only ones who would not take any money for my food. I drive a short distance to the closest beach. It is an empty stretch of glittering white sand, lava rocks, and lapping waves. Removing the paper wrap, I uncover the plate of food, smell the intermingling aroma of soy-sauce-laden dishes with vinegared rice, and taste Sagara Store's version of "home."*

Nostalgia's Kitchen: Side-dish Memory

In the 1980s and 1990s and into the 2000s, Japanese-American family-run businesses in Hawai`i have closed in rapid succession. Newspaper articles detail these closures as evidence of passing of an era. The era to which they refer is the pre-war and immediate post-war establishment of businesses, many by *issei* (first-generation Japanese-Americans). A significant number of these closing or threatened businesses are eateries, prompting a flurry of "last-meal" patronage. Closing restaurants (especially *okazuya*) in particular come laden with poignancy, because of their association with food and "home." Newspaper accounts of these closings show the kind of discourse surrounding *okazuya* and their placement within American life in Hawai`i. For example, one article from 1999 begins:

> Naka's *Okazuya* in Kalihi is gone, leaving hundreds of regular customers with only fond memories of Nancy's chow fun [Chinese rice-noodles], Flora's macaroni salad, and the Nakasone family's famed cone sushi [*inarizushi*]. The last official day of business for the little hole-in-the-wall *okazuya* ... was Christmas Eve. (Ohira 1999: A4)

Okazuya in an article like this are depicted as a dying breed, a relic from the past. "Nancy's chow fun" or "the Nakasone family's famed cone sushi" are foods emblazoned with the personal touch of a maker, rather than created through an impersonal industrial process. The food is part and parcel of a social relationship (even if this is sealed through an economic transaction). The article depicts Naka's *Okazuya* as a "little hole-in-the-wall," off the main track, perhaps difficult to find, whose location and food set locals apart.

This "space on the side of the road" creates a community of "regulars" who don't need signs identifying places or portions doled out in pre-set measure or prices attached to those portions. The fact that many *okazuya* are, indeed, "hole-in-the-wall" establishments in terms of size, location (not in shopping malls, but in older urban or small-town areas), and lack of distinguishing physical features makes their existence part of insider knowledge. Few *okazuya* advertise, and some have only minimal exterior signs identifying their establishment (Sagara Store has none). One non-local resident in urban Honolulu says he drove past a building for thirty years before realizing that it was an *okazuya*. He says that the building was so nondescript that he thought it was a catering office, rather than a place to purchase and eat food. *Okazuya* may not be deliberately hidden, but, by their lack of signage and seeming disregard for attracting unknowing foot traffic, they contradict all principles of "modern" business. They are invisible – the opposite of eye-catching, colorful, come-on attractiveness. What the *okazuya* "space" reifies is not visual branding, but human relations associated with a pre-McDonald's era.

Okazuya food itself boasts a pre-industrial legacy in its making. One customer marvels, "They chop the onions and celery by hand, so tiny. ... I tried to learn the secrets, but it doesn't come out [the same]. It's just so hard and time consuming" (quoted in Ohira 1999: A4). What is involved in making *okazuya* food and appreciated by customers such as this is not only skill (for instance, the ability to chop vegetables very finely), but also effort ("hard and time consuming"). Laments one former *okazuya* worker, "Everything now is done by machines. ... To me, when you make sushi by hand, it's better than a machine" (quoted in Ohira 1999: A4). For some workers, the years of cooking have left a patina of experience not only in their bodies, but also in their equipment. When Naka's *Okazuya* closed in 1999, the owner refused to sell the company's beloved wok. One customer explains: "The wok they used has years of sweat in it, and anything you cook in it comes out good" (quoted in Ohira 1999: A4).

What is significant is to examine the eateries that are positioned as the obverse of *okazuya*. The most commonly mentioned are global fast-food businesses, such as McDonald's, Burger King, Pizza Hut, and Subway. There are other local fast-food businesses as well, such as drive-ins, hamburger stands, and plate-lunch wagons, which serve food overlapping with that of *okazuya* menus.[9] One customer "laments that the modern fast-food industry has taken over Honolulu. 'All the small places like this [*okazuya*] are disappearing, ... and it's too bad. There's nothing more fun than finding a good, local hole-in-the-wall place'" (Oi 1999b: D1). The imagery of this kind of nostalgized account is based in part on size, with its implications of power, temporality, and location. On the one hand are large, global, "modern," industrialized companies taking over Honolulu. On the other hand are small-scale, local, pre-industrial *okazuya*. This becomes a battle of the global versus the local, the industrial giant versus the little guy, fast food versus home-cooked food.

But there are other kinds of contrasts listed by journalists, such as high-end, cutting-edge gourmet cuisine: "In a time when fusion and Pacific Rim flavors get the buzz and when food design has become equivalent to feats of architectural balance, the plain and simple okazu-yas [*sic*] remain a mainstay of food lovers in Hawaii" (Oi 1999b: D1). It is the notion of "plain and simple" – whether in food, social relations, or general lifestyle – that lies at the heart of the nostalgia surrounding *okazuya*. This nostalgia is class-based, as well as temporally and spatially constituted. What is being glorified by the nostalgized discourse surrounding *okazuya* is working-class, plantation/urban culture – "plain and simple."

As with many nostalgias, the reality of the class-based, past, distant life may not be as wonderful as is assumed. The "plain" may have indeed been painfully plain, and the "simple" may not have been all that simple in economic terms. The actual experiences of people's lives under those conditions now being nostalgized were engulfed in economic privation and physical hardship. The education level was low, with many *issei* going no further than an eighth-grade education (often forced to quit school in order to work and contribute to a family's income). Pay was likewise low and family life difficult, especially with the large numbers of offspring in the second generation. The focus of the nostalgia, however, looks beyond material goods and conditions to a reconstructed emotional resonance that *okazuya* evoke. According to a nostalgized reconfiguration of the past, what made the "good old days" good was the close friendships and relationships between people. The flex-plate of *okazuya* allows personal relationships to dictate the end result. The server calling a customer by name, anticipating his needs, and providing a dish accordingly transforms emotional resonance into culinary reality. The nostalgia of *okazuya* assumes that the smile that comes with a plate of *okazuya* food differs from the programmed cheeriness of a McDonald's server, derived as it is from a manual of customer relations.

The space on the side of the road of Sagara Store and other *okazuya* is defined primarily by class, place, and time, and less so by race/ethnicity and gender. Although *okazuya* are Japanese-American in origin, their menus, clientele, and even workers have outreached any narrow boundaries, and comprehend the amalgam of Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, and American influences that makes up local culture. As Kalcik points out, "regional and ethnic foodways are often intertwined," the ethnic coming to stand for the regional (1984: 39). *Okazuya* thus straddle and encompass local culture even as they retain Japanese-American associations, so that they are both at the same time. The shift from Japanese-American iconicity to local symbol is transparent and partial: *okazuya* are local institutions by virtue of their retention and manipulation of Japanese-American foodways.

As David Bell and Gill Valentine cleverly intone, "We are where we eat" (1997: i; Narayan 1995: 64). The "side-dish memory" of *okazuya* creates an identity based in the "local" that is both fragile and resilient. Threats to the local come from outside forces of fast-food globalization and gourmet cuisines, but they also come from

within. Younger eaters often select meals from fast-food chains over *okazuya*. These chains offer cheaper food that seems more familiar in a global world of the present and future. *Okazuya* cuisine is the food of grandmothers, at least in the pool of meanings given it by many people in Hawai`i. Educated offspring of *okazuya* owners show little interest in taking over the family business; owners themselves do not want their children to engage in a lifestyle of such hardship. These threats to the continued existence of *okazuya* give the nostalgia that surrounds them a panicky tone.

Here is where the resilience of the space on the side of the road lies. In spite of these numerous threats, at least some *okazuya* survive. In fact, new ones are being opened, sometimes by fourth-generation Japanese-Americans who see in them the opportunity to explore an interest in the food business within this particular niche market to which they feel some kind of ethnic entitlement. Perhaps what these new *okazuya* will create is a newly drawn space that reconfigures a sense of the past with fresh energy. They will have to deal with *okazuya* as marketably nostalgized institutions, something of which their grandparents never dreamed.

The irony of *okazuya* lies in the fact that what constitutes their side-of-the-road space is nothing less than center-of-the-road "home." *Okazuya* occupy an idiosyncratic position as both marginal (distant, past, old-fashioned) and mainstream (nostalgized by media, source of comfort food, emblematic of "home"). This is not home as lived so much as imagined through the lens of nostalgia. What people mean when they call *okazuya* "home cooking" is that the food serves as a mnemonic for meals made at home, not that it tastes quite like the food of one's home (or even one's grandmother). The notion of people visiting *okazuya* directly from the airport suggests that eating this food assures them of the completeness of their return, of the seemingly unchanging nature of the food, of the timelessness of this "side-dish kitchen."

Postscript

On July 24, 2005, a week after this article was written, Sagara Store served its last meal. After 83 years of operation, family members decided to retire the business, the name, and themselves. Like other stories of *okazuya* closings, this one made the newspapers with an article entitled, "Store Bids Aloha to Waialua" (Bernardo 2005: A3). Like many *okazuya*, Sagara Store gave the impression of venerability. Therefore, its closing – as reported in the newspaper – came as a shock to customers: "Kathy Yamamoto's jaw dropped when she read a handwritten note posted outside a popular *okazuya* store in Waialua notifying customers that it is closing tomorrow. 'I can't believe it,' said Yamamoto. 'Wait until I tell my husband. He's going to fall on his face'" (Bernardo 2005). It is the shock, expressed as "falling on one's face," that shrouds the closing of this *okazuya* and others with a sense of panic. The fear of losing one's signposts in terms of foodways, businesses, and more importantly, community, colors this space on the side of the road with heartfelt poignancy. As one customer says, "'They're like family to me. ... I love them. I'm gonna miss them'" (Bernardo 2005). The space thus grows smaller as the passing of one *okazuya* marks an era ("the olden days when there was a Sagara Store in Waialua") and its people ("those who ate food from Sagara Store"). Sagara Store's closing prompts nostalgic musings that challenge the concept of home, "side-dish" kitchens, and identity rooted in a sense of the past.

Notes

1. In Japanese cuisine, rice is considered the staple and *okazu*, including fish, tōfu, and vegetables, are considered "side dishes." In a shift in culinary classification systems (Douglas 1997), the meaning given rice and *okazu* has changed somewhat for Japanese-Americans, who regard *okazu* as the main dish and rice as the starch that accompanies it.
2. According to the listings provided in *The Okazu Guide*, the earliest opening is 4:30 a.m. (listed at five establishments). The earliest closing is 11:45 a.m. (listed at one establishment).
3. American missionaries first arrived in 1820. Chinese contract laborers began arriving in 1852, followed by Portuguese in 1878, Japanese in 1885, Koreans in 1904, and Filipinos in 1905.
4. Dishes may be local variants of those found in other parts of the United States. One example is potato–macaroni salad, a mayonnaise-based mixture of both potato salad and macaroni salad. Another example is teriyaki hot dog, which is a lightly fried hot dog basted in a teriyaki sauce.
5. Increasingly, *okazuya* have extended into the catering business, which tends to be more profitable and desirable for its predictability.
6. Note the difference between contemporary, urban, middle-class *obentō* in Japan as Allison describes it (1997: 298–300), and the *obentō* eaten by immigrants to early twentieth-century Hawai`i coming from rural, peasant backgrounds in Japan. Whereas the one is the source of maternal fussing to produce a virtuosic display, the other is plainly functional, pragmatic, and filling.
7. Extended families are not shrinking in numbers, but the closeness with which extended families interact is interpreted as diminishing.
8. The *ie* officially no longer exists since Japan's constitution of 1945 dismantled the institution. However, the notion of *ie* remains in symbolic form in Japan as a trope of "families."
9. A plate-lunch wagon is a truck with a portable kitchen that sells plate lunches and drinks. These wagons can be found at construction sites and near office buildings, schools, and beaches.