

September 12, 2007 11:38am AEST

Paradise on a plate

Susan Kurosawa meets an Australian chef who's redefining Fijian cuisine

Would you like to comment on this article? [Click here](#)

| July 07, 2007

SHANE Watson looks happily weary and admits it has been an enormous challenge to get the culinary side of things organised at Likuliku Lagoon Resort, Fiji's newest luxury island bolthole.



Gone troppo: Shane Watson in the kitchen at Likuliku

The one-time My Restaurant Rules reality television contender, former executive chef at Sea Temple Palm Cove in north Queensland and, most recently, the Sofitel Queenstown in New Zealand's South Island, has undergone not so much a sea change as a tropical transformation. In true troppo fashion, this has involved coming to grips with Fiji's airy regard for schedules. But construction delays in the opening of the 46-room resort (including Fiji's first overwater bures) and the ramifications of the unexpected military coup in December last year have had a silver lining for Watson. He has had unexpected time on his hands to explore the local culinary landscape and source premium produce and reliable suppliers.

Fiji has never really developed a reputation as a food destination, but Watson could be the man to change that. His style of cuisine -- which, with no regard for fancy tags, he simply calls "clean" -- is light, low in fat and dairy, and often Asian in its spiciness and execution. He has been inspired by working with Neil Perry at Sydney's Rockpool and is striving for dishes that suit the climate and no-hurry lifestyle of the sultry South Pacific. He is not a fan of "secondary sauces" and likes to eliminate fats, aside from those occurring naturally in meat. "I rely on pan juices; I try to get rid of the starch," he says.

Likuliku Lagoon has one restaurant, Fijiana, with indoor seating and alfresco terrace dining, and Watson's menus change daily. Dishes are deliberately small, encouraging excursions across the menu: no one blinks if diners opt for multiple entrees or two main courses at lunch or dinner.

Lunch always starts with an amuse bouche, usually a cooler, in yin and yang flavours such as raspberry and bush lemon, served in a shot glass. Main course could be a choice of seared coral trout with green pea puree, crisp prosciutto and balsamic, or chilli-spiked fried noodles or grilled fillet steak sandwich with bacon, brie, rocket and onion marmalade.

Watson is genuinely amazed at the quality and variety of the produce he has discovered; his manic food-finding expeditions around and over the main Fiji island of Viti Levu have become the stuff of awe among

his kitchen staff. "Getting the fresh seasonal produce you really want is any chef's eternal nightmare," he says.

But he's delighted to have made connections with suppliers of free-range eggs and organic fruit and vegetables, and the pork purveyor Vuda Piggery, near Lautoka. Watson recently discovered Spices of Fiji, an organic plantation at Wainadoi, halfway between Suva and Pacific Harbour on Viti Levu. "It's an oasis of vanilla, cinnamon, nutmeg and pepper ... I've never smelled anything like it. We order and they blend; I never imagined I would find a fresh vanilla bean in Fiji."

Watson has also forged a productive relationship with Nadi Bay Herbs, a small operation near Nadi airport that supplies him with mustard cress and varieties of basil. "The leaves are the size of dinner plates," he says. He adds that Nadi Bay Herbs is the largest provider of basil to NZ: "The Kiwis don't realise that most of their pesto has started life in Fiji." Watson also says: "Nadi Bay Herbs only grows what the locals won't eat because theirs is a hunter-gatherer tradition and they will just take the crops."

Likuliku Lagoon Resort, on Mololo Island in the Mamanuca group west of Nadi, is surrounded by a marine sanctuary, but fish is provided fresh from neighbouring waters, including utterly delicious coral trout. Mud crabs, on which Watson routinely performs an Asian makeover with chilli and soy, are readily available at Lautoka Market, near Nadi, while "meaty and textured" scampi and prawns come from a freshwater farm on the Navua River in the centre of Viti Levu.

His forays have meant opportunities to sample local dishes, too. "I've even taken to cassava," he says, admitting how surprised he is by his enthusiastic regard for this starchy vegetable, a staple of Fijian cooking. He's got a taste for kokoda, too. This local delicacy -- raw fish (usually mahi-mahi) marinated in lime juice with coconut cream, chopped red onion and chilli -- is similar to Tahiti's poisson cru. "It's a sexy little dish," Watson tells me. "I just have to step back and admire the way the Fijians orchestrate it."

Watson also loves the way Fijians eat in family groups, often with their hands. He features a magiti (Fijian for feast) banquet on Sunday evenings, served "share style" with small dishes designed to be passed around the table. On Tuesdays, there's an Australian twist at South Pacific barbecue night. This talented young chef is tapping into the Indian and Chinese cultural heritage of Fiji, too. "There are amazing Indian restaurants in Nadi Town," he says. "I love the Indian snack food, especially bara, a deep-fried fritter spiced with cardamom and cumin and smothered with chilli."

Meanwhile, back at Likuliku Lagoon Resort, general manager Steve Anstey says almost every guest is starting the day with Watson's bircher muesli from the continental buffet and DIY juice from a platter of fruit and vegetables, ready to be blended. Even those who claim they never eat breakfast seem to be hooked by what's swiftly become the resort's signature morning dish: a perfect omelette filled with mud crab, chilli and wild rocket, and served with a hot papaya relish.

As the day progresses, perhaps soy-steamed chicken for lunch, served with jasmine rice, ginger and shallot oil? And the dessert stand-out? A delicate carpaccio of pineapple served with kaffir lime ice cream. Culinary adventures in paradise indeed.

www.likulikulagoon.com

Susan Kurosawa's review of Likuliku Lagoon Resort (Travel & Indulgence, June 23-24).

Copyright 2007 News Limited. All times AEST (GMT +10).