



Pacificpalate

A rich tropical landscape and abundant ocean are the hallmarks of Fiji's fast-developing cuisine. Add to that Indian spice, innovative local chefs and strong traditions, and you've an addictive mix, says Michael Harden

PHOTOGRAPHY BY EWEN BELL



Above: horse-riding on Laucala Island.
Top, left to right: roaming the resort; iguana; Laucala; fish at Likuliku Lagoon resort; Mana Island; First Landing Resort spread; Likuliku





Lance Seeto is excited. The executive chef of Mana Island Resort & Spa and star of hit Fijian TV cooking show *Taste of Paradise* is standing on the site of his almost-completed latest project, a restaurant perched on one of the island's northern headlands. The view is exactly how you would picture a tropical idyll to be – all white sand and calm ocean marbled with deep

greens to startling blues, dotted with some of the other jewel-like islands in Fiji's spectacular Mamanuca chain. The Australian-Chinese chef says it's the best place on Mana to catch the sunset. But it's not the view that's exciting him the most. It's the food.

'Fiji is an exciting place to be a chef at the moment,' he says. 'We're in the midst of creating a regional cuisine from all these different techniques that Fijians have used for thousands of years – fire cooking, smoking, curing, seawater cooking – and all the indigenous ingredients like wild greens and coconut. Then there are the Indian, Chinese and European influences that are part of the story too. It's like a blank canvas in many ways. We have the freedom to do whatever we want.'

If the food that Seeto serves at the startlingly named WAR – an acronym for 'wild and raw' but also a reference to Fiji's turbulent and even cannibalistic history – is indicative of this new cuisine, then he has every reason to be excited.

WAR uses no gas or electricity. All cooking is done over fire, in a fire-heated saltwater pit for blanching, or on a salt block for curing. A maximum of 30 guests sit in a series of small, sheltered, palm leaf-thatched cabanas with their feet in the sand, facing the sunset and eating meticulously plated food by flickering torchlight.

On the menu might be an exquisite lobster ice cream made with coconut milk, topped with pieces of quickly grilled lobster meat, pickled lime and chilli flowers. Or there might be a brilliant take on the traditional Fijian dish *kokoda* (raw fish 'cooked' in lime juice), where he makes the coconut cream into a delicate panna cotta and places slivers of lemon juice-cured Spanish mackerel on top along with finely sliced ginger, diced tomato and *nama* (a native sea vegetable, like a tiny, salty grape).

Eating this food it's hard to believe that not so long ago, Fijian cuisine was the punchline to a joke. Fish, coconut, *taro*, repeat. But with tourism recently edging out sugar as the country's leading industry, there has been an awakening to the untapped culinary potential. Travellers are arriving who are as interested in eating 'local' as they are in the amazing snorkelling around the nation's over-300 islands and their accompanying coral reefs.

At Denarau Island off the west coast of the main island, Viti Levu, Tomo Zukoshi is making superb artisan chocolate with Fijian cacao and sugar using antique German chocolate-making equipment. The Japanese immigrant stumbled into his line of

Travel information

Fiji is a South Pacific nation comprised of about 333 islands, just three hours from New Zealand. The daily average temperature in January is a blues-busting 26C and it's a similar picture all-year round. Currency is the Fijian dollar. Time difference is +12 hours ahead of the UK.

GETTING THERE

Fiji Airways flies eight times a week from Los Angeles, code-sharing with Air New Zealand and four times a week from Hong Kong, code-sharing with Cathay Pacific. Fiji Airways also flies daily from Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne, as well as Auckland, and seasonally from Christchurch and Wellington. Suva is the capital but most international flights arrive in Nadi. From April, the airline will fly twice a week from Singapore. Fiji Airways also flies to other Pacific islands, including Hawaii.

Korean Air flies three times a week via Seoul. koreanair.com

Jetstar and **Virgin Australia** also operate regularly from Australia.

RESOURCES

Turquoise Holidays Book your trip to Fiji by calling the travel experts on 01494 678 400, or visiting the website at turquoiseholidays.co.uk

Tourism Fiji is the official tourist board, with useful tips and advice to help you plan your trip to these paradise islands. fiji.travel

FURTHER READING

Getting Stoned with Savages: A Trip Through the Islands of Fiji and Vanuatu by J Maarten Troost (Broadway Books, £12.99).

After ditching his job in the US, the author gets to grips with island life.

CARBON COUNTING

Want to offset your carbon emissions? Visit climatecare.org and support environmental projects all around the world. Return flights from London produce 5.3 tonnes CO₂, meaning a cost to offset of £39.75.



Above, left to right: light breakfast at Laucala Island; its beach bar, fresh plates and cocktails; lunch of lobster at First Landing; Mana Island dish; setting the table at First Landing; Mana Island raw fish

Main: Laucala Island beach bar. Below, left to right: its *kokoda*; First Landing



KOKODA
RECIPES START ON PAGE 116





Left to right: rooms at Laucala Island are luxuriously appointed; the kitchen team picks vegetables and herbs from the garden at Likuliku; Laucala birdlife. Below: the poolside panorama at tranquil Laucala

Where to stay

First Landing Relaxed, old-school resort with a mix of accommodation including small beachfront *bures* and multi-bedroom apartments with kitchens and semi-private pools. Family friendliness includes a kids' menu. B&B doubles from £60. *Vuda Point Road, Vuda Point, Lautoka, 00 679 666 6171, firstlandingresort.com*

Laucala Island One of the most beautiful resorts in the world, Laucala is set on a private island and features superb, spacious accommodation. Expect private pools, outdoor and indoor bathrooms, and five excellent food and drink options. Keep busy with golf, horseriding, a marina with 14 boats and a beautiful spa set in lush jungle. Full-board doubles from £3,648. *00 679 888 0077, laucala.com*

Likuliku Lagoon Small and elegant adults-only resort set around a protected, fish-filled lagoon with Fiji's only overwater *bures*. There's an excellent spa with a wide range of treatments and you should take advantage of the brilliant snorkelling opportunities. Full-board doubles from £488. *Malolo Island, 00 679 666 3344, likulikulagoon.com*

Mana Island Resort & Spa Large resort a short water taxi, seaplane or helicopter ride away. It offers an extensive range of accommodation options in its luxury *bures* and five different eating and drinking spots. Wake up to some of the best coffee in Fiji. B&B doubles from £136. *00 679 665 0423, manafiji.com*

Sofitel Fiji Resort & Spa This large beachfront address on Denarau Island is like two resorts in one, thanks to the newly completed Waitui Beach Club, which offers an adults-only experience complete with its own pool, bar and health-focused restaurant. B&B doubles from £185. *Beachfront, Denarau Island, Nadi, 00 679 675 1111, sofitel.com*

'The rooms include Fiji's only over-water *bures*, complete with ladders that lead from the deck down into the colourful, fish-filled water that laps beneath'

business after discovering cacao growing wild. The pods were the remnants of an attempt to start a cacao industry, which failed several decades before Zukoshi arrived in Fiji. The former owner of a successful rubber business back home did some research and taught himself how to make chocolate.

'People said to me: "Why is a Japanese immigrant in Fiji making chocolate? What the hell are you thinking",' he laughs. 'And my answer was, "I don't know".' It was a good decision. The chocolate made by Fijiana Cacao is now being exported to Australia, Belgium, Japan and Switzerland. The range includes beautifully textured, subtly bitter dark chocolate, a white chocolate flavoured with locally roasted coffee beans, and milk chocolates in the shape of sea shells that grace the pillows of some of Fiji's best hotels. Cacao has now been added to the ever-increasing repertoire of Fijian farmers.

Shane Watson is the executive chef at Likuliku Lagoon resort on Malolo Island, situated about 25 minutes' speedboat ride from Nadi's airport. Likuliku is a relaxed, elegantly proportioned adults-only resort of just 45 bedrooms, which are dotted around a sheltered, environmentally protected lagoon.

The rooms include Fiji's only over-water *bures*, complete with thatched roofs and ladders that lead from the outside deck down into the colourful, fish-filled water that laps beneath. Beachfront *bures* are nestled into lush, flowering gardens and have outdoor showers in their own courtyards. Some have private plunge pools too. There's only one restaurant at the





Clockwise from top left: Laucala resort's shaded pathways, lush terrace, guest boat, family villa and traditional musicians striking up a tune





'With the arrival of the Indians, the local diet of seafood, coconut, taro and bele was augmented with tomatoes and spices'



Clockwise from top: Laucala overwater villa and interiors; local flora; chef Lance Seeto's cooking; Laucala style. Opposite, clockwise from top: sunset sailing; overwater villas and their decor



Where to eat

Prices are for three courses, excluding wine, unless otherwise stated.

Daikoku A Nadi institution that takes advantage of the brilliant quality of Fijian seafood, both with its sushi and sashimi menu and with its tempura and teppanyaki lists. *Cnr Northern Press and Queens Road, Nadi. 00 679 670 3622, daikokufiji.com/fiji*

First Landing Executive chef Darren Braddock (aka chef Daz) is one of Fiji's movers and shakers when it comes to training Fijian cooks and promoting the use of local ingredients and cooking techniques. His restaurant at First Landing resort is a laid-back beachfront place that does solid versions of Fijian classics like the lime and coconut fish dish *kokoda* and local mussels stuffed with Fijian spinach. £20. *Vuda Point Road, Vuda Point, Lautoka. 00 679 666 6171, firstlandingresort.com*

Taste Fiji Proving that food innovation is not just for the resorts, this light-filled café serves breakfast and lunch using local ingredients and Fiji-made products. Locally produced bacon and ham is available in sandwiches and breakfasts while dishes like coconut fish cakes with wasabi mayo and root crop crisps keep it simple and delicious. From £5 a plate. *Lot 1, Cawa Road, Nadi, 00 679 672 5034, tastefiji.com*

V Restaurant The Sofitel's signature restaurant is a refined space with formal service and a menu from Australian chef Stuart Blair that cleverly incorporates local ingredients with classic panache. Think a mahi mahi and prawn brandade with coconut jelly and pickled cucumber or an ota fern salad dressed with wasabi oil. £42. *Sofitel Fiji Resort & Spa, Beachfront, Denarau Island, Nadi, 00 679 675 1111, sofitel.com*

WAR Chef Lance Seeto's headland restaurant on Mana Island pays sophisticated homage to Fijian ingredients and cooking techniques with an eight-course degustation menu that includes lobster ice cream and tea-smoked chicken. £60. *00 679 665 0423, manafiji.com*

resort so Watson changes the menu daily to give the guests variety.

Breakfast might include a local mud crab omelette with chilli and papaya relish; or kasava hash browns topped with local prawns and hollandaise. Lunch could see local chicken made into a schnitzel with a bush lemon-flavoured crumb; at dinner, pork belly can be roasted in master stock and served with papaya, coconut and sweet potato. Watson was the chef when Likuliku opened but returned to Australia about six years ago. Now he's back – and in the time he's been away the change in the availability and variety of produce, he says, has been remarkable.

'It also helps that we now have our own vegetable gardens. The soil here is really rich and volcanic and very fertile, so we can grow our herbs and vegetables and things like *bele* and taro leaf (spinach-like leafy greens) organically. We have beehives now too so we produce our own honey that we serve along with pancakes and Fijian vanilla at breakfast. But the breadth of what we are getting from farmers on the mainland has made keeping the menu fresh and varied much easier.'

One of the best places to see this breadth of produce is at the Nadi market, near the city centre. There's nothing flash about the saw-tooth, tin-roofed sheds with their concrete floors and dim lighting but the prosaic setting means all attention gets turned to the carefully arranged fruit, vegetables and seafood. Factor in the relaxed, laughing friendliness of the Fijian stallholders and it's a shopping experience that's hard to beat.

There's an abundance of tomatoes, all arranged in sculptural piles, skinny pale-purple aubergines, heaped taro, cassava and sweet potato, a huge variety of native spinach, capsicums, gourd-like cucumbers, tiny sugar bananas and large plantains; green papayas, startlingly orange mangoes, baskets of



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GOURMET TRAVELLER

FIJI



Clockwise from top left: resorts are built into the rich landscape; grilled fish by chef Shane Watson; fresh cocktail; the resort's pools; Shane. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Likuliku infinity pool; tropical life; food and drink around the resort

tiny chillies, watermelons, pineapples, passion fruit, jackfruit and meticulously aligned rows of mussels. There's a line of stalls tended by Indian Fijians selling an impressive selection of colourful spices – bright red chilli powder and deep yellow turmeric sitting in open sacks. In another section are Chinese sellers who have stalls laden with spring onions and bok choy.

Indians, Chinese and Europeans have long had an influence on the food culture of Fiji. The original islanders – made up of Melanesian and Polynesian ethnicities – lived on an almost completely spice-free diet, with the seawater used for cooking fish and vegetables one of the only seasonings.

When the British arrived in 1874 and declared Fiji a colony, they brought with them Indian contract labourers to work on the sugar plantations. The Fijians themselves refused to work in the estates, choosing instead to lease their land to the sugar farmers.

With the arrival of the Indians, the local diet of seafood, coconut,

taro and bele was augmented with tomatoes and Indian spices like curry leaves, chilli, cumin and garlic. Simple curries made from these ingredients, together with – most commonly – fish or chicken and coconut cream, are now Fijian staples.

But the Fijians also hold firmly to their traditions. One of these is *kava* drinking, a traditional way of welcoming guests that's widespread across Fiji with many of the country's resorts holding kava-imbibing ceremonies. Kava is made from the dried and powdered roots of the *yagona*, a relative of the pepper plant that is mildly narcotic in large amounts. The powder is mixed with water and the gritty, earthy liquid is usually drunk from half a coconut shell that is passed from person to person during the ritual. It's an acquired taste, to say the least.

A large section of the Nadi market is dedicated to kava in both root and powder form. There are also taps spaced throughout this part of the market so that kava can be mixed and







Opposite, clockwise from top left: fishing success; endless blue skies; the fresh catch; snorkelling trip; setting off from Mana Island; the local turquoise waters



Top to bottom: flame tree; Nadi market chillies; banana seller; market stallholder; chillies for the pot



drunk on site, though the ritual and friendly hospitality of a traditional kava ceremony is possibly a more polished experience.

Another Fijian tradition is the *lovo*, a style of in-ground cooking that essentially works as a steam cooker. Rocks are heated with fire then, once all the charcoal is removed, food is wrapped in leaves, placed in baskets woven from elephant plant leaves and arranged over the hot stones. The baskets are then covered with more leaves that seal in the heat so the food steams in its own juices. Many resorts include a *lovo* in their repertoire and one of the best of these – in terms of both *lovo* and resort – is on Laucala Island, owned by Red Bull billionaire Dietrich Mateschitz. It is reached via a 50-minute flight on a private jet from Nadi. Up to 80 guests can stay at the over-1,400ha property, though outside peak times like Christmas there's usually only about 15-20 so it feels incredibly spacious. Stylish villas with their own large pools are matched by an 18-hole golf course, five restaurants and bars staffed by friendly, relaxed, super-professional Fijians, and a marina full of boats at guests' disposal.

Manicured lawns, clifftop drinking holes, old palm plantations, lagoon-sized swimming pools, freshly raked beaches – this resort has the lot. It's one of those places in the world that can have you getting teary-eyed at the mere thought of rejoining the real world.

Australian chef Anthony Healy is in charge of the food on the island, which has its own farm and is about 85 per cent self-sufficient. There's Wagyu and Limousin cattle, pigs (they make their own ham and bacon), goats, chickens and quail. There are huge hydroponic greenhouses growing a staggering range of vegetables and herbs, beehives, vanilla trees and scores of papaya, breadfruit and soursop trees. Healy also buys fish, crab, octopus and lobster directly from fishermen who work the waters in the region, ensuring the seafood is line-caught and never long out of the water.

Healy admits that he 'cheats a bit' with his *lovo*, sometimes using high-grade Wagyu cheek which cooks beautifully in the steam. Pork, chicken, whole fish, breadfruit and taro also go under the leaves alongside a pumpkin, hollowed out and filled with vegetables from the garden, chilli and coconut milk.

'One of my favourite things we cook is really quite traditional,' says Healy. 'It's called *palusami*. Sometimes it will have meat in it but we make it just with taro leaf, coconut cream, tomato and chilli wrapped in an *uto* (breadfruit) leaf. After it cooks, it comes out as a slightly spicy spinach custard.'

While there is no barrier to Healy importing whatever ingredients he wants onto Laucala, he feels that the essence of the place is 'to use what's around me – it just makes sense'.

It's an attitude that's becoming increasingly common across Fiji. To tap into the culture, the cuisine, the history, the lifestyle and the flavours that spring from that rich, red volcanic soil really does seem to make a whole lot of sense. □

Michael and Ewen travelled courtesy of Tourism Fiji fiji.travel and Turquoise Holidays. Book online at turquoiseholidays.co.uk



'While there is no barrier to chef Anthony Healy importing whatever ingredients he wants



onto Laucala Island, he feels that the essence of the place is to use what's around him'





Clockwise from above: a smouldering sunset; locally made chocolates; the beans



Don't miss

Flavours of Fiji Cooking School

This hands-on class is a great way to learn about traditional Fijian and Indian Fijian ingredients and dishes. It has excellent, humorous teachers and well-equipped cooking stations, plus you get to sit down and eat your lesson at the end. £45pp.
5 Denarau Industrial Park, Denarau Island, 00 679 6750 840, flavoursoffiji.com

