

TIMOR-LESTE

“Look back to foods that we ate during the wartime.”

(Hahan Tempu Uluk)



Survival or ‘revolutionary’ foods used when the Portuguese, Japanese and Indonesian colonized and invaded East Timor. Taking in Timor-Leste (Venilale) @Safira Guterres

As part of the younger generation, I feel we are responsible for preserving these heritage foods. Let us try to put traditional cuisines on the table as regular meals and serve to children at home and to visitors that come to our house.

Not only that; but we can document and recollect food stories to share with the next generations.

Timor-Leste or East Timor is an isolated country situated in Southeast Asia. Almost 500 years of Portuguese colonization was followed by a 24-year brutal military occupation by Indonesia. With the assistance of international solidarity supporters Timor-Leste became an independent nation on 20 May 2002. This nation faces significant trauma and loss of 180,000 people who died from the effects of war and 80% of the nation's infrastructure destroyed during the Indonesian withdrawal in 1999.

During the Indonesia occupation many Timorese people were sustained by native and wild foods but because of loss of knowledge about preparation some were poisoned due to toxins. Hunger and starvation affected the guerrilla soldiers, and the Timorese women and men and children who supported them in the mountains but local foods helped them survive.

Food today!

The European Union Ambassador to Timor-Leste, Andrew Jacobs, stated that "many children are not receiving the nutritious food and health care" they need. "This harms not only the children themselves, but has negative impact on society."¹ (Lusa, Antonio Sampaio, 2020)

Among ASEAN, Timor-Leste is at the highest risk for childhood malnutrition. Children under 5 suffer stunting and wasting. The General Directorate of State et al. (2018, p. 214) state that the prevalence of stunting (short for age) among children under 5 is 46%, the prevalence of wasting (thin for height) is 24% and prevalence of overweight (heavy for height) is 6%.²

This is due to their diet is not nutritious enough. Then, the food insecurity is also a factor that has been pulling back the wellbeing of children and many people in Timor.



Children in Maubisse, Timor-Leste @ Antonio Sampaio

¹ Antonio Sampaio 2020, 'Timorese government starts research on food and nutrition in the country', *Antonio Sampaio (Lusa)*, 3 June, retrieved 18 June 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10158296856378399&set=a.60529533398&type=3&theater>

² General Directorate of State (GDS), Ministry of Health and ICF 2018, 'Timor-Leste demographic and health survey 2016', Dili, Timor-Leste, and Rockville, Maryland, USA: GDS and ICF.

Alternatively, native and local foods provide a healthy eating regimen in Indigenous Australia, Tonga and other Pacific Islands. Timor-Leste should look to its indigenous food for nourishment to battle high levels of malnutrition. Sadly, globalization has had a negative effect on food and nutrition in the country. “Many people have left behind these local foods and no longer eat and to serve to their children” explained Avo Joana Guterres.



Avo Joana Guterres (second-left), Timor-Leste @Jay Guterres

Avo Joana Guterres is from Venilale, Baucau, Timor-Leste. She is a single mother with her 3 children and some nieces and nephew were as witnessed to tell her experiences. It was fascinating to hear Avo Joana recounting to the tale about the foods that they ate in war time.

She then also explained that there were four essential foods that saved my family and me during the war. We had no money to buy food but these wild plants sustained us and I was grateful to have them to feed my children and myself.



Hidden foods of Venilale, Baucau, Timor-Leste @Safira Guterres

With a face of sad reflection, she recounted her experience during the war.

During the resistance struggle, many people including elders, youth and children did not survive because they did not have enough food, but we ate Maek, Lehe, Kalii, Uhi, Koto-moruk and some other foods and bush tucker to save us. Maek, Uhi, Kali, Koto-Moruk, Fehuk, Aifarina were wild food, and many people did not realize that they can be eaten. Some Timorese fighters also began to eat them because there was not enough food for them in the forest. They realized these foods were edible and could be used as survival food. (Carvalho, 2018)³

She also emphasized, if foods are eaten by monkeys, and other animals this mean these foods are edible for us, so we saw that animals are nourished with these foods and that made us hungry so we also tried them.

Example like Maek!

Maek was food that people ate to endure. During the war, Avo Joana and her family just ate Maek and some other hidden foods, for example, Lehe and Kali'i. She counted, it was an exceptional encounter and she just endured on account of the previously obscure foods like Maek. Maek in Mediki language is called Bau. There are two kinds of Maek; Edible Maek and Wild Maek. Consumable Maek is developed in the nursery and is planted by the gardener when it is in season. It has a lighter stem with white and green hues on it. The consumable tuber is gathered and eaten. At the point when it is cooked and heated up, its flavor resembles yam pound, and it doesn't make any irritation in the mouth. Wild Maek develops wherever in the woods with the exception of in wet regions. It has an alternate stem to the palatable one, and it can make the mouth bothersome except if it is cooked in an appropriate manner. Maek is planted in the dry season after the rice is reaped. Maek is planted in August or September and begins to develop when the downpours come in November. In the wake of reaping, the ranchers take the Maek home. The Maek is bubbled and broiled and utilized as a morning meal food by the ranchers.

Maek consistently has a significant job in their rice gathering function since they cook it with Kali'i, Lehe and Uhi to serve to the individuals that join in. The service in Tetum is known as the "Serimonia de Sama Hare". Just a couple of individuals come to join the service now, and unfortunately, it is turning into a lost custom. (Carvalho, 2018)

³ Carvalho, S 2018, 'Hidden Foods of Venilale', *Timor-Leste Food Lab Wiki*, wiki post, retrieved 11 June 2020, https://timorlestefoodlab.fandom.com/wiki/Hidden_Foods_of_Venilale

The guerilla Commander Santinho Mali-lait declared that “*Mandioca é o pão do Maubere*” - *Cassava is the bread of the Timorese nationalist*.⁴ This reflects how the guerillas and resistance networks survived on indigenous food, and it needs to be revived. While some of these foods are still eaten, some have been forgotten and replaced by imported foods. A barrier to people returning to these nutritious local foods is that a large number of Timorese have been raised to believe that wild plants are only eaten by poor and backward peoples.



Guerrilla Mali-Lait interviewed by an international reporter Adelino Gomes; Timor-Leste, Facebook Video @Moniz Ika

However, Promoting local ingredients and local cuisines has become valorized by a small movement in the urban centre of Dili. A few cafés in the capital are presently serving dishes dependent on customary wild ingredients. **Agora Food Studio** and restaurant offers training and mentoring in cooking and serving sustainable and healthy Timorese food and coffee.



At **Dilicious Timor** restaurant, the concept is to reveal the delicious food grown in Timor-Leste, which is rarely found in Dili and to contribute to the local economy. This café owned by young Timorese chef Cesar Gaio who consistently serves local ingredients cooked traditionally in his restaurant.

Finger foods (Koto Moruk) made by young innovator chefs in Agora Food Studio,

Timor-Leste @Safira Guterres

⁴ Moniz Ika 2020, 'Video 1975 momento Sr. Satinho Mali-Lait sei 19 anos', *Moniz Ika*, Facebook, 6 May, retrieved 11 June <https://www.facebook.com/100003729786912/posts/1898168813650760/?d=n>

This new food movement led by young innovators and young chefs has begun revitalizing Timorese food. They show that Instead of eating instant foods bought in cans and plastics, Timorese should nourish their bodies with natural and organic foods and “eat what you grow”.

Adi Carvalho, a young horticulturist who works for an agriculture project implemented by Cardno and funded by USAID Timo-Leste. Besides working at the project, he also has a farm of his own. He posts regularly on Facebook about the food he grows and he produces this food on his own farm and assists local farmers and shows how to process local ingredients in innovative ways for meals, snacks, juices and dessert. This young farmer loves to encourage people to eat organic ingredients and posts attractive meals on Facebook in order to inspire people with his new recipes. Originally he was only intended to share it with his friends on the social media platform what he is up to every now and then in his house and farm. There is interested in friends on the innovative ideas he shared, that inspires him to post even more and regularly. In the photo is his delicious and healthy pumpkin cake and doughnuts.



Innovative local foods, Timor-Leste, @Adi Carvalho

The issue of malnutrition in Timor-Leste is being addresses by many NGOs, both local and international, the government, especially the Ministry of Health, but also by local communities themselves. How they eat and how they cook nutritious meals to feed their children is seen as a significant issue. Households which survive on insufficient nutrients have dire consequences for children’s wellbeing. Together NGOs and nutrition programs and projects based in local community work together with government to combat malnutrition in Timor-Leste, and those using local ingredients are most hopeful. All these contributions have made significant changes within communities. Every year the rate of malnutrition decreases by 1% to 2%. Some of the programs have filled the Nutrition gaps and some communities have improved nutrition diets among their children.

Asosiasaun Halibur Inovador (AHI), Gathering Innovators Association, is a program funded by the government to work with communities in rural areas to innovate with local foods to tackle malnutrition in households. Young innovators give training to communities and get the kids involved to learn and understand that indigenous foods have value.



Local Ingredients displayed for training. @Safira Guterres Community in Ermera were elated to learn how to process foods in innovative ways. Timor-Leste, @ Guvery

The program has prioritized using local ingredients and wild plants to innovate with foods that have almost been lost from the community.

"Do not leave behind the oldest foods because they are your roots and your identity."

It is also crucial to reinvigorate indigenous foods by documenting stories for the younger generation because these foods were valued by our ancestors who were sustained by them in the.

Many rural people have closed their eyes to eating these indigenous foods and because they lack information about the nutritional value of these foods have relied on eating cheap imported food which has led to unhealthy outcomes. Eating healthy and delicious food is the main target of the programs so that children can eat foods that they grow and are more affordable.

These famine foods were processing into innovative foods. Famine food is considered wild beans and tubers which were common in the traditional diet of Timorese people.



Food Innovations on Famine Foods in Ermera, Timor-Leste @Safira Guterres

The meals in pictures are Wild Yam '*Kumbili Krokete*' (first-left), Cassava '*Ai-farina Boraxa Lulun*' (second-left), Wild beans '*Koto Moruk/Tisi*' (first-right) and Pumpkin and Sweet Potato flat bread '*Paun Lakeru no Fehuk Midar*' (second-right).

Rather than eating imported foods of low nutritinal value, it is better to take a lesson from the life of the past and teach children how to eat healthy locally grown foods.



Children eating nutritious and delicious foods innovated by their mothers and teachers. Ermera, Timor-Leste @Safira Guterres

The children in these photos were happy to be involved in the *Asosiasaun Halibur Inovador* program in Glenu, Ermera.

The little boy said; "We are extremely happy to see these types of foods in our life. This is our first time to taste such fancy, delicious and nutritious foods". With smile on her face, the little girl expressed, "This is the first time I saw sweet potato, cassava and yams to make into bread. I feel like I am eating wealthy people's food ".

We can see the new food movements that have started in Timor-Leste largely by a younger generation of innovators to create a new future for our nation. To do this we need to consider the value and stories of heritage and wild foods.

Writer Profile

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Safira Guterres (preferred name) is a young Food Storyteller. She is passionate about researching food cultures in Timor-Leste, including its stories and cuisines. Currently, she is completing a Bachelor of Nutrition and Science, majoring in Food Innovation, at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia.

Pictures' description:

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2. Children in Maubisse, Timor-Leste @Antonio Sampaio
3. Avo Joana Guterres (second-left), Timor-Leste @Jay Guterres
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