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FEATURE ARTICLE

What Fiji's Multicultural Traditional Kitchens Can Teach Us About Saving Money

As households across Fiji adjust their budgets in light of the ongoing fuel crisis, families are taking a closer look at their spending habits. The past few months have brought familiar financial pressures: soaring grocery bills, rising utility expenses, and transport costs that stretch incomes to their absolute limits. In response, consumers are searching for practical ways to slash expenses without compromising their family's wellbeing.

Interestingly, the answers do not lie in complex budgeting apps or new technology. They are found in the shared, cross-cultural wisdom of our parents, grandparents, and ancestors. Long before refrigeration and modern appliances, Fiji's diverse communities developed ingenious methods to survive changing seasons, natural disasters, and economic scarcity.

This article looks at 3 key techniques consumers can use to save money and avoid wastage:

- (i) energy efficient cooking;
- (ii) food preservation to prevent wastage; and
- (iii) storing food using low energy techniques to save electricity.

By using these techniques, consumers will be able to save critical dollars using lessons from traditional sources.

(i) Energy Efficient Cooking: Thermal and Firewood Efficiency

Long before gas cylinders and electric stoves became household staples, cooking over an open flame or hot stones was a daily reality across Fiji. Today, utilizing firewood remains an excellent backup during power outages or cyclones. However, efficiency is key to protecting our health and environment.

- **Earth Ovens (*Lovo*):** These traditional earth ovens are the ultimate lesson in thermal mass cooking. By heating volcanic stones underground, wrapped food cooks slowly in its own juices. To adapt this for modern cost-saving, urban families can utilize community or weekend *lovo* cooking, preparing large batches of root crops and proteins at once, drastically cutting down weekly cooking gas consumption.
- **Firewood Stoves:** This clandestine stove, often constructed using old blocks or metal drum tops, and fueled by firewood or dried coconut husks (*bulo*), utilizes localized heat retention. To maximize efficiency, elders always kept a big pot of water heating after

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the main cooking was done, ensuring no heat from the leftover embers (*angaar*) went to waste. This water was then often used for bathing, which can come as an added bonus to reduce electricity usage.

(ii) Food Preservation to Prevent Wastage

Food waste is literally throwing money away. For families buying groceries bi-weekly or monthly, fresh produce frequently rots at the bottom of the refrigerator before it can be cooked. While it may seem like minor daily waste, premature spoilage quietly eats away at your annual budget.

Before freezers existed, Fiji's various communities perfected unique dehydration and curing skills to extend shelf life for months, and preserve food for later use.

1. Solar Dehydration: Sun-Drying

Sun-drying is a zero-cost preservation method which was utilized heavily in traditional Fijian households. While it is still being done on some scale today, more and more consumers are turning to store bought/imported dehydrated products, whereas the process is relatively simple.

- **How it is done:** Local fruits, and vegetables are cut into smaller pieces and left in the hot sun to dry for days, until they are completely removed of all moisture. The process usually takes 3-5 days depending on the weather. Once the item is dried up, it is spiced or salted and stored for later usage, as accompaniments to staple foods such as rice or cassava.
- **The Saving:** These can be stored in airtight jars for up to a year and reconstituted in hot water or fried as crisp sides, ensuring zero waste during off-season price hikes.

2. Fermentation and Pickling

Fermentation alters the pH of food to stop spoilage, creating a natural emergency food bank.

- **Pickling:** When seasonal fruits like green mangoes, star fruit, lemons, apple, or even vegetables like carrots and cucumber or chillies, are cheap, they are salted to draw out moisture, infused with mustard oil, and packed into jars. The oil acts as a sealant against oxygen, preserving the food for years without electricity.
- **Davuke:** This traditional fermentation pit involves burying excess breadfruit (*uto*) or root crops wrapped in banana leaves underground. The resulting fermented paste

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(*madrai ni viti*) can last for months, acting as a vital insurance policy against post-cyclone crop failures.

3. Moisture Elimination: Smoke and Salt

- **Smoking (*Vakamamaca*):** Widely practiced by Pacific Island communities, fresh fish or pork is placed on an elevated wooden rack (*vatavata*) over a low, smoky fire. The smoke dries the meat and deposits antimicrobial compounds.
- **Salting (*Sei-Yuk / Kadhwaaru / Salt Fish*):** A cornerstone of Fijian culinary heritage. Fresh fish is layered with coarse salt to draw out all moisture and then sun-dried. For many dishes, a small piece of salt-fish adds immense flavor to a large pot of rice or soup, making cheap meals incredibly satisfying. In the other cultures, dried fish can be kept for months, and later used to make curries.

(iii) Storing Food Using Low Energy Techniques

Modern consumers frequently treat the refrigerator as a catch-all, overcrowding shelves and blocking airflow. This creates uneven cooling zones and leaves forgotten food to rot in hidden corners. In contrast, traditional kitchens operated with zero electricity, relying entirely on the physics of air circulation, strategic temperature zones, and natural pest deterrents. By understanding the logic behind these methods, we can drastically cut our energy bills and prolong the shelf life of our groceries.

- **The Power of Smoke and Elevation (*The Vatavata*):** In traditional kitchens, the *vatavata*, a slatted wooden shelf suspended directly above the cooking hearth, served as a brilliant multi-purpose storage system. The constant, gentle rising heat and smoke from daily cooking created a bone-dry microclimate. This environment was hostile to mold, fungi, and moisture-loving insects, making it the perfect place to preserve coconuts, seeds, dalo, and cassava for extended periods.
- **Microbial and Insect Barriers:** Similarly, generations of households relied on large, elevated galvanized drums to store bulk harvests of rice, pulses, and flour. To prevent devastating weevil and beetle infestations without resorting to harsh chemical pesticides, elders layered the grains with completely dried neem leaves. Neem contains natural, non-toxic compounds that act as a powerful insect repellent, keeping pantry staples pristine for months.

Bringing the Method to Modern Homes

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You do not need an open hearth or massive galvanized drums to put these low-energy principles into practice today. Urban households can adapt these traditional blueprints through simple, effective adjustments:

- **Ditch the Plastic Bags:** Root crops like cassava, dalo, and potatoes should never be stored in airtight plastic shopping bags, which trap moisture and accelerate rot. Instead, keep them in open, breathable crates or jute sacks in a cool, dark corner of your pantry to mimic the dry airflow of traditional storage.
- **Vertical Hanging Storage:** Take inspiration from the *vatavata* by installing hanging mesh or macramé baskets in your kitchen. Storing onions, garlic, and ginger vertically maximizes 360-degree air circulation, preventing the premature sweating and liquefying that happens when they are crammed into tight cupboard drawers.
- **Natural Pest Deterrents:** Protect your flour, rice, and grains by dropping a few dried neem leaves or whole bay leaves directly into your storage containers. These aromatic leaves naturally repel pests without altering the flavor of your food, eliminating the need to buy pricey, chemical-laden pantry traps.

Moving Forward Together

Honoring traditional cooking isn't about throwing away your microwave or abandoning modern life. It is about adopting the mindset of self-reliance and efficiency that kept our ancestors thriving. By learning how to properly sun-dry, salt, ferment, and store our food using the combined knowledge of Fiji's diverse cultures, we can build a more resilient, cost-effective future.

Sometimes, the best way to navigate a modern financial crisis is to look back at the beautifully diverse kitchens of our past.

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