

FOOD EDITION

NOV | DEC 2017

FIJITIME

WELCOME TO OUR HOME



Traditional Tastes

Flavours from the Islands and Afar



GAIATREE SANCTUARY
Taveuni's Edible
Garden of Eden

KAI PASIFIKA
The Pacific Palate
Pleaser

KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND
Indulge in Luxury Private
Island Pampering



Taveuni's Edible

GARDEN OF EDEN

By RAJAN SAMI

Photos by JEAN-BAPTISTE BIEUVILLE

Fiji's third largest island Taveuni is known as the "Garden Island of Fiji". Lush and bountiful – it is home to coconut, taro and kava plantations.

Taveuni has also long been a bonafide eco-tourism mecca. For years, independent travellers have journeyed here to hike through virgin rainforest and swim at majestic waterfalls, sight colourful native birds in the island's luxuriant, unspoiled interior and dive world-famous spots teeming with brilliant coral and marine life. The island is also home to the Tagimoucia, a rare crimson and white bloom that features in traditional folklore and on the Fijian fifty-dollar note.

Now there's another reason to go. The recently opened GaiaTree Sanctuary on Taveuni's north-western coast offers visitors a memorable (and distinctly Fijian) farm to table experience like nowhere else in the South Pacific.

The Spice of Life Tour is the brainchild of Canadians Mathew and Natasha Bird, who have spent the past 10 years creating an organic food sanctuary on eight sprawling acres high up on a secluded hilltop.

As many tree change stories go, the couple arrived in Fiji on holiday in the late aughts, fell in love with the country and found themselves a patch of earth that they've fashioned into a veritable Garden of Eden. "Stepping foot on Taveuni for the first time, it felt like home," says Matt, who is from Vancouver Island.

Pulling up to the entrance of GaiaTree in July after making our way uphill on a bumpy dirt road (all part of the adventure), we're immediately struck by a series of stark white domes that



Smoked coconut frittata & fresh garden greens



Edible flower display



Holistic happy hour



Gaiatree day club domes

sit atop this verdant hilltop, quite literally in the middle of nowhere.

Each beautiful dome has a separate function. There's one for guest meals, another serves as the kitchen, the couple lives in one and there's a guest dome for visiting family and friends. "They're a dream to live in, safe in any weather," shares Natasha, on a break from the kitchen where she and her team of local Indo- Fijian women are preparing lunch, "they're based on sacred geometry" We head into the main semi-open day club where vegetarian snacks and farm-to-table meals are served. A drink station has been set up on one side with three fresh concoctions on offer: chai; elderflower and kumquat infusion; and pandan and cucumber water. On the table sit bowls of super-thin plantain chips dry-fried in virgin coconut oil, which we use to volley fresh coconut and mint tapenade as well as a zesty plantain salsa to our mouths. Every morsel is bursting with natural flavour and it's only a taste of what's to come.

Natasha disappears back into the kitchen dome and Matt leads us on a walking tour of the gardens, stopping to explain the names of plants and their traditional uses.

In addition to native island plants such as the root crop taro, the garden boasts many other plants that were introduced during Fiji's British colonial period. This was also a time when Indian indentured laborers came to work on the country's sugarcane fields and brought with them their traditional foods such as saijan or moringa (a health super food that's all the rage at the moment) for nutrition and comfort. Later waves of Chinese migration led to a bunch of Asian edibles being widely grown.

For a visiting American family of four (mum, dad and two college students), it's their first experience of seeing many of the highly-priced and prized tropical fruit they're familiar with only on supermarket shelves growing on actual trees. Matt points out delicacies including papaya, rare varieties of bananas, giant passionfruit and purple sugarcane along with other lesser known varieties of tropical fruit and vegetables, many of which find their way onto our plates at lunch.

Some 100 egg-laying chickens forage freely through these gardens, at night they'll roost in a white dome of their own.

Having broken a sweat in the hot sun, we take refuge under the shade of a large raintree where we're offered holistic cocktails alongside delicious fresh pesto and papaya topped sourdough crostini. I try a refreshing ice cold virgin mojito with freshly crushed sugar cane juice served in a coconut shell.



Iced rosella tea and house-made ginger ale



Purple sugarcane mojitos

The lunch menu is a feast for the senses featuring rustic gourmet dishes based on daily harvest and seasonal fare. There's smoked coconut and ceylon spinach frittata made with free-range eggs; spiced bara fritters (a South Indian deep-fried lentil snack that Gaiatree has reinterpreted and filled with moringa); rosemary and sun-dried tomato foccacia; grilled cassava (manioc) gnocchi spiced with moli masima (lemon preserve); and an unbelievable salad with edible flowers, herbs and over 15 different local greens served with a killer lemon dressing.

This is zero mile food at its best; and when it's freshly harvested and served there's nothing else quite like it. Of everything on offer, my favorite is easily the mixed greens, which features micro bok choy and young rosella leaves (which my South Indian family cooks into a spicy chutney) but that I've never eaten raw nor knew that I could.

Natasha is an alchemist who has a way with pairing exotic and unusual ingredients to create magic on the plate. It's all the more impressive when we learn she's had no formal culinary training. Likewise, Matt has had no formal gardening experience. "We Google a lot and watch YouTube videos," say the couple, who arrived at what they do at Gaiatree the old-fashioned way: through trial and error.

The farm tour continues after lunch as we walk downhill, discovering more unusual fruit and vegetables, many of which are not commercially grown and are therefore not widely available at farmers markets in Fiji.

Natasha and Matt built up Gaiatree's collection by reaching out to neighbors and friends, and hope to get a community seed bank going on Taveuni to make the island communities more resilient to natural disasters such as Cyclone Winston in early 2016, which had a devastating effect on theirs' and others' food gardens as well as large scale commercial agriculture on the island.



Nectar refreshments after tour



Fresh organic greens



Gaiatree superfood coco's



A cottage at Maravu

At the edge of the gardens, we stop at a small, idyllic waterfall surrounded by flourishing vegetation. It resembles something out of a tropical island fantasy, prompting some of the guests to pose for photographs.

Back on the hilltop, once we are rehydrated and relaxed, the grand finale Gaiatree's Superfood Coco dessert bowl is served. It holds a tangy homemade acai sorbet paired with a second honey paypaya sorbet, and topped with vanilla, cocoa nibs, crystallized ginger, cape gooseberries, gotu kola and rose petals. A mouth-watering medley of unusual textures and flavours that magically come together, it's the perfect finish to a perfect day spent exploring Gaiatree's edible landscape.

The Spice of Life tour runs Thursday to Saturday and costs F\$125 per person. Advance online reservations are required at gaiatreesanctuary.com

How to Get There

Fiji Airways subsidiary Fiji Link flies to Taveuni from Nadi and Suva daily.

Where to Stay

The FijiTime team stayed at Maravu, a one-time five-star resort turned back- and flashpacker property. Maravu has a plantation style vibe with a variety of accommodation options including rustic hilltop cottages finished with Fijian art and artefacts, friendly staff, simple eats and a short walk to a beach.