

WHAT'S FOR TEA MUMMY?

Julie McLean

Of all the things that expats have to face in their new environments, the change to their normal dietary habits is the one that often is the most difficult to deal with. I can cope with fluctuating power, the constant heat and humidity, security guards, week-old newspapers, potholes in the road, cultural differences and confusions, but when I can't buy my favourite breakfast cereal I tend to fall to pieces. I have run with my children in my arms from *rascals* (criminals) who were shooting over our heads, and coped without a twitch. But have stood in the supermarket and cried because I couldn't buy a block of chocolate to use on my daughter's birthday cake.

PNG does not have a world-renowned cuisine. Somewhere between the dinosaur and tinned fish and rice, someone lost the cookbook. So the life of an expat woman in an isolated community in this country becomes one of substitution and imagination. It is a constant challenge to keep your family food traditions continuing, to keep your children from developing scurvy, and to stop them saying, 'Mummy what is that?' (to discover they're pointing to a zucchini), when you walk through a supermarket back in Australia.

Walking through supermarkets with unfamiliar packaging and unreadable labels is very overwhelming for expats in non-English speaking countries, however most imports into PNG come from Australia. We do get lots of food items from Asia too and many of these have non-English labels that make shopping sometimes a bit of a lottery.

Our markets, with some of their greenery of unknown origins and taste, can be self-defeating. 'Which banana do I eat? Which one do I cook? What is the funny thing with the green bumps all over it? Fern leaves - do I eat them or put them in a pot plant?' All the bits I used to throw away are now the bits I see for sale. I can buy the celery leaves but where are the stalks? There are bundles of pumpkin leaves but no pumpkins attached. The rabbit eats very well but I am still unsure what to do with half of it.

There can develop a find-and-hoard mentality here. The expat women in Tabubil would always do the ring-around when the shipment of Australian food came in to the supermarket. We would immediately get on the bush telegraph and before you could say 'Peaches, grapes and strawberries,' cars all over town would splutter into action and there would be a mini-traffic jam in the car park of the supermarket. Women would rush in with trolleys and stock up, but there was an unwritten law of

just taking your share and leaving enough for everyone else. This came unstuck one day when a box of strawberries arrived in the fruit and veggie section. As they were being put out, an expat woman, who will remain anonymous, came racing in and grabbed them all. Bryan stood there with his mouth open and just managed to splutter, 'Er... I was hoping to take some of them home for Julie.'

Whereupon the woman promptly put one punnet back in the box, turned on her heels and ran. Later over drinks, we all hoped she'd choke on her strawberries and cream that night. In war there is always a traitor.

Organizing the food for a dinner party is sometimes a difficult hunting-and-gathering occupation. It has taught me the benefits of having Plans A, B and C when organising the menu. For expats here, dinner parties are a huge part of our lives, and are often large and always regular occurrences. But the only way to prepare is with a number of different menus so when you go shopping you aren't disappointed.

The good thing is we all rally around and help each other out with the ingredients. It could get quite political though. If you need basil for a dish and you know Mrs X has a great bush of it, guess who you feel you have to invite to the dinner party? Luckily most of us are all good mates and all dig around in the freezer looking for a tub of sour cream or a packet of pine nuts to help out.

In our first posting in PNG, the Supermarket Fruit and Veggie section in early years, usually contained a bin of rotting onions and potatoes that they would 'refresh' every morning with fly spray. There would sometimes be a few cauliflowers so severely trimmed they were cube shaped, and the odd bin of carrots. A friend of mine taught me how to tell if a carrot was fresh or not.

Ye Ol' Carrot Freshness Test

- Step 1. Pick up carrot from bin.
- Step 2. Take firm hold of one end of carrot.
- Step 3. Take firm hold of other end of carrot.
- Step 4. Bring both ends together.
- Step 5. If carrot makes a complete circle put it back in bin and go back to Step 1.
- Step 6. If carrot makes a semi-circle grab a big bag and fill it up - you never know when you'll get such fresh ones again.

In our new location now on an island off the coast of PNG, we have difficulty getting quite a few things and for some weird reason brown sugar and cream cheese. Now look, when I was in Australia I hardly ever used cream cheese and brown sugar, but the mere fact I can't buy it here sends me into near hysterics. When a carton of

cream cheese arrived in town a few weeks ago and a certain person was seen taking the whole carton home, tempers rose and calls could be heard for said person to be cream-cheesed and feathered.

We constantly talk about what we can't get. I am at times consumed by the thought of zucchini, mushrooms that don't bounce, Turkish Delight and Apple Danish. I dream of shaved ham, crusty bread, crunchy apples and snow peas. I have cupboards full of electrical equipment to make the food I can't always get. I have an ice cream maker, bread maker, pasta maker, yoghurt maker and juicer to make the things we have trouble getting. We ask people coming in from Australia to bring us food packages. We fill our suitcases with tins of Jarrah Chocolate, bottles of mustard, pine nuts and treats for the cat.

When I know I can't live for another day without feta cheese, and I start dreaming about Richard Gere smothered in it, but all I can think of is where to find a knife and a piece of crusty bread, I know it was time for R & R. I get back to Australia and eat half my body weight in food (and crisp white wine that hasn't turned to vinegar in the heat) and then roll onto the plane, and spend the next three months trying to lose the weight I put on.

Recently I was craving broccoli. I would have killed for a head of green broccoli. Not broccoli that was yellow and soft and trimmed almost down to the stalk, but crunchy green broccoli. When it finally arrived and I got it home it was almost an anti-climax. How many dishes can I put broccoli into, I would scheme? 'Mum do we have to eat broccoli soup/pancakes/muffins/ice cream again?' the family would moan.

The other problem in PNG is the humidity and heat and what it can do to food.

Believe me, I've lived in the tropics for a number of years and nothing sits in a fruit bowl unless it is made of plastic. I've seen a pineapple go from green to juice in 24 hours on a bench. Ripe bananas have to be eaten within a day of purchase to prevent them turning into banana custard. Onions and potatoes turn into Bubble and Squeak in the pantry, and biscuits must be refrigerated not only to prevent the mould taking hold but the ants carting them off. *Anis* (ants) may be small, but what they have lost in bodily dimensions during evolution they have made up for in numbers. I've seen the cats' bowl walking out the door on the shoulders of a herd of *anis*. They eat our underwear; rubber gloves and chew threw packets in the pantry. They build nests in our cupboards, in the computer and in my car. They will take over the world one day!

Koki (cockroaches) are also a problem and in the mountains of PNG they are the size of small horses. I tried hitting one with a thong once and just gave it a bent antennae and a very bad attitude. They look you in the eye; twist their moustaches; open the pantry door and just eat what they want!

Larger wild animals however are very scarce in PNG and because of this, protein-deficiency has always been a problem here. Therefore any creature with meat on its bones is fair game - so to speak. *Pisin* (birds) are a delicacy, especially in the Highlands so any that are still in the wild usually have neurotic ticks and a reluctance to make any bird-like-sound, for fear of being shang-eyed and slapped between two slices of bread.

Jacob was one of our gardeners - a local gentleman from the village of Oksapmin. He was about 20 years of age with a taste for *pinis*. He and I had a running battle over his take-away dinners. He would find a *pinis* and tie it by one leg to a tree for the day so he could take it home for dinner. Of course I would find this most difficult to deal with. The *pinis* would pull their leg bindings and make gut-wrenching cries that would send me into hysterics. I would then stomp downstairs and point to the offending tree and tell him to let the poor thing go. Now to Jacob this was the equivalent of someone coming up to you in McDonalds and waving their hand frantically at you and demanding you set your hamburger free. It was a collision of different worlds, but as I was paying his wages and it was my tree, I decided in this matter my world would win.

Piks (pigs) are the most important animal in PNG and have been in the country for 6000 years after being introduced from Asia. There are the wild variety, which are hunted, and also the domestic ones. Domesticated pigs are highly valued in the village and are cared for by the family like a priced pet. It has been known for a woman to cut off her finger in mourning for a dead pig. They are a symbol of wealth and status, and used to pay bride price and compensation. They are not killed for daily food but are only slaughtered for a special ceremony.

Never mention the word *mumu* in hearing distance of a *pik*. They tend to get weak in the knees and have at times been known to faint. *Mumus* are similar to the Maori *hangi* - large pit, fire-heated stones and leaf-wrapped vegetables and meat (usually *pik*). The food from them is an acquired taste - very smoky, but always perfectly cooked.

Any big celebration or function has the obligatory stuffed (in more ways than one) *pik*, holding pride of place in the centre of the table. I have always had a slight problem with eating meat if it is in the shape of its former living self, so this is always very off-putting. I have tried not to pass this phobia on to my off-spring but when I see my first-born clutching her stomach and threatening to throw-up on the table the minute she sees Porky on the Platter at a function, I guess I haven't been that effective.

The *Massacre on the Beach*, as it is has now been called, did nothing to help this mass hysteria in the female side of our family. Pigs are very clever animals. I suppose if you were led down the beach by a couple of guys carrying great big bush

knives and a large bottle of pork marinade, you wouldn't have to be the smartest pig in the world to work out that you weren't going for an early morning stroll. The pig worked it out pretty quickly and started to panic (must have been the pork marinade). Now the sound of a screaming pig is one to chill you to the very bone and put you right off your weat-bix!! The neighbours had decided to kill the pig on **our** beach at 7 am in the morning.

It was very difficult to hear the voice of the woman next door who answered my phone call, over the hysterical screaming of my children **and** the pig, but I'm sure she had no problems hearing **my** voice.

That night the smell of roasting pig was enough to set the children off again into sobs and sniffles. These days we try and feed them before we go to any celebration and we keep them well away from the buffet table.



Julie McLean is a part-time teacher and keen cook who has lived in PNG for six years with her husband Bryan, and two daughters. They lived initially in Tabubil and now can be found living on the beach in East New Britain, with the sounds of thudding coconuts, the sweet taste of pineapples and the stunning views at sunset over St George's Channel.

Copyright © 2003 Julie McLean, All Rights Reserved