

# Now that's a FRIEND! - Fiji Times Online

Chef Lance Seeto

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On a recent visit to Ba, Chef Seeto stopped in to visit one of his favourite local food suppliers, FRIEND, who have developed many new products for the chefs to include in their restaurants

We all have a favourite family recipe or herbal remedy that has been handed down through generations. My grandmother's chicken and ginger broth was a sure-fire cure for any gastrointestinal bug, and my aunty makes an awesome banana cake that despite my professional training, I can never seem to exactly replicate.

Whether it is a twist of the wrist, a secret ingredient or an old technique that has been long forgotten, the recipes of past generations are priceless. And in today's choice of fast food and processed food in the urban centres, there's something life-enriching and comforting about experiencing generational recipes.

However, in Fiji those artisan recipes and use of herbal medicine remedies can be traced back even further with the arrival of the indigenous Polynesian and Melanesian settlers more than 4000 years ago, and the first Indian labour ship from Calcutta in 1879.

The iTaukei and Indian cultures make up roughly 95 per cent of the 880,000 population (2013 census), with many of those ancestral recipes and cooking techniques still alive today, especially in the rural regions and outer islands. It is also in those regions we see a higher incidence of poverty, where employment and enterprise opportunities are lessened by distance and harsh sugarcane lands.

Not all hope is lost. There's one a non-government organisation, led by one incredible woman with the vision to harness the artisan skills and ancestral recipes of those less fortunate, while providing them with a revenue stream to address poverty.

## FRIENDS from rural villages

The aptly named FRIEND, an acronym for Fiji for Rural Integrated Enterprises and Development, is helping many rural Fijians alleviate poverty by harnessing what they do best, and getting paid to do it upfront and in cash.

Founder and director of FRIEND, Sashi Kiran, says she felt anguished at the wasting away of valuable resources, while communities lamented that they were poor and facing difficulties in putting decent food on their tables. Sending their children to school or being able to access timely health services for the lack of money was of major concern.

As a development worker, Sashi saw first-hand how people were struggling to make a living in difficult

circumstances. They seemed unable to utilise their available knowledge and skills for supplementing their family incomes and improving their quality of life. She believed there was no shortage of resources and skills in the country.

What was lacking was access to information, opportunities and the reach of the market, and the creation of local and cultural food products was identified as the easiest and quickest way to get the project started.

In 2001 FRIEND was born. A partnership was quickly developed with the local Senior Citizens Centre for the start-up of an income generation project for tamarind chutney. The women's artisan recipe of tempered spices blended with freshly grated coconut and wild tamarind was already a hit in their homes, and its success was soon followed by an eye-watering chilli chutney, sweet mango chutney, and a suite of strange but unique pickles made from Fijian mango, a green hog plum called ambarella and the potent medicinal ginger, layalaya.

In 2004, the food products were followed with the establishment of a handmade card project with unemployed deaf and dumb youths harnessing their heightened visual and artistic skills. But it took a visit from His Royal Highness Prince Charles in 2005 to propel Sashi's dream onto the international stage. With funding from the British High Commission to buy a fruit dryer, financial support soon flowed from AusAid, NZAid and the European Union. FRIEND also started to receive international awards including the UN Habitat award for good practice, and the CIVICUS Nelson Mandela Graca Machel award for a Youth Employment Network.

In 2009, a new plot of land at Tuvu in Lautoka was acquired, with the ambition of creating a FRIEND Village with modern packaging and process facilities, a seedling centre and model organic gardens of fresh herbs, spices, herbal teas and wild tropical fruits and vegetables.

Old flavours become new

Today, the FRIENDS project has become a major link to Fiji's organically-certified farms, but more so than any other farm-to-table or farm-to-fork initiative in the world, it has become a conduit of gastronomy of two ancient and pre-history civilisations.

The old tribal techniques of the native iTaukei and the Ayurvedic-inspired recipes of Indian labourers are being melded and infused into a mysterious, medicinal and organic cuisine by the country's top chefs. The coconut and spice infused tamarind chutney is used as a marinade on meats like a Fiji version of barbecue sauce, while the soothing lemongrass tea, rainforest spices and organic sea salt are used as dry rubs and marinades for grilling. Tea charred and smoked beef and poultry are reminiscent of the charcoal wood fires and underground earth-oven of the lovo in the villages. The smell of fresh curry leaves, wild mint, medicinal sage and tempered spices in ghee takes visitors on a journey to the humble Indian kitchen of settlements in Ba.

Knockout yaqona tea

If you haven't already tried Sashi's range of herbal teas of lemongrass, rosella or cinnamon chai, you

must try the new yaqona tea. It is marketed as a relaxing tea but I can assure you it is more like knockout tea that will cure any insomnia or troubles with getting to sleep.

If you can stand the look and taste of kava then this is the perfect alternative because the tea does not look like muddy water, it is clear as normal tea with only a slight taste of yaqona. But don't let appearances fool you. Just a few half a cup will put a tired body to rest before you even know it.

On my recent Captain Cook Cruises trip to Lau, I gave two teabags to one of the crew who could not sleep because of the rocking boat. I told George to have one bag but he ended up brewing two bags and was late for work!

"What happened George?" I asked the next morning. "I drank all of the tea because it looked weak. All I remember was putting on a video and sitting down. The next thing I realised it is next day and I've slept past my alarm!"

Thanks to Sashi, the FRIEND dream has given Fiji's chefs a new arsenal of elements to experiment and create cutting-edge regional Fijian cuisine. The biggest win is reserved for those who are an essential part of the project. For participants like chutney-maker Sara's aunty, as she is known within FRIEND, she has found a new sense of financial independence and feels empowered with her ability to be able to contribute to the family's needs and wants.

And the best thing for visitors to Fiji is that they can also take home a FRIEND and support the local community, as most of the products are declarable through customs in major ports. It brings whole new meaning to the old adage of "a friend in need, is a FRIEND indeed."

\* Lance Seeto is the multi-award winning executive chef based on Mana Island, and is Fiji Airway's culinary ambassador and host of Fiji TV's Taste of Paradise Season 4 premieres August 30 on Fiji One TV.