

Straight from the cooking bure

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WHEN it comes to mouth-watering traditional dishes, the best place to go is ... back to the island. Trust me, there's nothing more scrumptious and delicious than tasting an original recipe from the land of your forefathers. Last month, Rotuma was filled with all sorts of yummy foods made from recipes passed down over generations.

Well, not everything during the Rotuma Day celebrations was cooked traditionally - curried and stir fried beef, pork and chicken were sometimes on the menu to supplement the real foods of Rotuma.

These familiar dishes were an option for visitors especially those with quirky feelings about eating anything cooked with fermented coconut or tahroro (a special condiment made from the flesh of young coconuts and fermented in salt water).

Being billeted at Rina Fonmoas place in Savaea, Itumuta was a thrilling experience. Every morning fresh bu (green coconuts) were piled in a metallic bowl to quench our thirst. By midday, another batch would lie in wait. Thanks to Tausie Fabiano, Avaiki Marseu and the youths of Savaea, we had just about enough fresh coconut juice in our system for the year.

Did I mention that during Rotuma Day at Ahau, I had a pleasant surprise when I was given a huge bu that had just come out of the lovo to drink? The juice had a different taste, a lot sweeter and scented with roasted coconut flesh. If you've never tried this then there's always a first time for everything.

During the week, I had mistakenly finished a bu and dropped it in an empty box thinking it was for rubbish. It didn't occur to me that the young coconut would be used for tahroro, after all, you can't let good food go to waste - a practice the islanders have followed since Noah's time.

Slightly embarrassed at the thought of not knowing how tahroro is made, I followed Irao Mausio to the cooking bure one humid day. She had a basin, knife, salt and a green basket with empty coconuts.

It was obvious she was in the process of making tahroro from the slices of coconut flesh she had already cut into a basin.

She told me she had cut out the flesh of the young coconuts earlier, washed them thoroughly before slicing them again into long strips.

I am making tahroro. Its easy to make. You just need coconuts and salt. After you've washed the strips of coconut, you add the salt and stuff the strips back into the other empty coconuts, she said.

You need to use a stopper to keep it airtight and leave it out to ferment for about two weeks before its ready to eat. I normally make the stopper from coconut leaves.

Sometimes the fermentation process depends on the flesh of the coconut. If its soft, it can take two to three days to ferment - and its ready to eat.

That night, we had tahroro fish, fresh from the sea and straight into the pot to boil with a bit of salt. The tahroro and its creamy juice were later added when the fish was cooked, mixed well and served steaming hot. Without minding the smell of fermented coconut, the taste is quite unique.

You can cook tahroro with just about anything - fish, chicken, rourou and palusami. Its very delicious when its put in the lovo.

My favourite is tahroro chicken. All you need to do is boil the chicken until its cooked, add some onions, a bit of salt for taste then crack open the tahroro - leave it to boil for a couple of minutes and vuawalah! said Sammy, a Fijian of Rotuman descent living in Suva.

If you dont have fresh fish, you can always have tahroro with canned tomato sauce or plain tuna. It tastes good too with some dalo or cassava.

I heard some people eat tahroro with corned beef but I wouldnt know how that would taste.

Another delicacy is fekei, a sweet pudding made from starch, sugar and coconut milk. This dessert was the icing on the cake after a hefty meal on the island.

A particular fekei or niafoou was on one of our dinner menus and made by the youths of Savea.

When we made fekei, we used cassava starch. After peeling and cleaning the cassava, we grated it and soaked it with water, mixing it like how you mix grog, Irao explained.

This is prepared a day before the fekei is made. The next day, the water is drained and what will remain is the cassava starch.

You take a bit of this starch and mix it again with water. You cook it like how you cook custard. This is mixed again with the leftover starch. It is wrapped in banana leaves and put in the lovo to cook.

Once it's cooked, the starch is put into a big pot. Coconut lolo and sugar are added for taste before it is mixed vigorously with ipes (two wooden sticks). The cooked and steaming hot starch from the lovo pit sort of cooks the lolo and sugar in the pot.



Feki making in Suva. Picture: FILE/ISIRELI MUAROR

The catering crew at Savaea whipped up amazing dishes and combination of foods I never thought possible like curried chicken with noodles. We had before us a spread of lovo pork, chopsuey, ikou (rourou) and stir fried. During the week-long stay, purplish lumi in lolo, pooi vi (Tahitian apple most commonly known in Fiji as wi grated and mixed with lolo), pan fried fish, nama, ota, vegetarian and lobsters also graced the eating table much to the delight of the Fiji delegates and visitors.

On Rotuma.net, theres a section on Rotuman recipes from local contributors and those living abroad.

A couple of years back, librarian Ethel Morris submitted a number of recipes and agreed to share this with our readers.

I liked the idea of having recipes on the website (Rotuma.net) and also because at the time, no local seemed interested in sending in any Rotuman recipes - they were all from persons living overseas, she told The Sunday Times.

I am not an expert on Rotuman dishes - only what I used to cook during my 14 years on the island.

I haven't made them for quite a number of years but its something you dont forget.

There is only one way of making tahroro. The only thing that has changed is that some people are now using rubber for corks and not the old-fashioned banana leaf corks.

Mrs Morris also shared another popular recipe called telulu - a method of cooking fish over a hearth fire.

Fish cooked this way is very tasty and nourishing as well. As most people on the island are not fortunate enough to own a fridge, and as fish does not stay fresh for long, this method of cooking fish ensures that for two days at least, a family can be assured of having fish for their meals, she said of her recipe.

If a telulu is well-cooked, it can be repeatedly reheated over live coals or a hot piece of iron and still taste just as fresh.

Any type of fish can be used, but I have found that the tastiest fish are the middle-sized ones such as riki, polo and not forgetting the little black fish that is caught in shoals by the women known as tutu. These fish are very tasty. Even sea eels can be cooked this way.

There are two methods for making telulu, one of them is with tahroro and the other using plain salt. At any gathering in our local context, food is a common factor that brings everyone together. American author James Beard said: Food is our common ground - a universal experience. These cultural dishes were indeed a universal experience because no where in the world can you find telulu or fekei making but right here in our Pacific region. It definitely has become part and parcel of our unique Pacific identity and culture.