

## A Family that Eats Together, Eats

"Now, mmm... where did I put the chopping board?" wondered my mother.

I could not believe my ears. Surely she was joking. Who would bring a chopping board for "a quick swim" at Flic en Flac beach?

Within five minutes she had lunch organised. Foie gras with truffles from Madagascar, smoked salami and crackling from her cousin's charcutier in Réunion, warm onion tart and a chilled bottle of South African Chenin Blanc. Bliss.

So why didn't I feel like an extra in a 'Vogue Living' commercial?

Probably because my nephews were ripping through their KFC and french fries. And ignoring what I had to say about the amount of sugar in their fizzy drinks.

After all I was back in Mauritius, my home and sugar cane island. In three years that I had been away my nephews had grown up but their taste had not matured. A dumb-founding embarrassment to my family whose meticulous passion for cooking and fine food is legendary in our circle of friends.

I had arrived from Sydney earlier that week in the middle of the night. They were all waiting outside the terminal: my parents, my two sisters, their husbands and my four nephews.

Would I like something to eat or drink before we drove home?

In the boot was the inevitable 'en cas' basket - in case my plane was late. My plane was early but I noticed most of the cups had already been used.

At home around 2.30 a.m my parents had us all sitting at the dining table for vanilla tea, home made brioche with essence of bergamotte and my favourite, paw paw and pineapple jam. My parents were beaming: their son was back and they were once again hosting their complete family.

Later, that same night I could not sleep and tiptoed to the kitchen for a juice. My jet-lagged eyes stared at a handwritten list of meals stuck to the fridge. It turned out to be the menu for the following month. I was back home alright.

Next to the fridge was the faithful chest freezer. Probably the only freezer in the world to go on holidays on the coast every year.

As far as I can remember that freezer has always been my mother's and sisters' sine qua non condition to going on holidays with the flock.

"We want to spend as much time as you guys on the beach. Not in the kitchen".

The ritual starts a month ahead when we gather to discuss the holiday's menu and logistics. My nephews agonize over their request of cakes, the women insist that they must be served their drinks IN the sea everyday and the men rave about the a-b-s-o-l-u-t-e necessity of pre lunch/ dinner snacks with the apéritifs.

Frantic shopping and cooking weeks follow. And slowly the freezer fills up. Pea and curry soup, fish with turmeric and ginger, squid au gratin, peanut chicken, venison with green peppercorns, orange and almond tart, prune cake, guava ice cream and... my Australian friends wonder why I'm so obsessed with eating.

On the appropriate day, a truck is hired to move the freezer and contents to the beach house. (With time, the removalists have stopped giggling because they now know of the 'en cas' basket at the other end).

And thus thanks to the freezer everybody has a relaxing and stuffing good time.

When I moved to Sydney for my university studies my family's main concern was that I ate properly. It took me a while to realise that my relatives here would always manage to open my fridge and cupboards when visiting - they had been asked to report on the status of my food supplies.

"Chockers" they wrote back.

Away from home my efforts to follow my family's traditions were finally acknowledged the day I got asked by my best friends to make their 30th birthday party cake.

I would show them. The fact that eighty people were invited did not even make me blink. I would bake a moment of history.

Forty five eggs later I started to sweat. And when my food processor died on me I had no solution but to hand grate all five fresh coconuts. Eight band aids later shredded coconut was streaming out of my ears.

At the party my enormous 'Génoise au Coco' was THE conversation piece. I casually flashed my band aids and detailed the mechanics:

"Layers of sponge cake soaked in kirsch and filled with crème pâtissière and fresh coconut. Covered in a softly cooked meringue and sprinkled with more coconut".

With all their guests gathered my friends proceeded to cut the cake. It was at that moment that a late comer standing next to me asked loudly:

"Is this just a big Lamington?".

*- Good Living, Sydney Morning Herald, 1 December 1992*