



Chef Ahu Hetteema

Owner and Executive Chef, Istanbul Hawaii

Chef Ahu Hetteema, the culinary maven behind Istanbul Hawaii, began her journey in the world of food during a time in her life when she was unable to visit her hometown: Mersin, Turkey.

While attending San Francisco's Academy of Art University and living in the Bay Area for 9 years, Ahu began to face immigration issues, where she struggled to keep her visa and student work permit. This eventually led to a 10-year battle of Ahu fighting for her rights to fulfill a life in the states that she had always dreamed of. Between moving to the Island of Oahu in 2013 and spending all of those years away from her tight knit family, Ahu was longing to return to Turkey. The immigration issues wouldn't allow her to do so, which led to personal challenges, post traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety and homesickness for Ahu. She soon turned to her mother, Nili – a chef specializing in Turkish cuisine for 30 years – for guidance. Nili came to live with Ahu on Oahu and with her she brought Turkish ingredients and spices that Ahu couldn't access for years due to the inability to travel back to Turkey. The more Ahu and her mother cooked together, the more Ahu healed. Cooking with her mother felt like awakening from a harrowing nightmare, reigniting her love for her Turkish roots and culinary traditions.

In 2015, Ahu and her mother started selling food at the farmers markets of their adopted island home, Oahu. Immersed in the fresh ingredients of Hawai'i, Ahu's passion for cooking flourished as she experimented with blending traditional Ottoman dishes with ingredients from the islands, creating a unique blend of cultures. Ahu ultimately decided that sharing her love of Turkish cuisine in Hawai'i brought her joy and in 2020 – three months into the pandemic – Chef Ahu opened doors to Istanbul Hawai'i. With troubles getting a loan and no money to hire contractors, Ahu and her husband built every part of the restaurant – aside from the HVAC and chairs – from the ground up. Applying her background in animation and visual effects, from her time attending Academy of Art University, Ahu lent her artistic eye to create a space that offers an authentic taste of Turkey in the heart of Honolulu.

Istanbul Hawaii is one of the only Turkish & Mediterranean restaurants in the State of Hawai'i that effortlessly combines traditional flavors and heritages together. Pulling inspiration from Ahu and Nili's personal journey exploring the healing powers of old-world spices and ingredients from their home culture, all of the dishes on Istanbul Hawaii's menu are traditional Mediterranean and Turkish recipes. For the mother-daughter duo Istanbul Hawaii is a way of bringing their home country to Hawai'i, connecting two places on opposite ends of the world through flavors, culinary traditions, and local and exotic ingredients.

Istanbul Hawaii's inviting atmosphere, that replicates a modern Turkish home, quickly became the hot spot for travelers and local diners looking for something unique. In recognition of Ahu's extraordinary achievements, Istanbul Hawaii was awarded Star Advertisers Best New Restaurant in 2021, the SBA Women-Owned Business of the Year for State of Hawaii in 2022, Hawaii Business Magazines 2023 Best Small Business of the Year and Honolulu Magazine has named Istanbul Hawaii the Best Mediterranean Restaurant for three consecutive years, 2021-2023.