

## Happy Meal ~ The Secret of Happy Islanders

Islanders have discovered a culinary secret, simple really: **put coconut milk in everything!**



I didn't realize how ubiquitous coconut cuisine was, but soon after relocating to a South Pacific island, I realized it was indeed true, providing culinary originals, cultural twists on old favorites, and delicious options for chefs and foodies alike.

My first love (big love) is rukau, a fabulous, rich combination of cooked young taro leaves and coconut cream, freshly grated and strained...a considerably better version of creamed spinach. Caramelized onions are added for greater depth. Rukau is a sacred marriage of flavors, popular throughout the Pacific islands, known as pulasami in Samoa. Fijians and Tahitians also enjoy this delicacy...as a staple. In Hawaii they mostly pound the taro root for poi, somehow omitting this specialty, many Americans avoiding the touted health dangers of rich coconut milk. What a loss.

First, let's eliminate all the bad rumors about the coconut being unhealthy. High in potassium and many health benefits, this much aligned fruit can assist in immune and liver functions and provide nutrition and health benefits for every body. The juice ('water') is a great source of electrolytes. Rich in lauric acid, coconuts can help boost immune function and are anti-fungal and anti-bacterial.

If you are concerned about the saturated fat content in coconut milk, know that this saturated fat has been shown in many independent studies to be a good saturated fat, easily metabolized to give your body quick energy. Contrary to popular myth, it does not transform into bad cholesterol to clog up arteries. In fact, cultures around the world that depend on coconut as their main source of fat have been found to be free of heart disease. The principle fatty acid in coconut milk is lauric acid, which is the same fat found in abundance in mother's milk and is known to promote normal brain development and contribute to healthy bones. It also has important anti-carcinogenic and anti-pathogenic properties and is less likely to cause weight gain than polyunsaturated oils.

The potent anti-viral, anti-fungal and anti-microbial effects of coconut oil have implicated it in the treatment of both AIDS and candida. Whatever bad things you may have heard or read about coconut milk have not stood up to scrutiny by unbiased food scientists; however, the goodness of coconut milk has not been given equal press because of intensive lobbying against it by the powerful vegetable oil industry. Southeast Asians and islanders the world over, meanwhile, have been staying healthy for generations with coconut, in all its forms, an integral part of their diet.

One of my favorite stories was from a nurse serving at Pearl Harbor during the attack. They were in the middle of moving into a new hospital on base when the Japanese planes struck, and the supplies had yet to arrive by ship. So when wounded were being loaded into the facility, there was no saline solution. Realizing it was sterile, readily available, and life-supporting, nurses hooked patient IVs up to coconuts to keep the injured alive and fed. I have always loved this story...and coconuts.

### **Health Benefits of coconut juice, meat and oil:**

- Weight loss
- Reduced risk of heart disease
- Reduced cholesterol
- Disease prevention via its antibacterial, antiviral and antifungal agents
- Help with diabetes and chronic fatigue, Crohn's, IBS, and other digestive disorders
- Increases metabolism and promotes better thyroid function
- Boosts energy
- Rejuvenates skin and helps prevent wrinkles

WARNING! Avoid poor quality oils, especially those processed by chemical extraction or hydrogenated coconut oil. These are definitely not health-producing.

If anything is more 'island' than the coconut, please let me know. I have traveled to nearly a hundred islands, and nearly all had coconuts. Everywhere people lived, the coconut was a staple from birth to death. Of all the culinary ingredients, it is the most available and the most saturated throughout the islands and island kitchens.

### **Making coconut cream...and coconut milk:**

Coconut milk is not the juice found inside a coconut, but the diluted cream pressed from the thick, white flesh of a well-matured nut. Find a dry coconut. Shake it for the sound of fluid within the nut. Husk then open the coconut. If on an island, ask a local to help you. Then drink or empty the juice ('water') and scrape the meat. Again, on an island, scrapers are available. They look scary, but they're most effective. Then the finely grated coconut meat is steeped in hot water, cooled until cool enough to handle. Squeeze until dry and strain to remove all the pulp. After it sits for a while, the coconut cream rises to the top...beautiful, rich and sweet, it is the secret ingredient of island chefs the world over.

More hot water is added to the pulp and the process is repeated to yield a lighter fluid, or **coconut milk**. An average mature coconut yields about one cup of coconut cream and one to two cups of coconut milk, depending on how light a milk is desired.

Canned coconut milks are available nearly everywhere coconuts are not and may be substituted. \*\*

With delicious fresh coco, you're ready for some culinary treats.

## Here are a few of my favorite recipes:

Now that we're not afraid of the beautiful coconut, let's find some taro leaves for my greatest love, rukau. I searched recently on Maui and was told "grow your own." In Rarotonga, like Fiji, Tahiti and other tropical islands, the young taro leaves are readily available at most produce markets.

### 1. RUKAU ~ my easy recipe:

1. slice young leaves into thin strips
2. place in a pot with a little bit of water at the bottom
3. cook the rukau, stirring until all water has evaporated
4. pour in the coconut cream and add finely chopped sweet onions, sauteed just until tender

### Here's how the Bluenote Café on Rarotonga does fancy Rukau:

Visit the Punanganui Market and pick up bundle of young taro greens.

Cook Islanders and people from throughout the Pacific region have this vegetable as their staple green vegetable. Islanders have embraced the aromas, colours and textures of flavours they have found in the kitchens of the world, but the taste of home for us is still the 'rukau'.

When in Rarotonga, visit the Punanganui Market on a week day and get your bundle of rukau greens. If you should miss out, ask one of the mamas to get some for you for the following day. It is possible to find rukau in the stores as you scoot around the island on your motorbike.

The traditional way to prepare rukau is to wrap and tie in leaves of banana, or wild hibiscus, or cordyline leaves. Use fresh hibiscus tree bark to tie the bundles. Any meat and fish may be added. Cook in the ground oven. Today we use the conventional oven or the microwave.

To prepare your rukau, dice onions and have coconut cream ready, slice or dice meat (optional) of your choice, salt and pepper. Choose leaves to wrap rukau and string to tie with, or have foil. The leaves must be washed and the central vein of each leaf cut off. Place some leaves in the cup of one hand forming a well in the centre. Carefully place onions and meat, salt and pepper to taste, and finally pour coconut cream into the middle. Bring together the top part of the rukau leaves to form a bundle which is then placed in foil and sealed. If using the banana leaves, these must be cut to size and passed over heat to soften and make them pliable.

Tie into one large bundle or smaller individual bundles as single serves. Stand bundles of rukau upright in a baking dish and bake in preheated oven 350°F for 45 minutes or more. Test if cooked by removing a bundle and opening to see if rukau is tender and meats and onion ready. The microwave is quicker but experiment with the times and give it a thorough cooking. Remember not to put foil in the microwave. The more coconut cream added will enhance the rukau flavour. Serve extra coconut cream if you wish. Any of the cooked root vegetables, rice and ripe bananas, breadfruit, cooked green bananas and buttered bread are excellent accompaniments

**2. IKA MATA ~ raw fish in coconut cream.** Add coconut cream to raw fish and voila: Ika Mata, aka poisson cru in Tahiti, ceviche in Mexico, kokoda in Fiji, Fish escapeche...fresh fish, 'cooked' in lime juice then made memorable by adding coconut cream.

I first learned how to make this easy dish in Bora Bora. It had been a rainy day, and since I was there to photograph a small resort, I hunkered down in my bungalow til nearly noon, catching up on spreadsheets and marketing campaigns. Finally I ventured over to the main hall, and found the manager and staff offering free maitais and games for the guests, weary of three days of rain. There were hoots and howls as all ages enjoyed the crab races. Twelve ways to tie a pareau followed, then the piece de resistance: how to make perfect poisson cru. I listened and learned. It's this easy:

- Cut fish fillets into 1/2 inch cubes (any white fish, tuna, snapper...)
- Sprinkle with salt
- Pour fresh lime juice just to cover the fish and mix well, letting it marinate for 30 minutes to an hour, draining when done (don't 'cook' it too long or until completely white, or the fish will become tough)
- Pour coconut cream over the fish
- Chop vegetables in season (carrots, tomatoes, onion, cucumber) into fine pieces and mix with the fish
- Serve with cooked root vegetables such as taro, kumara, breadfruit or boiled green bananas. It's the bomb!

**3. POKE** is another famous Cook Island staple. It's made by mixing fruit (mashed banana or pawpaw) and starch to a smooth consistency, adding coconut cream and baking about half and hour. It is best served warm, dipped in the leftover coconut cream, boiled and thickened. Yum! Note: Curried fish or octopus are other favorites, cooked with coconut milk or cream.

#### **4. COCO-PUMPKIN SOUP**

It was actually a kiwi friend who taught me how to make the very best pumpkin soup. Just substitute coconut for regular milk. How easy can that be?! Pumpkin has a particular affinity with coconut cream, and so is superb in coconut-based curries and soups like this one. Sweet potato (kumara) is equally good. If you can't find fresh kaffir limes to garnish the soup, use lime zest in its place, to finish the soup with bright, citrus taste highlights.

- 6 cups peeled and cubed pumpkin
- 2 cups vegetable stock or water
- 1/2-inch piece fresh ginger, peeled
- 1 tablespoon chopped lemongrass
- 2 scallions, white parts only, finely sliced
- 2 cups coconut cream
- salt, pepper
- freshly squeezed lime or lemon juice, to taste
- 2 fresh kaffir lime leaves, or very finely shredded zest of 1small fresh lime

Directions:

In a stock pot, combine the pumpkin, stock or water, ginger, and lemongrass. Cover, bring to a boil, reduce the heat to medium-low, and simmer until the pumpkin is tender, about 12-15 minutes. Add the scallions and cook briefly.

Transfer the contents of the saucepan to a blender or food processor and process until the soup is partially pureed. Pour in half of the coconut cream and process until smooth.

Rinse the saucepan and pour the puree into it. Add half of the remaining coconut cream. Season with salt and pepper and heat through without allowing the soup to boil. Taste and adjust the seasoning and squeeze in lime or lemon juice.

If using the kaffir lime leaves, fold them in half and, using a sharp knife, trim away the hard central rib. Cut the leaves into threadlike shreds. Ladle the soup into bowls, add the remaining coconut cream, forming a swirl on top of each bowl, (or a dollop of sour cream or crème fraiche) and garnish with the lime leaf or zest. Yum!

**5. PAW-PAW SALAD** ~ A simple and delicious tropical favorite I discovered at a Muri Beach Sailing Club potluck.

Dice fresh papaya, add mayonnaise, coconut cream and curry powder or curry ingredients. Toss with diced fresh mint or cilantro and serve on a lettuce, taro or banana leaf.

**6. BANANAS TROPICALE.** I'm known for my own personal version of bananas foster. It's even better now that coconut cream is easily available or friends drop some off after a Saturday afternoon's coconut hunt. Here goes...

Serves 2:

First, make or purchase coconut ice cream, then

Take 2 bananas (4 if tiny ladyfingers or apple bananas) and cut on diagonal in 1-2 inch slices.

Melt: ¼ lb. Butter in pan with ½ cup brown sugar, ½ teaspoon cinnamon.

Stir until sugar dissolves then add splash of banana liqueur and splash of vanilla.

Add sliced bananas and cook slowly 3-4 minutes or just until tender.

Add ½ cup dark rum (Meyers is nice), then tilt pan to flame liquor.

When flames disappear, place bananas on coconut ice cream (make from coconut cream) and pour over sauce. Enjoy!!

Sometimes I add chopped macadamia nuts or dried cranberries just before the rum.

Even yummierr!!

**7. HAUPIA** ~ is a traditional Hawaiian coconut-flavored dessert that is best described as a stiff (and yummy) pudding. This recipe is from the Maui Culinary Arts Program at MCC.

Ingredients:

4 cups coconut milk\*

2-1/2 cups water

1-1/4 cups sugar

1 cup cornstarch

\*Coconut milk, as you rightly recall, is made by mixing equal parts of shredded coconut and water, and simmering until foamy. Then the mixture is strained through a cheesecloth, and you squeeze as much liquid out of the pulp as possible.

Instructions:

Combine the coconut milk and water. Stir until smooth. Add the sugar and cornstarch. Cook over low heat until thickened and shiny. If the haupia is grainy, you need to keep cooking the mixture because the fat in the coconut milk has not yet melted.

Now, those impulsive cooking students at the Maui Community College have also provided the means for you to take this one step further. It may not be traditional, they say, but you can "take ordinary haupia and make it a special 'company coming' dessert." What's the secret? Make a dough with 1/2 cup butter or margarine, 3 tablespoons of sugar, 1 cup of flour and 1/4 cup of chopped nuts. Press the dough into a pan and bake it for 15 minutes at 350°F (175°C). When the crust is cool, pour the just-made haupia over the top, chill it, and then serve with whipped cream and a sprinkling of plain or toasted shredded coconut. Haupia Pie!

Substitute canned coconut milk for fresh...only if you have to\*\*

## **8. COCONUT CREAM PIE**

Ingredients:

2/3 c. sugar

1/4 c. cornstarch

1/2 t. salt

3 c. coconut milk

4 egg yolks, slightly beaten

2 T. butter softened

2 t. vanilla

1 c. flaked coconut

1 c. freshly whipped cream

Mix sugar, corn starch and salt in sauce pan. Gradually stir in milk, cook over medium heat stirring constantly till mix thickens and boils. Boil and stir 1 minute.

Stir at least half of hot mix gradually into yolks, stir into hot mix in sauce pan, boil and stir 1 minute, remove from heat, stir in butter, vanilla and 3/4 c. coconut, pour into shell, press plastic wrap onto filling and refrigerate at least 2 hours but no longer than 48.

Remove plastic, top pie with whipped cream and @1/3 cup toasted coconut flakes. Refrigerate any remaining pie immediately.

\*\* Good brands of coconut milk, Chao Koh in 14 oz. cans and Mae Ploy in 19 oz. cans. The latter is the richest and creamiest of brands I have tried; Chao Koh, while lighter, has a delicate, sweet natural flavor. For recipes requiring coconut cream, do not shake the can before opening; spoon out the thick cream on top. Refrigerate canned coco-milk so the cream will harden and separate from the lighter milk.

I don't recommend "light coconut milk" – it has little flavor, if any at all. Usually it has some additive to make it look thicker and whiter than it really is, although this is not usually listed in the ingredients. Better results can be obtained by thinning a good-quality, creamy coconut milk with water or cooking liquids to the lightness desired.

Coconut milk is the base of most Thai curries. Contrary to western ideas of working with cream, to make the curry sauce, coconut cream is first reduced over fairly high heat to break down the cream and allow the oil to separate. The curry paste is then added and fried in the coconut oil until all the herb and spice flavors are released and blended before the rest of the coconut milk is added to make the sauce. Finished Thai curries will have a thin layer of oil floating on top of the sauce. This oil picks up the color of the curries – bright red for red curry, glistening green for green curry, and so on – giving them a lovely appearance rather than a dull, whitish sameness. The color serves as a reminder of their true nature – spicy hot from red and green chilies and not creamy and bland.

Learn about coconut cooking, try a few recipes like rukau, ika mata, or haupia, and enjoy the island taste of 'home'.

**Bio:** As a passionate entrepreneur, I created several businesses on the US mainland, in Hawaii and throughout the South Pacific, and for many years I brokered sales of private islands and boutique resorts, working with clients and investors from Europe to Asia. I love islands and places unique and wild, lured and charmed like Gauguin, Stevenson, Brando and so many artists. Traveling to over 80 islands, doing business in many, I have tales to tell. Stories from magical places – Bora Bora, Port Vila, Aitutaki, Rarotonga, Fiji, Maui...and more – pepper my writings, and my articles, poems, photography, stories and novels are autobiographically inspired and informed. Visit One Foot Island and Saturday markets; watch quick-hipped dancers, hear tribal drums, feast on coconut cuisine and taste the essence of island places, island lives.

Research:

Dr. Mary Enig. <http://www.nexusmagazine.com/articles/coconuts1.html> Dr Mary G. Enig holds an MS and PhD in Nutritional Sciences from the University of Maryland in the USA. She is a consulting nutritionist and biochemist of international renown and an expert in fats/oils analysis and metabolism, food chemistry and composition and nutrition and dietetics.

Dr. Mercola. <http://www.mercola.com/2004/mar/10/coconuts.htm>

Dr. Vermen M. Verallo-Rowell <http://www.primezone.com/newsroom/news.html?d=82421>