

Food traveller 

by Lindy Alexander

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The chef advancing Fijian fare

One Fijian chef is encouraging young islanders to get into the kitchen and cook with the small nation's fresh produce.

Walking through the bustling Sigatoka market with Fijian chef Shailesh Naidu is not a quick affair. After spotting him, locals weave around the tables piled high with pyramids of tomatoes, bundles of purple beans and glossy eggplants in order to clasp his hand and chat. "I love coming here, but it's so slow," Naidu says. "Everyone wants to speak to me!"

Naidu is the executive chef of the nearby Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort, a past and now honorary president of the Fijian Chefs Association and the founder of a popular community project encouraging high school students to develop healthy eating habits by learning to cook. All this makes Naidu something of a local celebrity in the small town 60 kilometres from the busy city of Nadi.

Today Naidu is leading a small group of us through the market in order to buy ingredients for a cooking class at the resort. "Have a look around and see what you think looks good," he instructs us.

I wander past long tables stacked with tight heads of cabbage, tendrils of snake beans, woolly bulbs of taro with long purple stems, and mounds of shiny green chillies no longer than a pin. A stallholder in an emerald-green T-shirt rinses cucumbers in a purple plastic tub. "Bula," she calls with a wide smile. Next to her, a group of older women are sitting on wooden stools and chatting as they arrange chunky thumbs of ginger into brightly coloured bowls.

I stop by a table covered with jackfruit. The hefty fruit looks like a spiky green rugby ball and can weigh up to 25 kilograms. It has been used as a meat alternative for hundreds of years in Asia, but in the West we are just starting to realise its potential.

The unripe fruit has a slightly tangy flavour and when it's cooked it looks similar to pulled pork or shredded chicken. Naidu comes over and tells me jackfruit makes a great vegetarian curry but it is time-consuming to prepare because it's so sticky. He points to a bowl of pre-shredded fruit. "Shall we get it?" he asks. I nod. He pays the stallholder a couple of dollars and she tips the pale, sliced jackfruit into a bag.

Others in our group have found a stall selling mussels harvested in the clear waters of the Sigatoka River and another offering a local

delicacy of edible ferns. "You use them like spinach," Naidu explains. He adds some tiny chillies, fragrant spices and curry leaves to his bag, and we have the makings of a feast.

Back in the resort kitchen, Naidu and his executive sous chef, Priya Darshani, show us how to prepare a gourmet Indo-Fijian spread: chicken curry, "poor man's rice", jackfruit curry, mussels in coconut milk, cassava chips and a lentil dhal. The heady scent of the fresh spices has other chefs in the industrial kitchen looking over at our bubbling pots enviously. Naidu instructs us to chop, stir and taste while he moves briskly about the kitchen, adding spices, grabbing extra supplies from the fridge and talking us through each of the recipes step by step.

Naidu has a full plate by anyone's standards. He manages 110 staff at the resort, which includes apprentices, chefs and kitchen assistants. He also

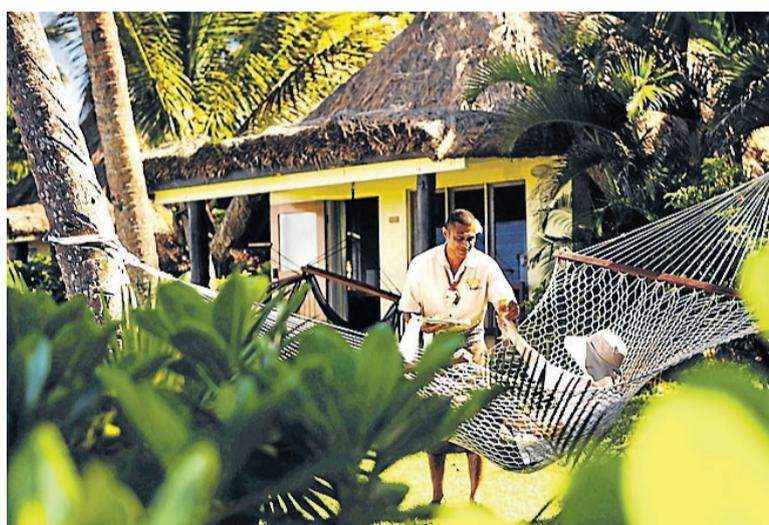
oversees kitchen operations and menu development for breakfast, lunch and dinner across the resort's seven restaurants and bars, in addition to the separate menus for room service, children and staff. So it is somewhat

astonishing that six years ago, when the then general manager of Outrigger, Peter Hopgood, asked each department to come up with a community initiative, Naidu jumped at the chance. "I wanted to do something that reflected my profession and was at the heart of being a chef," he says.

Naidu could see that the younger generation of Fijians had a growing appetite for junk food and he wanted them to develop better eating habits through cooking.

"I went to a neighbouring secondary school and asked if they were interested in me coaching their students and doing a cook-off," Naidu recalls. "I knew these kids watched television and were familiar with *MasterChef*, so I thought this idea would appeal. I thought it would be a once-off, but we had an overwhelming response."

Word got around and the next year teachers from neighbouring schools approached Naidu wanting to be involved. Six schools competed in 2013, and by the third year nearly every school in the province was involved in the Schools Chefs Challenge. But the initiative was growing faster than the cramped kitchens in the



Healthy choices: (Clockwise from top) Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort executive chef Shailesh Naidu; relaxing outside a bure (private cabin) at Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort; eggplants and citrus at Sigatoka market.

secondary schools could manage. Naidu knew he had to find a new venue.

"It took me weeks to prepare and think about how I was going to tell Peter that I wanted to bring 140 or so students into the resort to cook at peak time," Naidu says. "I knew I would be responsible if anything went wrong. If a kid set the stove on fire, if they burnt themselves or spilled oil, it would all be on me."

With Hopgood's blessing, 2015 was the first year that Naidu turned Outrigger's ballroom into a temporary kitchen with brand new stainless steel benches, stoves, ovens and utensils. The room was divided in half, with spectators on

one side and on the other, secondary school students eager to show off their culinary skills.

Naidu becomes emotional when asked about his favourite part of the event, which has become a popular part of the Fijian school calendar. "It's an intense day, but the best moment is when I announce the winners," he says. "When the students hear their name called they are so full of joy and often there are tears." Naidu pauses and wipes his own eyes.

"They make me cry. So many times this year I felt like I couldn't carry on [at the presentation ceremony] because the students made me so emotional. I'm not doing this with the intention to

Sauteed mustard rice with onions and curry leaves ('poor man's rice')

"This is a common recipe in Fiji as a way for people to use leftover rice," says Shailesh Naidu.

INGREDIENTS

4 cups long grain rice, boiled and cooled

30g-40g clarified butter

½ tsp black mustard seeds

2 onions, sliced

10-12 curry leaves

salt to taste

METHOD

Step 1

Heat the clarified butter in a pan over medium heat. Add in the mustard seeds and once they start popping, add the onions and curry leaves.

Step 2

Turn down the heat and let the onion gradually caramelize. Add the rice and saute thoroughly. Check seasoning and serve hot.

Serves 5-6

brainwash the kids to become chefs, but for them to appreciate good, fresh and healthy food. Everyone loves food, and once you start teaching people how to cook, they automatically appreciate good food."

And when Naidu is your teacher, the food really is good. Our cooking class complete, we carry the dishes we have made through to Ivi, the resort's fine-dining restaurant. The dark timber doors and louvres are open, the smell of warm spices from the curries rising on the breeze. The poor man's rice, studded with mustard seeds and scattered with crispy fried onion, is the perfect accompaniment to the rich, spicy chicken curry and the tangy, fragrant jackfruit curry.

I'm not planning anything other than staying put for the next hour or so, but Naidu's mind has already turned to his next task. His mission is to raise funds to send two of the winning students from the Schools Chefs Challenge to the Paul Krantzcke International Schools Culinary Challenge on the Gold Coast in late September.

"We are selling raffle tickets and I'm going to hold special dinners at Outrigger and do what it takes for these students to attend," he says. "They've never travelled overseas before so it's a big thing for them. But I've told them that Australians love Fijians so they are hoping for big cheers from the home crowd."

Lindy Alexander travelled to Fiji as a guest of Outrigger Resorts.