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FEATURE ARTICLE

Preserving What We Eat, Sustaining What We Grow

In many Fijian households, food is central to family life. Meals are often generous, with plenty prepared to share. But once the eating is done, the question of what happens to the leftovers is an important one. Some food is saved for later, some is shared, and some ends up in the bin. At a time when the cost of groceries is rising, climate change is accelerating, and landfill waste is a growing concern, how we handle food at home matters more than ever. The real value of food isn't just in what we buy, but in how we use, preserve, and recycle it.

This feature looks at how we as Fijian consumers can rediscover the art of food preservation and composting, blending the wisdom of our ancestors with modern know-how. It is a story of saving money, protecting our environment, and honouring the food that nourishes us.

Food Waste and Rising Prices

Walk through any supermarket in Fiji today, and you'll see consumers carefully comparing prices. A simple basket of groceries has become noticeably more expensive over time. Rice, root crops, tinned fish, flour, and fresh vegetables take up a large share of household budgets. Yet despite these costs, a surprising amount of food ends up wasted.

According to global studies, one-third of food produced worldwide is either lost or wasted. In Fiji, much of this happens at the consumer level, leftovers going bad in the fridge, vegetables spoiling before being cooked, or excess food thrown out during social gatherings. For families struggling with tight budgets, every wasted portion is money down the drain.

Here is where food preservation and composting come in not as old-fashioned practices, but as modern consumer solutions. Preserving food ensures that groceries last longer and that families make the most of every dollar spent. Composting, on the other hand, turns unavoidable scraps into resources that reduce gardening costs and improve food security at the household level.

Traditional Wisdom

Long before supermarkets and refrigeration, Fijians used practical and resourceful ways to store and preserve food. These practices were shaped by the islands' climate, the need to prepare for cyclone seasons, and the communal culture of sharing. Many of these methods remain relevant for today's consumers.

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1. **Smoking and Drying Fish (Vakalolo ika)**

In coastal and maritime communities, fish was often smoked or sun-dried so it could be stored for weeks. This method not only provided protein during cyclone seasons but also ensured that excess catch was not wasted.

2. **Fermenting Breadfruit (Uto)**

When breadfruit trees produced in abundance, families fermented the excess and stored it underground as *masi* (fermented paste). This ensured food security during lean months or when storms destroyed fresh crops. Such practices highlight the value of thinking ahead—something consumers today can adopt by freezing or pickling surplus food.

3. **Earth Storage of Root Crops**

Root crops such as dalo, yam, and cassava were stored underground or in cool pits. This natural refrigeration method kept them fresh for longer, sometimes weeks at a time.

4. **Leaf Wrapping and Natural Packaging**

Food wrapped in banana, taro, or breadfruit leaves not only stayed fresh but also avoided contamination. These biodegradable “packages” were sustainable alternatives to plastic, and consumers today could easily return to them for storage, especially when selling at local markets.

Modern Approaches: Making Food Last Longer

With urbanisation and changing lifestyles, modern preservation tools have become essential for many households. But the real challenge lies in how consumers use these tools effectively.

- **Freezing and Refrigeration:** Freezers allow families to store root crops, bread, meat, and even cooked meals. Consumers who portion food before freezing avoid spoilage from reheating the same dish multiple times.
- **Pickling and Jams:** Mangoes, pawpaw, and even local greens can be preserved through pickling. Pickled mango (*achar*) is common in Indo-Fijian households, while homemade jams help extend the life of seasonal fruits.

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- **Dehydration:** Sun-drying still works, but small household dehydrators are now available for drying herbs, spices, and even root crops.
- **Vacuum Sealing and Airtight Containers:** Preventing air contact extends freshness and prevents insect infestation, especially in areas where weevils spoil flour and rice.

Composting: Turning Waste into Wealth

Not every scrap can be eaten or preserved. Banana peels, cassava skins, and spoiled fruits are unavoidable. However, throwing these into the rubbish bin is a wasted opportunity. Composting gives food scraps a second life, turning them into rich fertilizer for gardens.

For consumers, composting brings clear benefits:

1. **Reduces Household Waste:** Composting lowers the volume of waste going to landfills, which are already under pressure.
2. **Cuts Fertilizer Costs:** Store-bought fertilizer is expensive and contributes to household expenses. Compost is free.
3. **Supports Gardening and Food Security:** Backyard compost improves soil quality, allowing families to grow beles, tomatoes, chillies, and herbs reducing reliance on market purchases.
4. **Environmentally Friendly:** Organic matter in landfills produces methane gas. Composting prevents this, helping Fiji's fight against climate change.

Schools and community groups across Fiji are increasingly introducing compost pits and compost bins. For example, some schools in Labasa and Lautoka have created student-led gardening projects where compost from canteen food waste enriches vegetable beds. This not only reduces waste but also teaches children valuable life skills.

Every Household Counts

Food preservation and composting are more than household chores; they are consumer responsibilities. Every choice we make about how we store, use, and dispose of food has an impact.

For consumers in Fiji, the benefits are clear:

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- **Stretching household budgets further** in times of economic pressure.
- **Honouring traditional knowledge**, keeping cultural practices alive.
- **Building resilience against disasters**, ensuring food availability during cyclones.
- **Protecting the environment**, reducing landfill waste and greenhouse gases.

Conclusion:

The Council has long reminded households that consumer rights go hand in hand with consumer responsibilities. Practising food preservation and composting is one of the most practical ways to live this responsibility. The next time you peel cassava, pack leftover rice, or buy extra mangoes at the market, ask yourself: how can I make this last longer? Can I smoke it, pickle it, freeze it or turn its scraps into compost for my garden?

By embracing both the traditional wisdom of our ancestors and the modern tools at our disposal, we as consumers can save money, protect our environment, and ensure that nothing goes to waste. In doing so, we preserve not just food, but our future.

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