

Fiji and Me

When I think of the food I loved growing up, I think of Fiji. My experience there had me 'food-wired' and it was where my whole thinking about food from local, indigenous sources inspired me to write Me'a Kai.



So, why was I so nervous and stressed about going there to film for Real Pasifik? It was probably the expectation and responsibility to truly do justice to their story.

I shouldn't have worried. As soon as I arrived it dawned upon me how incredibly exotic and amazing the place really is. The sights, sounds and smells speak for themselves.

The biggest story for Fiji compared to the other island nations is the multiculturalism. Certainly the different cultures are borne out politically, but as far as food is concerned it's often all together on the one table, whether it be Fijian, Indian, Chinese, Rotuman or the whole Kailoma (part Fijian–part European) culture. There is the necessity, however, to show how each main ethnic group has influenced local cuisine, so the three local chefs for the show reflected that.



Arishma Devi from the Sheraton in Denarau Island brings the Indian influence. I worked with her at the Fiji Food Festival last year and she's a heap of fun. Kalara Vusoniwailala is kailoma and lived much of her life in the United States. She runs Mango Café in Suva, which is probably the most successful restaurant in Fiji. She's becoming increasingly interested in local produce and credits Me'a Kai for validating that interest.

Then there's Tarika Sabo from The Pearl South Pacific and Spa Resort in Deuba, which is an hour from Suva on the south coast. It's an incredible spot with a stunning beach, the perfect place to host special guests for the meal the three chefs would be presenting. The head chef is Ben Tredrick, an Australian who, unlike a lot of foreign chefs who tend to bring their own food culture, has embraced the Fiji food.



We spent a day with Suliana Siwatibau, one of my personal inspirations and a long-time friend of my Mum and Dad when we were living in Fiji. Suliana is well known for her political activism, but she also is a geneticist who studied at the University of Auckland and is involved in an indigenous healing group.

Her knowledge of local crops is amazing. She understands them from a cultural, medicinal and nutritional perspective and is also an organic farmer. Suliana's concern is that as commercial agriculture grows in Fiji, a lot of these indigenous crops are disappearing. With increasing focus on crops that are the most commercially viable i.e. easier to grow and export, others are marginalised.

Originally we used to eat anything that was naturally edible, and in a place like Fiji it could be 100 different types of taro. If we're eating only two or three types there's a vast genetic range that our bodies have been constructed for, which we are missing out on.



That has driven Suliana to collect many types of taro, sweet potato and old bush crops. Her approach is if you lose the crop, you don't just lose the food, but the potential knowledge and culture that's part of it. It made a huge impact on Tarika, who grew up a Suva city girl and hadn't really been to the bush.

The next day we went to an Indian wedding to experience Indo Fijian cuisine. The scene was outrageously colourful, as was the food with some wonderful vegetarian dishes. Great Indo Fijian cuisine is Sashi Kiran of Friend Fiji's story.



Friend Fiji was founded in 2001 to work with marginalised communities in under-served areas of Fiji for their social and economic development. Among its amazing development programmes is Friend Fiji's Style Shop, which provides an outlet for rural communities to display and sell their food, which includes chutneys, pickles and jams.

From old recipes Sashi has taken some wonderful chutneys and given them genuine commercial value. Bringing commerce back into the recipe makers' homes ... that's the power of cuisine and a terrific business model for what we're striving for.

The third day was spent with Whippy family, an old kailoma neighbour of ours. The kailoma or vasu (children of Fijian women married to Europeans or other races) have been around since the early days of colonialism.



They were largely based in Vanua Levu and many of the country's industries were the result of interactions between locals and European traders. Because their offspring were deemed to be white, they went to school, gained an education and kept that entrepreneurial tradition to maintain businesses such as copra, cotton, and sandalwood from generation to generation. Spending time with them brought back visions of what seems a romantic era, of how good life was back then.

The lunch we provided as the finale at The Pearl was brilliantly received. All that was added to the dishes the chefs made from local ingredients was in the presentation. Arishna said she felt so proud to be Fijian. Most heart-warming for me is the pride that had been generated from Me'a Kai.

It's about our cultures of the South Pacific embracing the traditional foods that have sustained them for generations. Our aim is to provide the knowledge to help them sustain generations to come culturally, nutritionally and economically.

Kokoda



Serves 8 generously

In the South Pacific, there are many versions of kokoda and many other raw-fish preparations. Kokoda (pronounced 'ko-kon-da') is Fijian raw fish; in Samoa it is known as oka and in Tahiti by its French name, poisson cru; it is ika mata in the Cook Islands and ota ika in Tonga. No matter which version, kokoda is the dish that seems to have best found its way to hotel menus, and hence is the dish that nearly everyone who has visited the South Pacific has enjoyed. In Fiji, it was traditionally with a marinade of lime juice, chillies, onions and seawater – and walu (Spanish mackerel) is the preferred fish. I've been told that coconut milk was added in the 1930s by a Suva restaurant owner. Kokoda is now a fixture on every Fijian menu, always with coconut milk.

- *1 kg very fresh walu, mahimahi or snapper fillet, skinned*
- *Juice of 10 limes and 3 lemons*
- *2 medium-sized onions, finely diced*
- *3 red chillies, minced*
- *2 cups finely chopped tomato*
- *Several spring onions, finely sliced*
- *Few stems of coriander leaves (substitute: parsley)*
- *4 cups coconut milk*
- *½ tablespoon sea salt*
- *Lime wedges to serve*

Cut the fish into 1 cm dice, discarding any bloody tissue

In a bowl, mix the fish and the citrus juices and chill to marinate for two to three hours, or until the fish is opaque.

Drain the fish and add the onion, chilli, tomato, spring onion, coriander, coconut milk and salt.

Mix well, chill well and serve in coconut shells with lime wedges.

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