

Sonja's Kitchen

Sustainable Cuisine from the Cook Islands

Dee Pignéguy and Sonja Raela



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"One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well."

~Virginia Woolf



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A WORD FROM DEE...

Aitutaki, the quintessential tropical island, provided Mike and me with the opportunity to manage Tauono's Organic Garden Café while Sonja and Tauono were on holiday overseas.

With my expertise in organic gardening and cooking, and Mike's ability to repair and fix things, we were the perfect couple to manage a South Pacific garden café. So, for two months each year between 2001 and 2008 this island of special plants, that sustain an island way of life, was our home.

Like botanical explorers and collectors of the past, Sonja and Tauono gathered and grew a wealth of plants to supply fresh, nutrient-dense, traditional fruits and vegetables, not only for themselves but for island visitors. *Sonja's Kitchen* will introduce you to some of the memorable dishes with distinctive island flavours that put Aitutaki on the map as a food destination.

Why *Sonja's Kitchen*? Though it may be called Tauono's Organic Garden Café the culinary delights are prepared in Sonja's kitchen.

The time I spent on Aitutaki, experimenting with new recipes, gathering food from the plantations, tending the café garden and cooking with island food, was an absolute delight. Visitors loved the abundant tropical produce and the unique island-based cuisine which offered healthier alternatives to the highly refined and imported processed food. I knew that Aitutaki and Sonja's cuisine needed to be shared with people unable to sit in the garden and savour the food, the flavours, the colours and the warm tropical air.

So I teamed up with Sonja to bring these delicious island flavours to your kitchen. Now, let *Sonja's Kitchen* inspire you to create many delectable dishes that visitors have enjoyed at Tauono's Organic Garden Café on Aitutaki.

In the Botanical Aitutaki section I introduce some of the important plants that support and protect the island. In *Eating Aitutaki*, the recipes are organised according to the island's important food plants. And in both sections many of Mike's stunning photographs allow you to walk through the lush vegetation of the Cook Islands.

Enjoy!



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SUSTAINABLE CUISINE

A NATURAL PROGRESSION FOR THE ORGANIC GARDENER

Both Sonja and Tauono were aware that local food production was the key to sustainability and that more sustainable ways of growing must be implemented.

They also believed that organic gardening was the answer to self-reliance and survival on Aitutaki, where pesticides, herbicides and chemical fertilisers used in the production of export bananas had caused great environmental damage in the past. Even today, the effects of the ongoing use of chemicals are becoming increasingly evident in Aitutaki's fragile environment.

In an effort to support the infrastructure, and ensure agricultural sustainability, of a 19 square kilometre island, the Café's vegetable garden remains chemical free. Soil continues to be "grown" and is seasonally nourished from rapidly decaying compost heaps – the garden's black gold – chicken manure and fish teas. Garden beds and plants are protected with shade roofs made from dry palm leaves, while mulching with mahogany shavings, seaweed and grass clippings retains soil moisture and protects plants from heavy tropical downpours.

Sonja's cooking is fabulous! Her flavourful dishes are made with herbs and vegetables from her very own garden. Everything is organic and healthfully prepared. A restaurant not to be missed when you visit Aitutaki.

*Archana & Patrick Pelley,
San Diego, California*

While internationally people are searching for better ways of growing food and sustaining life on Earth, many island people continue to follow the traditional way of life – fishing and growing their own food.

Sonja's and Tauono's small garden could well be a model for diverse tropical and sub-tropical organic food production as well as sustainable local cuisine, with its daily harvests of a wide range of vegetables, herbs and luscious fruits.

When inspecting the Café gardens, visitors are inspired by the variety of plants and the resulting delectable meals. Many tourists say that they feel encouraged to start their own home garden. Sonja says the Café is known for its "talking



menu”. Only what’s ripe, of sufficient quality and quantity and freshly harvested from the plantation and garden makes its way to the table. Aware of food sensitivities, diet restrictions and special needs, each meal is discussed with the guest and their requirements incorporated in the meal. Fresh coconut cream, homemade breads, fragrant herbs and an array of tropical flavours grace every plate.

“Mouth-watering, imaginative and simply divine. Aitutaki’s freshest and tastiest food. So good you’ll have to come back for more.”

Tanya, Hamilton, New Zealand

Omelettes are made with pumpkin or squash blossoms and Malabar spinach. Lasagne is meatless and created with breadfruit, freshly prepared coconut cream and bountiful basil of many varieties. Spiced bananas and seasonal fruit salsas accompany fish and savoury dishes. Fruit and vegetable salsas, curries and salads become taste sensations when numerous varieties of chilies, lemongrass, turmeric, ginger, garlic onion, mints, and especially lemon basil, become main notes or accents to a dish.

“Sonja’s Power Salad” created with fresh garden veggies, herbs and pureed fruit dressings was named by tourists.

Flavours created by many varieties of lettuce are enhanced by the addition of spinach, mustard, rocket or silver beet; the varieties are adjusted for the seasons.

Garnishes of cherry tomatoes, carrots, asparagus tips, snake beans, peppers, assorted radishes, cucumber, okra, kohlrabi, dill, parsley (Italian, Japanese and Chinese), fennel, thyme, rosemary and chives, are lavished on each dish.

Assorted seasonal fruits complement cake platters – pineapple, papaya, guava, starfruit, many varieties of banana, custard apples (known as sour sops) are accompanied by the wonderful flavours of vanilla, lemons, limes, and passionfruit.

Sonja’s Kitchen is an education in creating a whole new food culture with delicious local foods. This book takes you on a virtual journey through Tauono’s Café garden and plantation. Each step of the way, you will learn about the organically grown plants that are the staples of island food, and alongside you will find a selection of Sonja’s recipes for the food that draws visitors to the Café from all over the world.

The sustainable cuisine to be found in Tauono’s Organic Garden Café proves yet again that soil is what gives us the real income, it supports us all.





Puka
Lantern Tree
Hernandia nymphaeifolia

The Puka is one of the most common coastal trees in Polynesia. It has large, shield-shaped glossy green leaves and the marbled like fruit is hard and black. Seeds are surrounded by a red or whitish, translucent balloon-like structure with a hole in the top. The seed casing looks just like a small lantern with a seed inside. Traditionally the inner seed was cleaned and strung for neck *eis*.

Guettarda
 'Ano
Guettarda speciosa

The 'Ano is a fast growing coastal plant that reduces the impact of storm waves and salt water spray. The large oval-shaped leaves are dark green and smooth with prominent paler veins.

The wood is very durable, and on atolls it is used for dwellings, canoes and furniture. The small white tubular flowers with a fragrance similar to gardenia, are used for scenting coconut oil.

Noni
 Nono
Morinda citrifolia

When searching for new island homes, ancient Polynesians took Nono in their voyaging canoes. Plants that ensured their survival were called 'canoe plants' and included candlenut, giant taro, breadfruit, paper mulberry, coconut, taro, turmeric, ginger, sweet potato, kava, sugar cane and banana, as well as Nono.

Native to Southeast Asia, Nono was valued for dyes, medicines and as a famine food; it is now distributed throughout the tropics. It grows in shady plantations and on the coast, where it is tolerant of saline soil and drought conditions.

Flowers and fruit are borne all year round. The compound, translucent fruit has a pungent odour when ripening and despite the foul smell and bitter taste it is a staple food in many Pacific Island cultures.

An infusion of the fruit is widely used as a tonic for high blood pressure, indigestion and arthritis and has become a commercial success.





Noni - Morinda citrifolia

Pandanus

'Ara-ta'ati

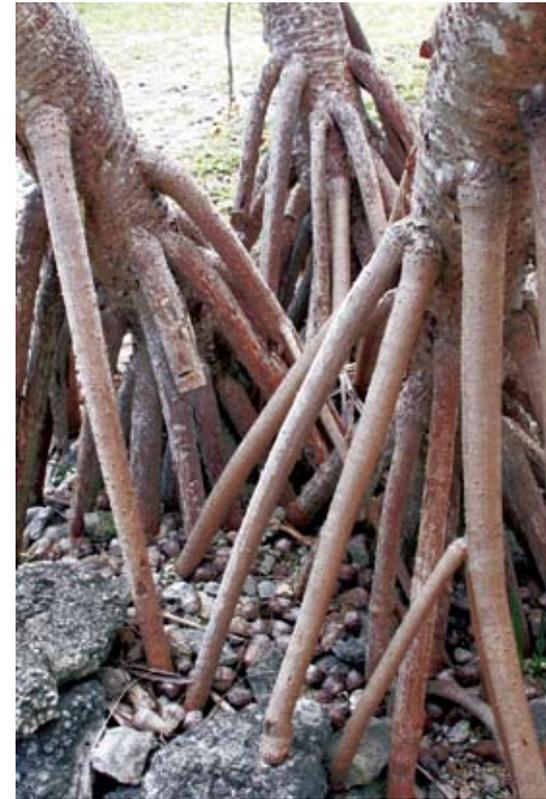
Pandanus tectorius

One of the Pacific Islands' most useful plants, the Pandanus is also called the Walking Tree because of its prop roots, the tips of which can be eaten.

This important coastal protection tree is native to the Pacific islands. It is capable of surviving the sand-blasting of gale force storms, while serving as a windbreak and providing protection from salt spray. It also controls coastal erosion. It provides leaf material for weaving into mats, thatch, baskets, hats, fans; edible fruits; and flowers for perfume and material for making *eis*.

Female plants produce a large segmented fruit resembling a pineapple. When ripe, the fragrant fruit ranges from yellow to reddish in colour. The numerous segments, called carpels or keys, are wedge shaped. Island women cut each segmented fruit into long curls that are woven into neck *eis*. These can be hung in closets and the fragrance lasts for many months.

The nuts can also be used for *eis*.



The pandanus has distinctive long blade like leaves with spines along the edges and on the midribs of the leaves.

The leaves are spirally arranged and leave a spiral pattern on the trunk when they fall.





A visit to Tauono's is not simply a trip to a restaurant to satisfy one's hunger - it's an experience of a special kind in paradise. Sonja's cooking skills, her love for detail, her knowledge of organic growing and untiring explanations of food creations, thrilled our senses. Yellow fin tuna in a fresh coconut cream basil sauce complemented by extraordinary side dishes like lemon pumpkin, green papaya salad, breadfruit lasagne and coconut spinach, will linger in our memories forever. Bread and cake lovers alike will find the ultimate in flavours in coconut bread with garlic onion, the famous coconut cake and Aitutaki Kisses - we had it all - yum! A visit to Tauono's is an experience one wants to repeat, and so we did. No two dishes were ever the same - always new creations, varied flavours and taste sensations - simply poetry of the South Seas.

- Katharina & Tobias, Rum, Tyrol, Austria

EATING AITUTAKI

BREADFRUIT

Kuru

Artocarpus altilis

Breadfruit, which is propagated from root cuttings or suckers, was transported to the Pacific islands by Captain Bligh and it has remained a staple food for Pacific islanders.

A quick growing evergreen, it has large glossy leaves that are deeply cut into four pointed lobes. It bears separate male and female flowers on the same tree. The male flower, a drooping spike about 30 cm in length, with tiny densely packed flowers, appears first. The female flowers are massed together in a rounded ball which develops into a compound fruit. The fruit is really made up of multiple fruits fused together like a pineapple.

The fruits are produced in twos or threes at the end of the branches. The flesh when boiled or roasted is like bread dough. Breadfruit can be substituted in any recipe that requires potatoes.

The flavour and texture of the fruit changes as the season progresses. As it nears the end of the season, the flesh becomes more porous and absorbs more liquid. Hence, you may need to add more coconut milk or cream when cooking/serving. Left to reach the over-ripe stage (very soft to the touch) it can be used to make sweetened desserts. Sonja has spooned the raw pulp directly from the fruit and dropped it into hot oil, to make the tastiest of flourless instant doughnuts.

A medicine for shingles can be prepared from the ashes of the leaves and bark.

► *continued page 46*



AITUTAKI QUICK AND EASY BREADFRUIT BREAD

Take a whole ripe breadfruit and puncture the entire surface with a fork.

Bake in 190°C oven for one hour until fruit is nicely browned all over and soft when pricked with a fork. Cut into sections, discard seed cavity, drizzle with butter and serve. Eat as is or use as an accompaniment with main meals. Wedges can be dipped into Coconut Cream Herb Sauce (page 91). It is also good cold the next day for breakfast; just slice, spread with butter and jam. Slices are easily reheated and browned in a little oil or butter.

AITUTAKI SMACKED BREADFRUIT

1 breadfruit (stem removed and drained)

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup coconut cream

1 palm leaf paddle (prepare first)

To prepare the paddle, cut a palm leaf and trim off the fronds. Select the part of the frond that is approximately 7.5 cm wide and cut to a length of 32 cm.

Place ripe breadfruit in the embers of a fire until charred all over. Remove and let cool slightly. Gather some breadfruit, noni or wild hibiscus leaves, enough to hold the charred breadfruit.

Peel off the charred skin and remove the inner core/stem.

Pour 2 tablespoons of the coconut cream into the stem end and slowly smack the breadfruit with the paddle. When absorbed repeat the process several times. When the inside appears saturated, pour some cream on the outside and continue smacking. Repeat until all the cream is used or until the breadfruit appears saturated and cannot hold any more.

Pieces can now be cut or torn off and eaten/served with additional or any left over coconut cream.



TURMERIC

Renga

Curcuma longa

This member of the ginger family is an upright herb growing nearly a metre tall. Sterile yellow-white flowers appear on a spike-like stalk surrounded by large oblong leaves. The underground stem, or rhizome, is thick and fleshy and ringed with the bases of the old leaves. At Tauono's we grate the fresh rhizome to add to recipes for the bright orange colour and distinctive taste. It is also delicious simply steamed and served as a side vegetable.

An unusual use for turmeric is in the chemistry laboratory. Strips of paper soaked in turmeric can be used as an indicator for alkaline substances. The turmeric soaked paper will go brown when applied to an alkaline (basic) substance, such as baking powder. In the Café's souvenir shop, you can purchase Sonja's fabric aprons, pareaus and shopping bags, hand painted with natural dyes derived from turmeric, banyan roots, candlenut, banana and coconuts.

For an immune system booster: grate 1 tsp of turmeric into a cup, add boiling water, steep for five minutes and drink. And yes, you can eat the grains at the bottom of your cup! This is a super strengthener prior to surgery or as an aid to recuperation; it is also a remedy for kidney and bladder ailments.



RENGA COCONUT BREAD

Made with desiccated coconut and powdered turmeric

- 1 cup wholemeal flour
- 1 cup standard white flour
- 100 g of desiccated unsweetened coconut + 1 cup hot water
- 2 tsp yeast
- ½ tsp sugar
- ½ cup warm water (for yeast)
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 tsp of powdered turmeric
- 1 cup warm water
- 3 tbsp olive oil

Breadmaking tips



Add the 1 cup of hot water to the desiccated coconut and set aside.

In a cup blend the yeast, sugar and ½ cup warm water. Blend flours, salt, turmeric and reconstituted coconut in a bowl; add yeast, ½ cup water and oil. Only add the remaining ½ cup water if mix is too dry. Serve with herb butters, salads, salsas, soups. Great with cold plates and for sandwiches.



PAPAYA CORNMEAL BREAD

- 1 cup mashed fresh papaya
- ½ cup soft butter or olive oil
- ¼ cup brown sugar
- 2 eggs
- ¾ cup yellow cornmeal
- ¾ cup all purpose flour
- 3 tsp baking powder
- 1½ tsp lime juice and zest of 1 lime
- ½ tsp cinnamon
- ¼ tsp allspice

Grease and dust medium sized loaf pan (preheat oven to 180°C.)

With a wooden spoon beat butter, sugar and eggs. Add lime juice, zest and papaya and beat until smooth. Gradually add dry ingredients.

Pour into loaf pan and bake for 50 minutes or test with knife for doneness. Cool in pan 10 minutes, remove and cool on rack.

Variation: use 1 cup mashed cooked squash or pumpkin.



PAPAYA KRAUT SALAT

When drought has withered the garden and salad greens are scarce, salad ingredients include cassava, breadfruit, cabbage and green papaya. The house papaya salad is often referred to as “Kraut Salat”, its flavour and texture similar to sauerkraut.

Serves 4-6 as a small side salad

- 1 medium green papaya - (if the skin shows yellow or orange, it is too ripe)
- 3 tbsp roasted peanuts (or toasted sesame seeds or coconut slivers)
- 1 small finely minced chili (deseeded)
- ½ small onion finely minced (optional)
- 1 tsp sesame oil
- 1 lime or lemon juiced
- 1 tsp salt
- ½ tsp sugar
- ¼ tsp paprika (optional)

Shell peanuts and roast in heavy skillet over medium heat stirring with a wooden spoon. When well browned cool and chop coarsely. Cut papaya in half; scrape out seeds with a spoon, and peel. On a julienne slicer, or coarse veggie grater, grate the papaya until it yields approx. 2-3 cups.

Put grated papaya in a salad bowl and add remainder of ingredients, except peanuts and paprika. Toss. Sprinkle with the roasted peanuts. Garnish with paprika.



Green papaya salad - “Kraut Salat” - with starfruit salsa and carrot salad.

FISH AND MEAT DISHES

DEEP SEA UNDER COVER

Serves 4

-
- 4 Albacore fillets cut to 1½ cm thickness (wahoo, tuna)
 - 1 tsp fish sauce
 - 2 cloves garlic finely minced
 - 1½ lemons (reserve 1 lemon - cut into quarters for garnish with each serving)
 - 2 tbsp finely chopped parsley
 - 2 eggs
 - 1 cup regular flour
 - 6 tbsp cooking oil (or coconut oil)
-

Rub the fish gently with the fish sauce and minced garlic. Cover in airtight container and leave in refrigerator several hours or overnight. When ready to cook, drizzle with juice from ½ a lemon. Heat the oil while you sprinkle the fillets with parsley. Gently pat into flour on both sides and then swish into the egg. Place the fillets into the hot oil and cook on high, then medium heat until the egg becomes firm and lightly browned. Turn fillets over and brown the other side. Do not overcook.

Serve on a bed of finely shredded mustard or spinach. Place slices of fried plantain alongside and a spoonful of mango salsa on top. Serve with sundried tomato or capsicum rice.

SURINAM POACHED FISH

Serves 2

-
- 2 seasoned tuna fillets
 - ½ cup coconut cream
 - 1 tsp each of parsley, basil, garlic onion (finely chopped) (optional)
 - ½ lemon
 - 4 fresh Surinam cherries (reserve two for garnish)
 - 1 tbsp of Surinam cherry jam or jelly (see page 104)
-

Drizzle ¼ of a lemon over the fish. Combine the herbs with the coconut cream, cherries and jam in a small pan. Add the fish and cook over very low heat for a few minutes. When the underside has set (when it turns white) turn the fillets over and cook for another minute. The fish is cooked when the tip of a knife turns easily in its centre - it should still be pink. Shred some fresh spinach or mustard on your serving plates, place the fish on top, pour the sauce over and top with a fresh cherry next to the one cooked in the sauce. This gives you three ways of tasting Surinam cherry (Menemene) - fresh, cooked, and as jelly, being part of the sauce.

Note: This sauce has a lavender colour when jelly and cream are combined. The herbs are not essential but do enhance the flavour of all the ingredients.



PINEAPPLE

Painapa

Ananas comosus

In Tauono's plantation you will see pineapples growing in neat rows interspersed with taro, ginger and turmeric. The pineapple belongs to the bromeliad family, most of which are epiphytes (a plant that grows non-parasitically upon another plant).

Take the time to observe closely the growing strategy of the pineapple. You will find this fascinating plant grows from a terminal bud surrounded by a thick rosette of spiny leaves, which allows the plant to collect water.

A fibrous flowering stem emerges and eventually bears small purple or red flowers, which ripen to produce a fruitlet. The flowers are arranged in two interlocking spirals - eight spirals in one direction, thirteen in the other. Each fruitlet contains all the parts of a complete flower, and they are fused together to produce a single fruit. The pineapple is really a fruit of many separate flowers growing on a plant spike (a sorosis).

As the individual fruits grow, they swell with juice and pulp and become the pineapple fruit. The scaly rind of the pineapple, like a coat of armor, is composed of the remains of the flowers that persist after the fruit is formed.

The fibrous core of the pineapple is actually the stalk. It penetrates up through the fruit and ends in a crown of numerous short stiff sword-like leaves. The crown, with its rosette of prickly leaves and the armor, all help protect a sweet, sugar-rich fruit that grows at ground level.

Pineapples are the only known source of bromelain, an enzyme that digests protein (one could say it is a flesh eating fruit!). It also contains high levels of Vitamin A, B2, B1 and C, and unlike most fruits it has no starch reserves of its own. This means the sugar content must be accumulated before it is harvested and it should be picked when it is ripe. When eaten unripe it acts as a purgative. Being a digestive aid similar to papaya, when in season, it is lavishly used in the Café as a garnish for main meals and drinks.

PINEAPPLE JAM

1 kg of peeled, cored and finely chopped pineapple

½ kg of sugar

2 lemons

2 tsp of ascorbic acid (optional)

Wash sufficient jars (e.g. 5 x 375 g jars) and sterilise by boiling for 10 minutes. Boil lids separately for 5 minutes. Dip the ladle into hot water to clean before you fill your jars. Rims of jars need to be clean before sealing.

Combine the pineapple with the sugar and let it sit for an hour to develop juice. Cook over medium heat for 15 minutes, stirring frequently. Add the juice of 2 lemons and then do the gel test (i.e. chill a plate in freezer for a few minutes and drop a teaspoon of jam onto it). If it sets, the jam is ready to go into the jars. If it is still fluid, add another lemon or 1 - 2 tsp of ascorbic acid. Depending on the amount of juice and the quality of the pineapple, you may need to cook it longer. Seal into hot sterilised jars.





Pineapple Slice, page 100.