

Fiji Time: 12:44 PM on Saturday 21 October

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A tale of traditional tastes

Seona Smiles

Saturday, October 21, 2017

Tukuni! Uwe, uwe! And so the story starts. Tukuni is the iTaukei word for a story, and

'uwe, uwe' is the response from the audience sprawled on the mat around the tale teller if they wish to listen.

But Tukuni is a special sort of story - not a myth or a legend, not a fanciful yarn, a romantic saga or even a chronicle of events. It is a tale of things past, of traditions and ways and even possessions, of understandings and knowledge of earlier generations, of "tabu" matters that are recounted in story form, from the elder to the younger, so that they may understand and value them. It could be a story about an old garden tool, or a fish hook, or a wild fruit, or a way of survival after a hurricane.

Today a new Tukuni brings a tale of traditional tastes. Dr Jone Hawea of FRIEND, the acronym for the Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises & Development spun me the tale while we strolled around the Tuvu property.

Dr Jone, medical doctor and surgeon who has served with Fiji's peacekeeping force and worked throughout Fiji, New Zealand and elsewhere before finding his life's work with FRIEND, providing a free community outreach health service since 2007 that is not only about diagnosing illness and effects of non communicable diseases, but helping people transform their lives to good health in all aspects.

He is now heading the Tukuni project that centres on a restaurant but actually incorporates virtually everything that FRIEND is about. We began the exploration of Tukuni in the garden, surprisingly verdant given the general drought conditions. Most plants, potted or in the ground, bear an identifying label.

These are some of the plants that give their flavours to Tukuni foods and are available from FRIEND as dried herbs and spices.

Next to an arbour of climbing vegetable vines was a glorious patch of marigolds, where if you wished you could picnic. Under a large shade tree nearby, the paper makers were at work on their attractively textured sheets. Vegetable waste such as cane tops, discarded banana stems, onion peels and kava kosa (dregs) for high quality environmentally friendly paper.

But no time for that now, we pressed on towards the back of the two storey FRIEND headquarters building to where the large production centre was in operation.

This is where the produce from the vulnerable villages and communities who are part of the FRIEND operations is brought.

FRIEND works with farmers in clusters to grow crops in large volume for ease of marketing, assisting with seed distribution, nursery set up, irrigation and market links and encouraged to plan for high end and longer term crops such as orchard fruits. They build on farmers' existing knowledge to develop import substitution foods, for example pulses, cereals, herbal teas and root crops.

Some of it ends up at the Tuvu headquarters where it is value added and packaged in the production centre and sold through FRIEND's Fiji Style brand and now to also fill the pots and plates of Tukuni restaurant. There are jams, pickles, chutneys, herbal teas, spices, gluten free flours, desiccated coconut and dried fruits, made with no additives in a wholesome and healthy way using recipes used for generations in Fiji homes and now appearing (and disappearing rather quickly) on Fiji supermarket shelves.

Director Sashi Kiran said the point about all FRIEND products was their quality, especially those organically sourced. "We don't want pity purchases, buying to help the poor. These are good products, worth what people pay for them."

At the back of the production centre in Tuvu there is an odd collection of large tables of corrugated iron, plastic and various other materials. They are the experimental, and working, solar food dryers.

"We are completely solar powered here," Dr Jone said proudly, pointing to 45 solar panels on the roof that supply electricity for everything on site, from computers and airconditioners to production equipment and lighting.

It was time to go upstairs to the Tukuni restaurant, on the way passing the busy carpentry unit crafting chairs and tables for dinner guests that are reminiscent of the often old and battered but good, solid wood kitchen furniture of many rural homes.

Diners can start with snacks on the mat, relaxing on a scattering of comfy cushions and sipping a cold drink while looking at what's on the day's menu or waiting for friends. In the same 'waiting room' nook, attractively rustic display shelves show many of the FRIEND products, from powdered ginger and mango jam to a couple of items in the museum collection of traditional artifacts.

Dr Jone is particularly enthusiastic about the packets of Satwa, a seven grain flour preparation that he believes is the secret to how Fiji's indentured labourers transported from India had the energy to work in the canefields from the early hours of the morning until dark. The seven varieties of homegrown grains in the mix - maize, red rice, cowpeas, pigeon peas, green gram, black gram and sorghum - are roasted before blending. They can be eaten for breakfast mixed with milk and honey, added to smoothies or to flour mixtures for baking and flavoured for sweet or savoury dishes, with a dash of Fiji salt that is still made by traditional methods by a remote coastal village.

The display also holds a range of dried, powdered herbs, spices and flavouring with astonishingly fresh tastes, from ginger to tomato that has been picked deliciously sun ripened and the sun dried and powdered to add taste and colour to pasta, sprinkled on curries, pasta and salads or for thickening sauces and stews.

The dried fruit includes deliciously sweet and chewy banana that retains the famous Fiji flavour that is great for snacking and really good in fruitcake.

What takes people's attention immediately they enter the restaurant, however, is the all round view of Tuvu's rolling hills, sunburnt vegetation and big sky. It isn't just an outlook, it's a look into an island landscape that produced the lives and the foods that contribute their uniqueness to this Tukuni tale.

Innovative use of Fiji's natural ecological décor gives colour and interest to the restaurant. There are woven coconut palm leaves and split bamboo, a tall ceiling of masi showing interesting evidence of how different people have worked together to make the huge sheets required, and a masi strip that illustrates the Tukuni food story with pictures of traditional agriculture, fishing and preparation. Interspersed with useful potted plants around the room are ancient implements that make you want to taste a curry or a chutney like grandma used to make. The grindstones a redolent of the spices and herbs that were made into powders and pastes by the busy hands of former generations, some still in use.

It is not just the old implements but the old ways of cooking that Tukuni uses, from open fire grills to produce wonderfully smoky flavoured eggplant or the clay chula fireplace that is so economical with fuel and is brought aflame with a few puffs through a piece of pipe. Tukuni offers visitors demonstrations and also cooking classes for those who would like to know the secrets of Fiji's traditional cuisines.

The truly authentic flavours of Fijian food are produced in Tukuni's kitchen, from the hand ground spices, fresh herbs and organic produce to the final fruit garnish on the dessert and the digestion-aiding tea, all made from scratch by expert hands who have learnt from the old hands and their instructive tukuni.

The menu changes with what is in season and what is available from farm and sea. It features dishes such as Ika Tavu (grilled fish in open fire), Kokoda (Fiji's famed marinated raw fish in coconut), free range chicken jungli murgi and duck curries, maize roti and the much sought after home grown red rice. Special delicacies from the seaside villages that supply FRIEND and now Tukuni restaurant include octopus and seagrapes nama.

The vegetables are turned into the dishes Fijians remember from the kitchens of their bubu or aaji (grandmothers), and that others wish they did. Every dish brings an authentic, home made, hand made taste, even though it may vary from cook to cook, who each bring their own flavours to the dhal soup or rourou (dalo leaves), the baigan (eggplant) and the kumala (sweet potato).

By the time you get through the vudi (cooking banana) or halwa (semolina sweet) it's time to hit the outdoor fitness exercise stations strategically placed around the compound. As believers in practising what they preach, FRIEND staffers knock off early on Fridays to do the nine stations over 550 metres, at three levels to suit those of all ages and fitness. The equipment for the various activities is made from natural and recycled materials.

A little less vigorous are the sessions for meditation, massage (including traditional Fijian bobo and yoga that are part of the health programme. There are also activities that range from traditional dancing, carving, weaving and charcoal face painting — and who could resist that.

For those who truly can't face anything active after a Tukuni meal, out in the garden there is a swing, one of the traditional pleasures of rural households.



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