Taro is a versatile vegetable, but it's still best smoked in a pit, says Tiare Tuuhia. Illustrations: Sarah Cliff

THE POTATO OF THE PACIFIC



The taro – a starchy root vegetable known for its natural purple colour when cooked – is the potato of Polynesia. Polynesia means 'many islands' and refers to a group of more than 1,000 islands scattered between Hawaii to the north, New Zealand to the east and Easter Island to the west. Taro is to these Pacific islands what rice is to Japan, pasta is to Italy and potatoes are to Ireland.

The vegetable is believed to have arrived in Polynesia from Southern Asia and spread throughout the islands with the early Polynesian voyagers. On many of these islands, the humble taro holds tremendous cultural and nutritional importance and remains a significant part of everyday life.

Taro is a low-growing plant with large, heart shaped leaves. The corm or taro root is the part that grows underground and it looks a bit like a bigger, uglier cousin of the potato. It is oblong, hairy, grows to around 30cm and can weigh up to 5kg. The taro root is also poisonous if eaten raw. But what taro lacks in looks it makes up for in taste and nutritional value.

Once peeled and cooked, the taro has a mild, slightly sweet flavour and a heavy, gluey texture. It also comes in a range of colours from off-white to a pleasing purple and is richer in fibre, iron and calcium than potatoes. The young leaves and stem are also edible and commonly eaten.

In the Pacific, taro is more than just a vegetable. Its mythic origins are told in stories passed down through the generations – every island has its own unique tale. But even among Polynesians, Hawaiians have a particularly special connection to the plant.

Taro, or kalo as it is known in Hawaii, dates back to the genesis of the Hawaiian people. According to the sacred Hawaiian creation chant, the Kumulipo, Wakea (sky father) and Papa (earth mother) came together and conceived their first child, a daughter named Ho'ohokulani.

In time Wakea and Ho'ohokulani also conceived a child together, a son they named Haloa-naka, meaning eternal breath. Haloa-naka was stillborn and buried in the earth. From that earth sprouted the very first kalo plant. Ho'ohukulani had a second son, who was also named Haloa and who became the first Hawaiian – the ancestor that all Hawaiians today now trace their lineage to.

For Hawaiians, kalo is an ancestor, whose death gave life to the islands' most important crop, which in turn nourished the Hawaiian people for centuries. As such, it is treated with great respect. The Hawaiians were master kalo farmers and by the time the first Europeans arrived in Hawaii they had cultivated hundreds of varieties of the plant, a feat that helped enable them to comfortably support a massive population – some estimate as many as a million. Kalo formed the basis of the traditional diet, and although in Hawaii it's now more of a special occasion food, in other Pacific islands, such as Samoa, it is still a diet staple that is consumed daily.

The traditional method for cooking taro in Polynesia is in an underground or earth oven, one of the most ancient ways of preparing food. In Tonga, this oven is known as an umu and the process of building one and cooking in it takes a lot of time and effort. The preparation usually starts before sunrise or even the day before the meal is to be eaten. The first step is to build a fire big enough to heat all the stones that will be used to cook the food. Lava stones are found throughout Polynesia and are essential to this kind of cooking: they're porous and hold heat well. While the stones are heating in the fire and embers, a wide pit is excavated.

When the rocks are heated through they usually glow red or white. At this point, everything moves very quickly to ensure that maximum heat is retained in the stones. First, all the lava rocks are moved into the pit. Then the pre-prepared food, such as taro, green bananas, plantain, sweet potato, pork and fish are placed directly on top of the hot stones. Often, the food is wrapped in banana leaves or aluminum foil with flavourings such as coconut milk and onion.

Everything is then covered completely with banana leaves, burlap sacks or even earth. The food is then left to steam and slow cook in the ground for up to eight hours. It results in a smoky, earthy ambrosian meal – all the flavours melt together to create a uniquely Polynesian dinner.

There are many traditional dishes centered around taro in Polynesia. One of the most common is whole taro served baked or boiled as a side dish, similar to how rice would be served in other countries.

In Hawaii, poi is a dish that is made with just two ingredients: taro and water. Cooked taro is pounded on a wooden board with water slowly added until it reaches a soft, sticky consistency – a bit like slimy purple playdough. The poi can be eaten as is, which tastes quite bland, but can also be left to ferment, which adds another sour flavour dimension. It is also a popular first food for babies as it doesn't require chewing and is naturally hypoallergenic.

In Tahiti, taro is made into a dessert called poe, which involves mashing the taro and adding sugar and cassava, then cooking it in an underground oven or conventional oven. The result is a jelly-like dessert with a delicious, sweet taro flavour, always served drowned in fresh coconut milk.

In Samoa, palusami is a very popular dish made from young taro leaves bundled together with coconut milk, onions and salt, then cooked in the umu. It's a rich, savoury mix, similar to creamed spinach – and especially good served with plain taro.

Today in Polynesia, taro has found its way into new dishes and even into fine dining restaurants and swanky hotels. In French Polynesia, taro is used to make taro gratin and Chinese-style taro and pork cooked in oyster sauce. In Hawaii, taro bread rolls and taro ice cream are popular and everyone everywhere loves taro chips.

Chefs throughout the islands have rediscovered taro and are turning it into everything from hummus to sushi to curry. The best way to eat it though, is the traditional way: cooked in an underground oven and served with fresh coconut milk. Unbeatable.

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