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All Connoisseur Multi Drawer refrigerators feature a **humidity drawer**, designed to maximise the freshness of produce. This is ideal for fruit and vegetable storage, with a higher humidity than the main refrigerator compartment. Entertainers will also love the **non-plumbed ice maker**; the convenience of automatic ice without the cost or hassle of plumbing and replacement filters. The Mitsubishi Electric Connoisseur range is available at all leading appliance stores, to find your nearest stockist please visit www.mitsubishi-electric.co.nz today.



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food power

The self-appointed crusader of Pacific Island food is back, this time with Samoa in his sights...

Photography by Shiri Ram
Story by Victoria Wells



Clockwise from top: Fresh fish is only a net away in Samoa; organic farmer Repeka Meafou is part of a burgeoning organics sector in the island nation; Prime Minister Tuilaepa Lupeolai Sialele Malielegaoi appears in *Mea'ai Samoa* with his green mango salad (see recipe next page); chef and author Robert Oliver hopes his new book will become an economic tool for Samoa.



When Robert Oliver's book *Me'a Kai* won the title of 'Best Cookbook in the World 2010' at the Gourmand Awards in Paris, it was a bit of an upset to say the least: a book from a relatively unknown New Zealand-born chef about a relatively unknown part of the food world had just beaten chef René Redzepi's book *Noma* (based on his Copenhagen restaurant, which was ranked number one in the world at the time) and *The New York Times Essential Cookbook*.

Me'a Kai featured the food of six Pacific Island nations and was designed to showcase Pacific cuisine, which Robert felt had been lost in the growth of tourism and subsequent Westernisation of resort menus. His aim with *Me'a Kai* was to create a sense of pride in Pacific cuisine and help strengthen its presence within tourism, and as a result create stronger partnerships between the sector and local agriculture. It was something he'd had success with while a consultant chef to a major resort chain in the Caribbean, where he built relationships between the big hotels and local farmers.

Robert says *Me'a Kai*'s win in Paris was a watershed. "In one spectacular moment Pacific Island cuisine took its rightful place alongside the great cuisines of the world. What I didn't anticipate was that it felt like everybody's win and that's been amazing for me to experience. Whenever I go to the Pacific people feel like it's their book, which is perfect. It's awakened some sort of food and the heart relationship."

Three years on, Robert has teamed up once again with Dr Tracy Berno and photographer Shiri Ram and created *Mea'ai Samoa* – in the same style as its predecessor but this time dedicated to the food of Samoa. Born in New Zealand and raised in Fiji, Robert's family also spent many years in Samoa, and he still considers it a second home, making it an easy subject choice for the book.

"Once you see how beautiful real Samoan cuisine is, you'll wonder why it was ever moved out of tourism, or not placed front and centre. I would travel for that."

Mea'ai Samoa is primarily a cookbook, with recipes from the villages as well as chefs from the resorts and restaurants, and even Samoan Kiwis, such as chef Michael Meredith. But it also presents the wider goal of a Samoa with indigenous food at its heart – for both locals and tourists – and a robust agricultural sector as a result; a business plan of sorts. As Robert points out in his introduction: "...menus based on local cuisine require local agriculture." Tourism and agriculture are Samoa's two biggest industries, and Robert's belief is that if you can create the demand for local product, then everyone around that can benefit and there is a clear path to economic prosperity. It's a plan he would like to see applied throughout the Pacific.

The first step towards his goal has been creating a sense of pride in Pacific cuisine, and a belief it is worthy of being served to visitors; something the *Me'a Kai* win was instrumental in doing.

Robert has support from high places too: the Prime Minister of Samoa, Tuilaepa Lupeolai Sialele Malielegaoi, has written a foreword to the book (even contributing a recipe, see over) supporting its endeavours and calling for people to take a fresh look at the food of his country.



That's because Samoan food is often associated with fatty meats such as corned beef and lamb flaps. In what's been described as "food colonialism", the Pacific became a dumping ground for low quality meat products, leading to locals developing what Robert calls "a fat tooth" and accompanying dietary problems. He says it's crucial to revive the use of traditional island ingredients. "Original Pacific food was based on what are now considered 'superfoods' such as coconuts, fresh fish, greens, complex carbohydrates and fruit."

Mea'ai Samoa therefore highlights Samoa's diverse array of fresh produce, rather than those corned beef dishes.

It would seem the pieces are all in place for Robert's vision to come to fruition. The Prime Minister of Samoa is the head of a taskforce to promote organic practices in the Pacific, organisations such as Women in Business are further developing the industry and there is a growing desire within tourism to engage more with the culture, rather than relegating it to a weekly 'Polynesian Night'.

Robert has also been working with the tourist resorts over the past three years to encourage chefs to use more local ingredients in their cooking. He's added weight to his argument too with his appointment as an Ambassador to Le Cordon Bleu in Wellington

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"I don't want them [those meats] to be at the front anymore so I didn't put them in here," says Robert. "I made the decision not to, with my committee. It is part of Samoan cuisine, but they've come to typify it and that's just not true. The organics need to typify the cuisine, so we have put a bit of a way forward in this book."

Organics is a fast-growing sector and as the Prime Minister points out: "Most of our farmers are organic by default. It has been our tradition to work with nature, rather than command and oppress it."

When researching his first book Robert came across an organisation called Women in Business Development. He was astounded to learn it had helped foster 1000 organic family farms across Samoa, 700 of which are organically certified to international standards. "I was blown away to discover there was an organic movement," says Robert. "And run by a bunch of women who were like: 'We'll take care of things, don't you worry about that,'" he laughs.

As well as helping set up the farms, Women in Business has created local demand for the produce with a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) network, in which weekly baskets of whatever is fresh from the farmers are put together. "So you pick up your organic CSA basket, and it's a real woven basket, every Friday," says Robert, "and it has *koko Samoa* (cocoa) and *laupele* (wild hibiscus) green leaves and breadfruit and pawpaw and mangoes and coconut oil. These women aren't just creating food systems, they're creating a way to live."

As well as fresh fruit and vegetables Samoa's organic industry also produces local honey, coconut and avocado oils, vanilla, chilli sauce and even free-range chickens.

and the production of a television series, *Real Pasifik*, in which he visited chefs around the Pacific to show them creative ways of incorporating their own indigenous ingredients into their dishes.

He says attitudes are changing: in one Vanuatu resort the chefs take guests shopping at the local market followed by a cooking class, while a fale resort in the Samoan village of Lalomanu has developed all its menus from *Me'a Kai*. "There's a vibrant Pacific cuisine conversation that wasn't there before," says Robert.

Now living in Auckland after many years overseas, Robert has plans for opening a Pacific Island restaurant in the city. "The community is here and what an omission from our cultural landscape; we're the biggest Polynesian city in the world but we don't have that expression of food. I think it's a really important thing to do – for trade and for pride and health and perception."

A chef in one episode of *Real Pasifik* describes Robert as the "missing link" in Pacific Island food. "Maybe I am," he muses. "It's easy for me to come in and take things that are everyday there and put them together in ways they probably haven't thought of. That's a creativity the chefs really enjoy. I'm the outsider who loves the region because I've been so involved with it throughout my life but I provide that fresh look – that's my role." ●

For more information visit www.realpasifik.com
(See over for a recipe extract from *Mea'ai Samoa*).

Salati o Tuilaepa - Prime Minister's Salad

Samoa's long-serving prime minister, Tuilaepa Lufesolai Sialele Malielegaoi, not only advocates for a healthy Samoa in his political capacity, he also practises what he preaches. He has addressed his own diet-related health issues head on, and in public, as a contestant in the television show Challenge Samoa, a transformative fitness show.

This salad captures the prime minister's personal philosophy — it is based on high-value local crops pawpaw and o'o, and there is honey and lemon juice instead of oil in the dressing. Plus, it is a vegan 'raw food' recipe!

I love using o'o, the sprouting heart of the coconut — it is such a unique Pacific product and not used as much as it could be. Most Samoans recall it fondly as a childhood food.

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| 4 large green mango or 2 medium-sized firm pawpaw or 6 firm vi (or any combination) | 1 tablespoon minced fresh ginger |
| 1 cup shelled local peanuts | juice of 2–3 lemons or limes |
| 1 cup loose basil or mint leaves, or both, washed and torn roughly | 3 tablespoons Samoan honey |
| 1 cup loose a'atasi leaves, washed and shredded (optional, or alternatively, use watercress) | sea salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste |
| 3 pieces o'o (coconut heart), diced (alternatively, use diced fresh coconut meat) | 1 teaspoon crushed pawpaw seeds (optional, instead of pepper) |

Peel the mangoes, pawpaws or vi and julienne, or cut into 'matchsticks'. Place in a bowl and add the peanuts, basil or mint, the a'atasi, and diced o'o.

In a jar, place the ginger, lemon or lime juice and honey. Add the sea salt and freshly ground black pepper or pawpaw seeds, if using. Place the lid on the jar and shake well.

Pour the dressing onto the salad ingredients and mix well.

Let sit for 5 minutes, then serve. **Serves 4 as a main or 6 as a side salad**



Recipe and photography from Mea'ai Samoa reproduced with permission from Random House NZ. Photography by Shirir Ram. RRP\$49.99 On sale now.

For a review of Mea'ai Samoa see pg 24.



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