Ripe Banana Cake *Pilhai*

*Preparation time: 20 minutes • Cooking time: 1 hour • Serves: 24*

1 dozen ripe bananas  
1 cup self raising flour  
1 small tsp salt

Mash bananas very well and add flour and salt. Put into greased baking tin and bake in moderate oven for one hour.
The Sunshine Club’s Norfolk Island Cookery Book contains a number of other dishes with names in Norf’k, including anna, mudda and marie, all of them variations of the original recipe. The name of the dish made from cold kumaras and coconut milk is anna. A dish made from flour, boiled milk, and fruit such as red guavas, mulberries, or loquat is called marie, probably in honour of the woman who first produced it. The origin of the word mudda or mada, ‘grated banana dumplings boiled in milk’ is not clear. It has been suggested that the name of this dish, made from grated green banana dumplings boiled in milk derives from Polynesian mata, ‘uncooked’, ‘unripe’ although a form with this meaning is not recorded for Tahitian. The word appears in Källgård’s 1998 Pitkern wordlist as mada, though the more usual Pitkern name of the dish is China dumpling, so named after the banana variety ‘China’. It is possible that the Pitkern-Norf’k word mada may refer to the use of bananas when they are unripe or raw but...
there is another possibility: the dish may have been named after an old Pitcairnese woman who was called Mudder (Mother), and the first person to make mudda.

Pilhai probably originates from the Tahitian pirahi, translated as ‘the name of a species of food, bundles of food tied up’. The dish was one of the meals that the Polynesian partners of the Bounty mutineers introduced to Pitcairn Island and adapted to local ingredients. There are several spelling variations, multiple methods of preparation, all using vegetables that were easily found on the island.

Like other linguistic and cultural adaptations, pilhai adapted to the new environment of Norfolk Island. In the same way that cow’s milk, which was not present on Pitcairn, was substituted for coconut milk in the dish mudda, because coconuts did not ripen properly on Norfolk, pilhai also changed its form and content on Norfolk. Again due to the absence of fresh coconut in the early days after the Pitcairners arrived on Norfolk, it was simply left out. Once a store was established and there was a ready supply of tinned and desiccated coconut, the traditional Pitcairn interpretation of the dish was revived. Pilhai is an essential dish served at the Bounty Day (8 June) picnic at Kingston on Norfolk, the annual celebration of the arrival of the Pitcairners on Norfolk Island. The event reinforces the cultural identity of the Pitcairners as connected to Norfolk’s natural and cultural landscape and also to a broader connection to Pitcairn, Tahiti and the South Pacific.

Different spellings and recipes for pilhai and different names for the same dish are typical of an oral language spoken in a subsistence society. It also is indicative of the adhoc-ness of Pitcairn and Norfolk cooking as an element of its culture. The language has a number of informative expressions such as the Pitkern allen ‘poor food’ after Allen Christian who, when disappointed with dinner said grace with the words ‘where is the food we are about to receive’ or Norf’k snel ‘to cater insufficiently’, or slogos ‘hastily whipped up scones.’ Because the cuisine was not overly sophisticated, the main meal was eaten in the evening and the same meal served cold often made its reappearance at breakfast time or in the lunch boxes of the islanders who worked in their fence ‘enclosed gardens’ or on fishing vessels. In this sense pilhai was a sensible and practical dish to prepare and eat; it did not require refrigeration and would keep for several days. The main meal was usually in the evening and they also would have had a Sunday meal – such as leg bone stew.

Recipe books are not necessarily able to cope with ingredients that are not continually present in the cultivated or wild vegetation where they are collected. In oral cultures and cultures where things such as vegetables and other perishable items are not consistently present, the writing of recipe books and the documentation of recipes as intangible cultural heritage and the utilization of recipes for creating tangible (and edible) cultural heritage is quite a problematic exercise. Norfolk cookbooks are not essential because the recipes come from such an oral culture. However, they are ideological statements and markers of identity, just as the use of the yorlo stone for grating the ingredients is not essential but is understood to lend the dish authenticity. Cookbooks are sold to tourists and islanders in order to show that they support an important social activity, e.g. the Sunshine Club, the publisher of the most well-known Norfolk cookbook, which is a hospital auxiliary and helps finance medical supplies for Norfolk Island. In the same way that Norf’k has moved from being an everyday language to a marker of social identity, pilhai has also moved from being an unmarked, everyday food in the past to a symbolic marker of Norfolk identity and culture in the present.

Further Reading

Beechey, R. N. (1832) Narrative of a Voyage to the Pacific and Beering’s Strait, to co-operate with the Polar Expeditions performed in HMS Blossom, under the command of Captain F. W. Beechey, RN. In the Years 1825-1828. Philadelphia PA: Carey and Lea.

Davies, J. (1851) A Tahitian and English dictionary with introductory remarks on the Polynesian language, and a short grammar of the Tahitian dialect: with an appendix containing a list of foreign words used in the Tahitian Bible, in commerce, etc., with the sources from whence they have been derived. Tahiti: London Missionary Society Press.


Norfolk Island Cookery Book with Local Words and Phrases (no date), Compiled by Members of the Sunshine Club, Norfolk Island: Greenways Press.