

Friend Fiji - REAL PASIFIK

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I was unprepared for the sheer dynamism of Sashi Kiran CEO of FRIEND FIJI. She is a powerhouse of innovation and over many years has developed an extraordinary NGO that has changed the livelihoods of many families. And, you guessed it this organisation is all about food. In fact food is the vehicle they use to generate revenue out of their own back yards that, in turn, is developing local economies and protecting the integrity of the land.

Adam, Heather and I set off early to make the one-hour drive from Nadi to FRIEND's HQ in Lautoka. We'd heard a lot about Sashi through Robert Oliver- international chef and food writer. A self proclaimed Fiji Indian food fanatic Robert rates her chutneys and relishes as some of the best he's had. I was fortunate enough to taste his braised pork belly with FRIENDS tamarind chutney earlier this year at the South Pacific Food and Wine Festival. He had included it in his five-course degustation menu at the Sheraton. It was so sensational that I brought several jars of chutney back to New Zealand with me.

It's an impressive set up at FRIEND's HQ in the hills above Lautoka. They have a total staff of 25 people most of whom work out in the villages. They have a commercial kitchen where they make pickles, chutneys and jams from traditional, local recipes. They have model gardens, a seedling centre, village based health and education programmes and even a community clinic with free medicine. All of this has been achieved in ten years under the leadership of Sashi Kiran.

What is driving her? It is the desire to empower the people in her community. FRIEND programmes don't just focus on economic empowerment they value and develop personal empowerment. One of their key aims is to build the confidence of the local community that they can utilize the skills they

have now.

Ten years ago they realized that the local Fiji Indian women were making delicious chutneys and relishes at home using great organic ingredients. There was a demand for this local produce in the market but it was not getting further than the tables at home. They started small focusing on quality of recipes and integrity of growing practice. Over time they built their local markets and are now exporting internationally. As they complete their organic certification process I can only imagine the demand will increase.

When we asked Sashi what made their produce stand apart. She said immediately that it is the quality of the ingredients. "You can taste the fruit". It's true. She invited Adam, Heather and I to share a delicious vegetarian feast her staff had prepared. The fruit they use in their chutneys and relishes is bursting with its own natural sweetness. The organic seedlings they provide to the farms for herbs and grains come from rich soil and you can taste it in the food. It's clean food.

Sashi Kiran and FRIEND Fiji embody the principles of why Zoomslide and Robert Oliver launched Real Pasifik. The principles are the backbone of this incredible Pacific food revolution that is happening across the region. Sashi Kiran's FRIEND Fiji join other food heroes such as Samoa's WIBDI in being the leading lights in the Pacific farm to table organics movement. They make great food and when you buy that food you know that the money is going straight back to the people who grow it.



Sashi Kiran (right) with FRIEND staff.



Seedling Centre



FRIEND Pickles