

FIELD TO

Resort

Change is afoot in Fiji's tourism industry as more and more resort chefs embrace local ingredients over imported produce.

This move to adopt greater use of local produce in Fijian resorts is linked to global "slow food" and "farm to table" movements, which encourage preserving traditional and regional cuisine by utilising local farm produce, livestock and fish.

The changing palates of travellers who are more embracing of different tastes and flavours has also been a factor behind this change.

The Fijian tourism industry, which started to develop in the late 1960s, offered mainly Western fare made with imported ingredients in order to appeal to primarily Australasian travellers.

But with South East Asian food and Pacific Food making inroads in Australia and New Zealand in recent decades, the culinary preferences of travellers from Fiji's two main source markets have also become more adventurous as a result.

The benefits are multiplied many fold. Travellers to Fiji are able to sample some of the freshest local produce that the country has to offer as interpreted by innovative resort chefs.

What's more? It helps chip away at the Fijian tourism industry's historically high food import bill while spreading the benefits of the tourist dollar further down the supply chain to small grassroots farmers.

"The Fijian experience is an immersive one. As soon as you step off the plane, you cannot help but feel the change in the air. This brand of authenticity is maintained by more and more hotels opting to use fresh and healthy Fijian grown produce in their menu," said Dr Audrey Aumua, Deputy Director-General of The Pacific Community (SPC), the scientific and technical agency that's playing a part in this change.

While the Fijian tourism industry has been keen to capitalise on this growing trend and utilise more local produce in resort menus for some time now, there was grave concern that the destruction caused by Tropical Cyclone Winston in February 2016 would jeopardise the quality and the consistency of supply and the growing volume of locally grown ingredients required by the tourism industry.



An array of fresh produce of the Fiji Islands.



PGS Farmer walking through his tomato farm



Grand Pacific Hotel Executive Chef Mohammed Arun, prepares salad, using locally sourced ingredients



ASSISTING FARMERS

In June 2016, the European Union launched the Increasing Agriculture Commodity Trade (IACT) Project TC Winston Recovery Action, a FJ\$4.3 million project with the Pacific Community (SPC) to assist commercial farmers and traders to recover from damage incurred by the cyclone.

"This recovery project strategically directed assistance at commercial farmers. By restoring and strengthening disrupted value-chains the project contributed to build a more resilient future for businesses and local communities," said H.E. Andrew Jacobs, European Union (EU) Ambassador to the Pacific.

As the strongest tropical cyclone to make landfall in South Pacific Basin in recorded history, TC Winston caused widespread devastation to many industries including extensive damage to Fiji's agricultural sector amounting to FJ\$208.3 million (US\$100.2 million). Over the past nine months, the project has found success working with a number of fresh produce and aquaculture farmers in Fiji to get locally grown produce back on the market, and onto the menu in resorts around Fiji.

Here are some of the individual success stories.

TOMATOES

A partnership between farmers groups in the greater Sigatoka and Suva areas and a number of leading Fijian resorts, is putting more fresh, locally-grown tomatoes on holiday makers plates.

Under a participatory Guarantee System (PGS) established in 2014, farmers guarantee to supply high quality vegetables to replace imports, and resorts guarantee a higher than market but lower than import price and to accept a certain minimum amount each week.

After entire crops were wiped out by TC Winston, the project has supported 240 farmers to structure themselves into growing clusters to produce tomatoes and other vegetables. The project has also provided cultivation training, irrigation and green house equipment to assist with year round production.

It is hoped that by having 16 dispersed locations and improved protection for crops, this will prevent a complete destruction of production in the future.

Participants Guarantee System (PGS)

PGS Project Co-ordinator: Dr Robert Erskine-Smith, rob.erskine.smith@gmail.com

PRAWNS AND CRABS

Apart from taking in the beautiful sites and soaking up the sun, the Fijian experience is not complete without a delicious hearty Fijian meal. Considered a delicacy, the native mud crab is an iconic species in Fiji, harvested by coastal communities, particularly those living near mangrove forests.

Established in 2009, The Crab Company is a unique enterprise that specialises in the production of live mud crabs and prawns for the growing Pacific seafood market.

The company grows crabs from a young crablet stage for up to eight months to acquire a healthy size at its farm in Raviravi, located on the main island of Viti Levu.

Small quantities of wild mud crabs are also purchased from local fishers for fattening and the company has plans to develop community mangrove crab farming to feed into the company's operations and market.

The company was supplying crabs to major hotels in Fiji such as Sofitel, The Fijian, Hilton, Pearl and the Wakaya Island Resort when it lost all of its breeding stock and frozen feed due to the power outages caused by the destruction of the electrical system by TC Winston.

To get things back on track, the project has assisted with the installation of a solar power grid to provide electricity to protect their hatchery and feed shortage. TC Winston also destroyed the electrical and refrigeration structures at the company's farm in Navua. With increasing demand for fresh prawns, the project has restored the blast freezer and helped the company to increase its production area by 150% and thereby fulfil orders for prawns. "The TC Winston recovery assistance has been very indispensable in getting us back on our feet," says company director Wilco Liebrechts.

"The solar system introduces a renewable solution for reliable electricity and dramatically reduces our dependence on grid power and saves us a considerable amount of money. It may even help us generate some funds when we sell some of the power to the grid."

Fiji Crab Company

Website: www.fijicrab.com

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Farmer from the Crab Company Fiji standing in front of the Crab Farm in Navua. Photo: FRANK KOROI



Seafood platter served at Malolo Island Resort

COFFEE

Kiwi, Luke Fryett started Bula Coffee in 2011 after discovering dormant coffee plants in Fiji's Navosa Province that had been planted many decades ago.

Further investigation revealed coffee growing throughout many regions of Fiji's second largest island Vanua Levu.

The company has grown steadily and was on track with its purchase of wild-harvested green beans from village communities on Viti Levu to produce 60 tonnes in 2016 before TC Winston hit, and overnight the harvest was destroyed.

Several areas in Vanua Levu were still able to supply but too many complications with processing the cherries and avoiding contamination in transport, meant that Bula Coffee was unable to purchase.

The project has stepped in to assist Bula Coffee with the purchase of a mobile processing unit, which allows for the pulping and drying of coffee beans at the village.

Bula Coffee has also been helped to set up two nurseries to grow the best locally suited species of coffee to encourage more farmers to take up coffee as an alternative long term crop in addition to their seasonal crops.

"By going from wild-harvest to wider cultivation, these timely interventions will help grow the Fijian coffee industry and bring much needed income to many grassroots farmers," said Fryett, who is aiming to reach an ambitious target of 300 tonnes by 2020.

Bula Coffee

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Locally grown cocoa



Local chocolates created by Adi Chocolate

CHOCOLATE

Japanese Tomohito Zukoshi started the gourmet Fijian chocolate brand in 2007 after stumbling upon old, vine-covered cocoa plantations on Fiji's second largest island Vanua Levu.

Today, Adi Chocolate plays an instrumental role in the development of Fiji's cocoa industry, working directly with 20 grassroots farming communities to improve the volume and quality of locally grown cocoa.

The brand was on track to produce 15 tonnes of raw cocoa in 2016 for its line of dark chocolate products when TC Winston wiped out almost the entire year's supply by causing widespread damage to cocoa plantations in Fiji.

To help this fledgling industry get back on its feet, the project has engaged Adi Chocolate to help Fijian cocoa farmers clear their farms as well as create and maintain a newfound network of cocoa farmers.

The project is assisting farmer groups with the establishment of three fermenters and drying centres with the aim of improving the quality of cocoa production, and provision of quality control testing meters, an essential element to demonstrate the best time to harvest and how to control the fermenting and drying process. Training in best harvesting practices and the quality control of the fermenter and drying process has been an essential element of support.

The project is also assisting Fijian cocoa farmers with organic and ethical certification, which will enable them to provide higher quality beans, improve the buyer/farmer relationship, and increase the interest in cocoa farming as an additional source of income for farmers who grow other crops.

Adi Chocolate

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Farmer from Nadroumai (Nadroga Province) picking coffee berries