

Fiji Time: 11:00 AM on Monday 6 November

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Amazing cassava

Sashi Kiran

Sunday, November 05, 2017

A CONSULTANT from Europe walked into our office, looked at display of gluten-free flours and picking a packet exclaimed: "This is really good, old stuff. This is one of the favourite baby weaning foods."

He was holding a packet of cassava flour. I almost quipped back: "And here we grow cassava but rely on processed bottled stuff for baby food!" But I bit my tongue instead replying: "This is high in demand as gluten-free flour."

Cassava, a staple for the people of the land, is a wonderfully versatile food. A quick search reveals number of health benefits as a health food with its low glycemic index making it healthy option for diabetics.

I find it ironic that we import wheat flour when we have gluten-free flour, food our ancestors have eaten for generations. We now instead rely heavily on imported wheat flour known for its ill effects on our health.

Cassava leaves high in protein are also used extensively in a range of dishes. Though known as staple for indigenous people, cassava has greatly influenced other cuisine in Fiji.

Boiled, grilled or cooked in a lovo, cassava is always a soul food. We know of bila, cassava bread and cakes.

While in the Lau Group, I discovered pala. Pala is made from grated cassava and coconut mixed together, wrapped in leaves placed in earthen ovens. It's deliciously filling, has a long shelf life and a great meal for the rocky boat ride back!

In Indian homes, cassava is used in main meals as well as deserts. Curry cassava, wraps and roti made from boiled or cassava flour and of course yummy deserts like payasum and halwa made from dried, grated cassava or different flavoured cassava papadums.

Then there is our version of vakalolo which is made from grated cassava, coconut, sugar, spices cardamom, wrapped in leaves and steamed or baked.

In these days of instant gratification, I have friends who rehydrate dried grated cassava and just make these in microwave oven!

Being a drought resistant, resilient crop, cassava is easy to grow.

Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises & Development (FRIEND) a livelihood NGO works with farmers to help generate sustainable income.

It often starts with what farmers readily have access to. Then there is research into product development from these raw materials and looking at developing the value chain.

In 2012, farmers in Ra shared how they had grown tonnes of cassava for export but that did not materialise and their crops were wasting in the fields.

FRIEND undertook quick research to find out about value addition to cassava to save some of the farmers' crops and discovered a demand for gluten-free cassava flour. Trials were conducted to develop the products and plan the value chain process.

Two products were launched; coarse grated dried cassava and finely grounded flour. Team members spent a lot of time conducting training in the communities and different models of solar dryers were built by different communities as each tried to fit into the value chain process.

Today more than 3000 men and women and more than 50 villages have been trained to make their own flour. This is both for their own food security as well as to ensure they have a sustainable source of income.

These gluten-free, additive and preservative-free products are now easily available in supermarkets distributed by our partner Motibhai & Co Ltd.

Dried grated cassava can be just rehydrated by adding water, milk or coconut milk for a range of quick and easy recipes.

For making payasum, I use dried grated cassava. Just toast mung dhal, boil it to soften and slowly add dried grated cassava to thicken the pysum before adding coconut milk, milk, sugar and dried fruits. Cassava brings out a beautiful consistency to payasum, a highly nutritious dessert or porridge for breakfast.

Cassava flour is great for gluten-free cakes, breads and wraps. A little cassava starch binds the flour well. Cassava flour can be mixed with breadfruit flour, satwa flour or just used plain for baking.

Coconut milk and dried fruits give added texture and taste to cakes and pies. Cassava flour makes great halwa! To make papadum or crackers, boil water, gently mix cassava flour to thicken and when consistent, add salt, herbs, spices or dried fish/prawn to flavour, spread thinly on trays and let it dry. Microwave for great naturally flavoured crackers for kids.

Cassava flour makes for a great soup base. For vegetarian soups, just gently thicken and simmer the mix, add fresh vegetables and herbs. One can also boil fish head or any meat to make the broth and gently mix cassava flour to thicken and add some fresh vegetables and herbs for a quick, tasty, nutritious meal without any additives.

My family elders recount they, in the olden days, would farm cassava and the whole family would sit together to grate cassava, sun dry and store these in drums for food security. And of course the juice from the grating was collected and dried for starch.

We only have to look at old pictures to see the starched shirts, uniforms and sari. Cassava starch was used to iron clothes giving them a crisp fashionable look!

For those of us who do not farm and need quick, easy and nutritious meal , just reach for FRIEND's Fiji Style cassava flour at your nearest supermarket.

? Sashi Kiran is the founding CEO of FRIEND. The views expressed are hers and not of this newspaper.

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