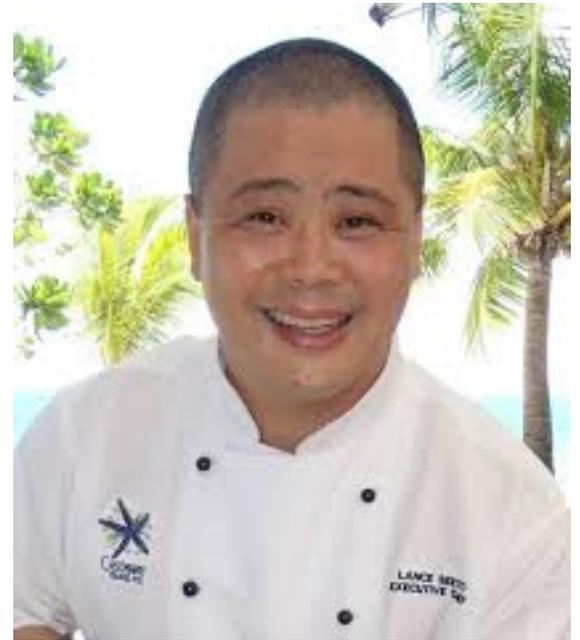


Book Excerpt

Coconut Bliss

By Lance Seeto



Cooking With The Cannibals

Being disconnected from your world is one of the scariest things to contemplate when taking a vacation. We all expect to find a Wi-Fi hotspot in a hotel room, walking down the street or all around us. We're uncomfortable when the white noise of television, radio and our phones isn't constantly clogging our brains with useless information.

Castaway Island, Fiji is not where the Tom Hanks' movie, *Cast Away*, was filmed but it's literally across the road on nearby Modriki Island. The local people who have seen the film joke that Hanks' character stupidly paddled in the wrong direction because the resorts were just around the corner! He could have been sipping cocktails on the beach had he looked over the right horizon.

With no television, radio or telephones in the bures, or huts, the international tourist is able to relive the *Cast Away* lifestyle of unplugging and disconnecting from the world. Nested below a lush rainforest mountain and surrounded by an aqua blue sea, Castaway Island's resort is one of the oldest and most famous holiday destinations in the region. It has had nearly fifty years to perfect an experience of serenity, contentment and tropical lifestyle that is distinctly Fijian in culture.

The island's staff have also seen many generations of families regularly return to this paradise to not only enjoy the tropical climate, but to recharge and get some perspective on their own life. Castaway is one of those places that is spiritually lifting and soul warming. There is a sense of calm, family and happiness that helped turn this culinary assignment into one of the most pleasurable and personally rewarding experiences of my life. When you step foot on the white sandy beach you are by a flank of staff with huge grins, laughing and shouting, "Bula—welcome home, welcome to Castaway Island!"

I was keen to get started and wanted to do as much research as possible on the local produce and cuisine. I had read a lot

about the fresh wild seafood, coconuts and sweet tropical fruits, so I was excited to get stuck into my first Fijian meal. With such an abundance of locally grown, exotic tropical fruits, organic vegetables and the most pristine wild seafood of anywhere in the world, traditional Fijian food was sure to be amazing.

My first dining experience was the Fijian *lovo*, a traditional feast of roasted meats, fish and root vegetables slow-cooked in an earth oven. Similar to the Hawaiian *luau* or Maori *hangi*, uncooked food is wrapped in native leaves and then buried in the ground for at least three hours. The result is a smoky, wood-flavor that permeates the food.

As much I as wanted to enjoy my first Fijian meal, I found it bland with no depth of flavor, no complexity and no hint of native creativity—there definitely wasn't any seasoning! Everything taste like it was thrown into the pit without thought to flavors and timing.

With plenty of room for desserts, I wanted to try all the different coconut-based delights the Fijian chefs told me were traditional recipes. To my pleasant surprise I loved most of these! Cassava (tapioca root) and plantain bananas cooked in freshly grated and squeezed coconut milk was exactly what I was expecting in a native cuisine. The pineapple pie and teacakes though, reminded me of something out of a Girl Guides cookbook from last century. I was later to discover that there was indeed such a publication produced by the local white homemakers some decades earlier, as a means of teaching both the settlers and natives the delights of British colonial home cooking!

My continued experiences with the food around the islands' resorts and restaurants resembled the tourist fare of Waikiki, Hawai'i some twenty-five years ago; tasteless, boring and overcooked. What was going on here? With Australian culinary textbooks; a government-run culinary training

college; and a young but established tourist industry; why was the food so crappy? The answer was to be found in Fiji's past. Every country's local cuisine can be defined by the fusion of the food from its diverse culture and the influence of other nations upon the indigenous cuisine. But in Fiji, its history and culinary development has been very different. Fiji was never conquered or had its native culture displaced by the colonising empires of the Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, French, German, Japanese, Americans or even the English. Its isolation from the major spice trading routes; its fierce reputation as the Cannibal Isles; and its unmapped and deadly reefs kept many of the conquering empires away from Fiji until well into the seventeenth & eighteenth centuries. In comparison to other parts of the world, pre-contact Fiji was a divided nation of clans fighting and conquering each other whilst the ancient kingdoms of the old world were forcing their cooks to come up with something different every day to satisfy the desires of their rulers. Threatened with death, those cooks ventured far across the land to find new herbs and spices, plants, nuts, animals and sea life to include in their kitchens. In Fiji, despite a diverse mix of Melanesian, Polynesian, Micronesian, Indian, Chinese and European cultures, there has been very little reason or motivation to experiment with different techniques and flavours until very recently.

As I enjoyed more staff meals of local recipes in my kitchen, I realized Fijians do not eat or see food in the same way. The Western concept of meat and three vegetables does not exist, and a rare or blue steak is completely alien. Their proteins have always been slow-cooked, well done, whether in the earth oven, smoked over an open fire, fried or stewed. And cooking times, presentation, textures and flavors are not always paid much attention, especially if there is a rugby union game or kava session in progress.

The huge celebratory feasts are a mass cook-up of unmodified, wild starches like taro, cassava, sweet potato and breadfruit, with pigs and chickens thrown into the fire with no seasoning or marinades. I wondered why the traditional foods are hardly seasoned until I sat down to my first Fijian meal to discover bowls of salt, lemon and chilies across the table. Fijians add the seasoning after cooking, sometimes drowning the food in excess iodized salt and lemon, whilst intermittently biting the baby chilies in between mouthfuls of food. With fish and native greens, bowls of freshly squeezed coconut milk mixed with onions, tomato, lemon and chilies accompany seafood called a miti. Whilst certainly tasty, the young cook is challenged to develop a more refined palate and understanding of portions and presentation when they go into the real world of resort kitchens – and very fussy and temperamental tourists to satisfy.

In many of the functions I have attended, food is also simply piled on top of each other on a plate—sometimes even

dessert—without care for presentation or flavor combinations because it is simply and practically seen as just food. For the uninitiated Fijian not interested in cooking, food is fuel and not a culinary adventure of textures and flavors. For the local chefs, struggling to come to grips with the French techniques and terminology of our craft, their task is made harder with minimal exposure to Western flavors. Very few can afford to eat out at the fancy restaurants and resorts that service their clientele. A meal for two in any of the top establishments is equivalent to two weeks pay. And without the plethora of television cooking shows, magazines and celebrity chefs, most of the local chefs must rely on their tenacity to learn the cultural differences in food if they are to excel in the industry. Cooking a rare or blue steak is a case in point. I remember one of my local chefs asking, "Why do tourists order their steaks half cooked? It's still got blood!" Explaining that good meats are wonderfully tender when cooked underdone, the chef replied, "And I thought we were the cannibals."

This presented a new set of challenges in trying to teach a local workforce to cook like my Australian apprentices and chefs. How do I gain the quick respect of a local workforce? I'd have to delve much deeper into their heritage. ■

