



POKE

*A slice of heaven
in a bowl*

Mention poke to friends and you're likely to either receive a puzzled look or an impassioned ode to the Hawaiian dish of raw, cubed fish dressed in soy sauce and sesame. Pronounced POE-KAY (from the Hawaiian word for "slice"), poke is so prevalent on the islands that it is served in quantity at most deli counters. Unlike ceviche, where the citrus marinade "cooks" the fish, poke needs not sit for longer than half an hour, to let the flavors mingle, and it is truly raw when you eat it. This dish has quickly caught on in Santa Barbara, where a vibrant array can be found in some truly unique venues.

Perhaps the most unforgettable place to enjoy poke is the Santa Barbara Fish



Market, situated on the wood-planked pier at Santa Barbara Harbor. Although not a restaurant, this small fish market has garnered quite a reputation for its poke, which you can eat outdoors, surrounded by the sound of waves, seagulls, and a busy fishing dock. Alex Valenzuela, one of the many dedicated staff at the market, described the importance of cutting the fish to just the right size for proper sauce absorption and texture. Their normal fish of choice is premium-grade ahi tuna, caught in the waters around Santa Barbara. They add a little seaweed salad to the mix of soy and sesame, with a hint of green onion. For a big taste experience, you might luck into their weekend "Tsunami Poke," which has a sriracha and mayonnaise sauce. Alex, like many poke purists, prefers to eat poke made of wild tuna with a very simple dressing, so that the tuna flavor comes through.

However, that's not the only way to eat poke. The poke bowl has caught on as a great way to experience poke, and nobody does that better than **I'a Fish Market & Cafe at Santa Barbara Public Market**. Offering five or six kinds of poke each day, Satu Rivera and Vincent Thomas, along with the rest of the kitchen crew at I'a, are passionate about poke, in all its many forms. Here you will find silky Hamachi yellow tail, albacore, and other sashimi-grade delights. If you're in an adventurous mood, try the octopus poke (the one poke that's not raw, but rather boiled). Or perhaps the salmon poke with soy and ponzu that Satu swears is "like butter, tender, a very soft, unique flavor." Start with your choice of white or brown rice, pick your poke, then add sauces such as soy, sesame oil, or spicy sriracha aioli. To customize further, pick from vegetables like bean sprouts, wasabi peas, edamame, cucumbers, and pickled ginger. For the ultimate bowl, add seaweed salad and avocado.

Certainly eating raw fish might intimidate some people. But Satu feels that "Raw fish is very safe to eat as long as you know where the fish is coming from and are buying it from a good source." Also, I'a serves sashimi-grade fish, which goes through a freezing process to preserves freshness. If it's your first time trying poke, Vincent recommends the tuna, which is seared on the outside, raw in the middle, and seasoned nicely with pepper, providing a taste experience that's a little more familiar.

Aside from Santa Barbara Fish Market and I'a Fish Market & Cafe, you may also hear raves about the poke at **Lazy Acres**. Their poke bar features aloha poke (mild ahi), spicy poke (hot sesame oil), and the delicious citrus chili shrimp poke (don't worry, the shrimp is cooked). Shane Pacheco at the fish counter reports the poke has an enthusiastic following and is well worth the trip out to the Mesa.

There's really no end to the combinations and forms of poke, and Santa Barbara is taking up the habit with a passion! —*Angela Borda*

Santa Barbara Fish Market, 117 Harbor Way, (805) 965-9564; I'a Fish Market & Cafe at Santa Barbara Public Market, 38 W. Victoria Street, (805) 845-0745; Lazy Acres Market, 302 Meigs Road, (805) 564-4410.