

# FIJIAN DAIRO VAKASOSO VAKA-VITI

## (STUFFED SEA CUCUMBER)



A sea cucumber fisher with dried products ready to sell. Vuna village, Taveuni, Fiji.

PHOTO: ACIAR

### ABOUT THE DISH

The recipe is a traditional Fijian way of preparing sea cucumber updated with modern ingredients. This dish is traditionally prepared for feasts or family gatherings. The recipe was provided by Mrs Pauline Fong Toy, Fiji, the mother-in-law of one of our collaborating scientists from the Pacific community.

While the fished sea cucumber species in the Pacific are usually dried and exported to China rather than being consumed locally, in Fiji there is one species—the sandfish (*Holothuria scabra*)—that is traditionally eaten by Fijians. This species contributes to food security and is protected by Fiji fisheries legislation, which restricts export volumes. Sandfish are sold fresh in local markets but the size of the sea cucumber has been decreasing because of overfishing due to supply of the Chinese market, where it is dehydrated and labelled ‘beche-de-mer’.

### PROCESSING OF SEA CUCUMBERS IN THE WESTERN PACIFIC

Sea cucumbers are worth \$20 million to \$50 million a year in exports from Pacific island countries. Wild harvest has provided income to more than 300,000 small-scale fishers in the Western Pacific in recent years. The main issues facing sea cucumber fisheries are the postharvest processes used by fishers and inadequate or ineffective management frameworks, enforcement and governance. Several recent initiatives have started to improve fisheries management but need to progress in tandem

with improved processing methods if fishers are expected to harvest less yet still earn sufficient income for their families.

There have been several ACIAR projects in the region, with FIS/2010/096 focusing on improving postharvest processing of cucumbers so that export quotas can be lowered (as exported sea cucumbers are a higher-value product).

### THE PROJECT

The overall aim of this project is to improve the incomes of village fishers in Kiribati, Tonga and Fiji through support to improve the quality of postharvest processing of sea cucumbers. At least 3,000 households are expected to benefit financially from the project as a primary impact. The outputs could also prove valuable to Torres Strait Islanders who harvest sea cucumbers commercially. A greater involvement of women in the fishery through postharvest processing is expected.

The Western Pacific postharvest-processing sea cucumber project is led by Dr Steven Purcell from Southern Cross University and is commissioned through ACIAR's Fisheries Program.

Proper processing of sea cucumbers can reap a two to fourfold increase in sale prices from fishers to buyers, but many fishers did not know how to process sea cucumbers. Training manuals have been a fantastic tool for village fishers and more than 95% of workshop participants in Fiji, Kiribati and Tonga reported that the workshops provided

new knowledge and had changed their thinking on processing.

Many of the fishers interviewed say that they continue to refer back to the manual. The following year the project team followed up with the trainees to understand how the processing methods had been integrated into their farming practices.

In the village of Vuna on Taveuni Island, Fiji, one fisher said that he found the workshop most useful and had never been taught proper processing methods. The follow-up questionnaire showed that this farmer had sustained the best-practice methods he had been taught the previous year and had even taught his uncle based on the training provided. ■

#### ACIAR PROJECT FIS/2010/096

Benefits of improving postharvest processing of sea cucumbers in the Western Pacific.

#### MORE INFORMATION

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### Fijian Dairo Vakasoso Vaka-Viti (stuffed sea cucumber)

#### Ingredients

4 fresh or fresh-frozen sea cucumbers (dairo, sandfish), the bigger the better (approximately 600 to 800 g) \*

300 g sliced green pawpaw

1 can tinned corned beef

1 sliced onion

4 to 5 whole fresh chillies, diced

½ a bunch of fresh coriander

400 ml coconut cream

\* Where fresh sea cucumber is not available, the dehydrated version (called beche-de-mer) is also suitable after being soaked.

#### Method

1. Gently scrub the outside of the sea cucumbers with a brush. Slice each one open down one side and remove all entrails and grit.
2. Place in a saucepan with the slices of green pawpaw and cover with water. Bring to a boil for about 10 minutes, then simmer for about 40 minutes. Be careful not to overcook!
3. Mix the corned beef with the sliced onion in a bowl along with chilli and coriander to make a stuffing mixture. Stuff the sea cucumbers with this mixture.
4. Place the stuffed sea cucumbers back in the saucepan and pour coconut cream over them. Increase heat until coconut cream starts to bubble, then turn off heat.
5. Serve with a root crop such as taro, cassava or sweetpotato, leafy green vegetables such as slippery cabbage, spinach or watercress and garnish with extra fresh chilli.

Serves 4