

TIMOR-LESTE BABILAK AI-LUKA

(CASSAVA BALL WITH COCONUT)

ABOUT THE DISH

Cassava (*Manihot esculenta*) is a root crop that is native to tropical America but is now cultivated virtually all around the world. It is consumed by millions of people throughout the tropics and accounts for about 30% of world production of roots and tubers. It is rich in carbohydrate and dietary fibre and better able to tolerate seasonal drought than other major food crops. Both roots and leaves, however, can be toxic due to the presence of compounds containing cyanide that can liberate a potent toxin—hydrogen cyanide. Cassava varieties referred to as ‘sweet’ contain low levels of cyanogenic compounds and their roots can be peeled and cooked like other root vegetables. Those referred to as ‘bitter’ require extensive processing before they are safe to consume.

TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL SEED SYSTEM FOR TIMOR-LESTE

Timor-Leste is predominantly an agrarian economy. Agriculture provides employment for 80% of people and accounts for 30% of gross domestic production. Just less than half of all households rely on subsistence agriculture and are below the basic-needs poverty line. With no food security, many people experience a ‘hungry season’ of up to four months per year.

One of the biggest challenges faced by the nation is increasing production of the main staple crops. While a range of factors contribute to low productivity—such as low-yielding varieties, poor agronomy and high postharvest losses—developing improved varieties with higher yield potential is where the most immediate and significant gains can be obtained.

THE PROJECT

In collaboration with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Timor-Leste

Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF), ACIAR has played a key role in the Seeds of Life project through the introduction, testing and initial distribution to farmers of improved germplasm of the major food crops: sweetpotato, maize, cassava, peanuts and irrigated rice. National capacity to carry on this work has also been established through the creation of research, development and extension services such as national agricultural research centres, research stations and learning centres where farmers can receive training, information and support. In the third phase of the Seeds of Life project, the aim was to establish the foundations of a national seed system, providing a high level of access to seed of improved varieties to farmers throughout the country. The outcomes sought include:

1. Identification and release of improved varieties of food crops;
2. Formal production and distribution of seed, involving the establishment of seed processing centres and the production and distribution of maize, rice, peanuts, sweetpotato and cassava seed and cuttings;
3. Informal production and distribution of seed (involving increasing farmers’ access to improved varieties outside government channels); and
4. Improving the capacity of the Timor-Leste MAF to implement a seed management system.

Local farmer Francisca Pinto became involved with Seeds of Life in 2009, initially testing sweetpotato and cassava varieties. She then became an MAF contract grower of certified seed and is now an active member of a commercial seed producer group named ‘Unidade Sameklot’.

Mrs Pinto says the project has had a significant impact on her family. She says her household now has enough food to eat and enough corn to last all year, sometimes producing so much that they can’t sell it all. Improved nutrition has led to

better health, with Mrs Pinto reporting that her family no longer become ill for no reason. The next generation will have even greater opportunities as Mrs Pinto has been able to educate her five children and repair her house.

ACIAR will build on the successes of Seeds of Life through a follow-on project looking at community-level agricultural innovation. ■

Timor-Leste’s Babilak Ai-luka (cassava ball with coconut)

Ingredients

500 to 700 g grated cassava
(2 large cassava tubers)
500 g grated coconut (2 coconuts)
½ tsp salt
4 tsp tapioca flour
100 g or ½ cup brown sugar (or to taste)
50 g fresh basil leaf (or to taste)

Method

1. Mix ingredients well, then form into small balls.
2. Fry in hot oil until golden brown.

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Agricultural innovations for communities for intensified and sustainable farming systems in Timor-Leste (AI-Com)

MORE INFORMATION

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1. Cassava balls
2. These women from a community seed production group in Natarbora, Manatuto district, show some of the group's Utamua peanuts. PHOTO: JESSY BETTY

3. A member of the 10-person community seed production group outside Maubisse, Ainaro district, cuts weeds growing in his group's communal Sele maize field. PHOTO: CONOR ASHLEIGH