

Blades of organic change - Fiji Times Online

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WHEN Fiji Cha, the country's ground-breaking organically certified lemon grass tea grabbed the limelight, not many noticed the quiet, proud smiles deep in the lemon grass fields.

They belonged to farmers.

Beyond a

simple cuppa

Semi Uradradra, 45, exclaimed excitedly, "Who would have thought!" adding "So satisfying to see our hard work on the supermarket shelves!"

His excitement was contagious. I smiled, my heart echoing his joy.

Growing up on lemon grass tea or co boi, sometimes complaining "Na (Mum), please buy some black tea" because I thought the lemon grass was the poor man's breakfast beverage and the store bought variety was just better.

Little did I know! Seeing it out there with the popular brands but with the promise of added goodness, healing wonders, kindness to nature, and Fijian made, makes the birth of this grassy cuppa a Rockefeller moment! Or as we like to say it in Fiji — kaila mada (shout, scream for joy). Indeed momentous.

It's beyond a simple cup of lemon grass tea.

Relate it to the concept of blue green economies, the path Pacific Island countries' are taking to respond to climate change challenges; this is just what it means, in its simplest form.

Growing lemon grass with organic agriculture principles extols the aims of climate mitigation, adaptation and building climate resilience.

Carbon sequestration, lower-input of fossil fuel dependent resources, and use of renewable energy all present opportunities for organic agriculture to lead the way in reducing energy consumption and mitigating the negative effects of energy emissions.

In particular, chemical fertilisers emit potent nitrous oxides, a greenhouse gas (GHG) 300 times more evil than carbon dioxide as far as GHGs go. Removing chemical fertilisers from farming is then one of the options available to agriculture to reduce GHG emissions.

Food and nutritional security and poverty alleviation as well as health and wellbeing are added

benefits.

Value adding lemon grass allows farmers to earn more income from the same area of farmed land (no need to clear large areas of forest). There is less impact on the environment. From ridge to reef the lemon grass cuppa is both green and blue. Or in other words, while Uradradra is farming his lemon grass in Raranibulubulu community(50km from Labasa Town), it's just like assuring fisher folk along the Great Sea Reef: "Don't worry, I'm helping keep the reef healthy so you can continue to enjoy your healthy fish supplies for food and income."

How's that possible? Organic farming prohibits the use of harmful chemical fertilisers, weedicides, pesticides or even disruptive agricultural techniques that cause soil erosion and that eventually make their way to our reef systems where they cause harm.

People partnerships for nature ultimately benefit people. Simply put — we need to be kind to each other in this common, limited space, earth, that we call home; we are after all an interconnected web of life — humans and creatures alike.

Organic farming, in keeping us kind, weaves a stronger web.

Friendly FRIEND

It's the brilliance of the planning, being strategic enough to think far into the future, and those brilliant minds run FRIEND that first got the Fiji Cha wheel spinning.

Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises and Development (FRIEND) is a household name in Fiji.

Working with farmers like Semi, they literally build product dreams from the ground up. They did it with the range of chutneys that are a hit! Tamarind chutney is divine with dhal!

And they are doing it again with the lemon grass.

"You are not drinking harmful chemicals with this one," Sashi Kiran promised. "And that is an organic guarantee!"

Fiji Cha carries the Organic Pasifika mark, a guarantee the lemon grass tea is grown in an environment where harmful chemical fertilisers, weedicides or pesticides are not used. It's a promise that the tea you drink is pure and natural.

"The whole thing about organic is not only putting a product out there that's healthy but it's also trying to get sustainable agriculture back, trying to look at how nature works in agriculture for health and sustainability.

"So it feeds into a larger program of socioeconomic health."

Organic Pasifika

Organic Pasifika is managed by the Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community (POETCom) that

also oversees the setup of community Participatory Guarantee Systems or PGS for organic certification.

POETCom is a network of organic farmers across the Pacific Islands region promoting the values of organic agriculture. It is housed within the European Union funded Increasing Agriculture Commodities and Trade Project implemented by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community.

The journey to organic certification began with a simple oath. (Under heading)

The oath translates;

"My land is my gift from my God. It is right for me to use my resources for mine and my descendant's survival. But I have responsibility to care for it and not use it in a damaging way. This is for the prosperity of my 'vanua', my descendants and to honour God."

Before God and their families, the farmers declared their oaths in church. Healthy natural resources are after all used to measure family wealth and status.

As organic farmers they now uphold the key principles of organic agriculture upheld by the Pacific Organic Standard.

These are healthy soils, maintenance of ecological systems, and fairness in human dealings with the environment and life opportunities, care for the health and wellbeing of current and future generations, and maintenance of Pacific cultures and traditions through the practice of traditional agriculture.

Some of the farmers are from Raranibulubulu, Macuata province, Suweni village in the highlands of Cakaudrove province and Western Viti Levu.

However apart, they are all part of FRIEND's community PGS mechanism. Periodically they carry out peer review exercises. This involves auditing each other's farms for compliance with organic standards. They all had to go through a mandatory 18 month conversion period. During this time they stopped using chemical fertilisers, pesticides and weedicides that harm soil health.

Socionomics

of chai

Since Fiji Cha, things have changed for 36-year-old Masilina Nailuse.

Her 600 lemon grass plants thrive in the remote, mountain village of Suweni.

They bring in extra dollars that supplement income from traditional crops.

"The extra we get is big for us," Nailuse happily stated.

"That covers the essential staples for our families and helps with the income that we get from other

crops like cassava, taro and kava."

She's also cut back on trips to the kava plantation with her husband. Backaches from carrying heavy loads through the forest aged her, she says.

"My lemon grass is easy money.

"It's important to have money every week for our school children's lunches. It's good Government covers the bus fares but sometimes we still have to pay."

Uradradra likes farming organic lemon grass.

"There is little to no cost; there is no need to hire labourers for harvest!" he said.

Fiji Cha's affecting them in an even more personal way.

"Now we don't buy tea from the store," Uradradra said.

"Through the organic awareness training I've come to learn so much more about the health benefits of lemon grass, I just didn't know before.

"At the same time I'm proud and fulfilled I'm looking after my land the way my forefathers did.

"I'm doing the right thing and it's keeping me happy."

Next time at the store, try Fiji Cha, for a winning cuppa, good for business, nature, and Fiji. Share their smiles, feel their pride!

* Theresa Fox is the information and communications officer for the Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community (POETCom).