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THE CHEF WHO RETURNED HOME

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THE CHEF WHO **RETURNED** HOME

By RAJAN SAMI
Photos SUPPLIED

Executive Chef Ashim Singh cuts a lanky figure in his kitchen whites, the sleeves of his uniform rolled up to reveal a smattering of chef's knives tattooed on his right forearm. "There's also a butcher's diagram of beef cuts on my back," he tells me as we sit in the Tokoriki Island Resort lounge in the Mamanucas to talk food.

The Nadi-born, Nausori-raised, globe-trotting chef picked up the Memento-esque tattoos on his culinary travels through Asia, the Pacific Isles and New Zealand over the past 20 plus years. They tell you a lot about his priorities: food isn't just something he does for a living, it's his life.

It's this obsessive passion with the nuts and bolts of cooking that saw him trade in executive positions in South East Asia and New Zealand where he led big teams in larger kitchens for something that's much more hands on. "I became a clipboard chef which I disliked immensely, it gave me no joy managing large kitchens with 74 chefs catering to 2000 people" he says. Ashim was expanding his culinary repertoire, having left Fiji and his Head Chef position at Tokoriki Island Resort in 1997 at the age of 21 for greener pastures in New Zealand, then onward to Hong Kong, Dubai, Papua New Guinea and Vietnam. In an Alchemist-worthy twist, Singh has found himself right back where he started 21 years ago as a young man of 21.

Tokoriki's current owner Andrew Turnbull (who, foodie sidebar, made his millions bringing Chupa Chups lollipops to the masses) had only just acquired the thread-bare, half-star resort the year prior in 1995 on a whim. In the years since, Andrew and his design-savant wife Yvonne have transformed Tokoriki into what it is today 'TripAdvisor's No. 1 Resort in Fiji' for the fourth year in a row.



Chef Ash Singh



Chef Orisi with Chef Ash



Vietnamese rolls



Chef Ash's utensil tattoo



Tokoriki's beach framed by palms

This 'homecoming' of a local boy done good, who's been given the reigns (and carte blanche with the menus) at Tokoriki, is monumental for a number of reasons. The Turnbells have long put the resort's local staff as well as Fijian art and culture front and centre at Tokoriki – it's part of what makes the place so captivating in a sea of cut-and-paste lookalikes. Their faith in putting a global Fijian chef at the helm of the multi-award winning luxury resort's kitchen and food experiences marks the dawn of a new era – one in which home grown talent can finally put their own distinctly Fijian stamp on the country's resort menus.

At Tokoriki, Ashim is approaching this in a measured yet self-assured way – putting his own take on the Asia/Pacific Rim cuisine-themed menu. He's elevated Fijian soul food staples like ika vaka lolo and palusami to fine dining status. "We crisp the skin and gently poach the fish in fresh coconut milk instead of cooking it whole," he says, of what has become one of the resorts most popular local dishes.

Moringa, a trending superfood or saijan as it's locally known is panfried Keralan-style with grated coconut and wrapped in a roti to accompany freshly caught walu. Only a chef raised in the islands could take a downhome ingredient found in backyards and put it on a resort menu. "We throw the drumsticks from the saijan tree into our dhal here at the resort," he says, adding: "It's great for flavour."

Ashim caught the food and cooking bug in his early teens while studying agricultural science at school. This led him to growing vegetables at home and selling the surplus to neighbours. In his spare time, Ashim would help out with his father's mobile catering company, cooking and selling popular local dishes like chop suey. To this day, he gets excited about local produce, which he is increasingly incorporating into the resort's menus.



Chef Ash with Aunty Raj & cousin Vinod Lal



*Kokoda Tokoriki style
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ASHIM'S TOP EATS IN NADI

It makes sense that all three of the globetrotting chef's top picks for Fiji eats are Nadi and Denarau based since he spends the bulk of his week on Tokoriki Island in the Mamanucas with days off the island spent in the jetset town. "I don't really go to Lautoka or Suva unless there's a reason," he says. "I just stay put in Nadi."

BONEFISH AT PORT DENARAU

"Try the Chinese style fried whole fish," he recommends. "It's very good. I took my mum there when she visited from New Zealand recently and I was very impressed. Everything including the service was good."

V AT THE SOFITEL, DENARAU

"It's not cheap but it's well worth it," says Ashim of the signature French-Fijian fusion cuisine at the Sofitel Resort. "It's a slow-paced fine dining experience with some exceptionally good food."

RAJU'S AT RB JETPOINT IN MARTINTAR

"This is our go to for simple local food in Nadi. We like it so much we practically live here - having our breakfasts and lunches when we're in town."



Asinate, Eseroma, Moape, Chef Ash
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*Fish in lolo*

Influences from Ashim's South-East Asian jaunts meet those from his Pacific heritage in dishes like the crunchy heart of palm salad and palusami lasagne (taro leaves baked with coconut cream layers). "Every day there's also a traditional Fijian curry on the menu," he says. A fan of bold flavours, he likes to throw in a bit of fresh chilli to spice things up.

In recent months, he has gone on a culinary odyssey of Thailand where he hung out with a local chef friend in places where only Thai was spoken and where he tried a bunch of dubious unmentionables. But he did learn to

cook really specific regional dishes from his friends' grandmothers, which will form some of the Thai-inspired dishes coming up at the resort.

His earlier stint at an expat-frequented Aussie steakhouse in Hanoi exposed him to aromatic Viet-flavours after hours. Late nights would end with early morning bowls of steaming hot pho. At Tokoriki, these Vietnamese street food experiences transform into more refined dishes like the pho ga noodles in broth with crispy chicken and garlic pickle. Also on offer: a custom seven-course Vietnamese degustation that he'll make upon

*Tokoriki's famous Sandy Ice-Cream*

request.

Next up, the chef is putting together a cookbook showcasing his signature dishes for Tokoriki Island Resort that guests can take home and savour. He's also looking at introducing more local touches to the resort's food experiences such as cooking on an open wood fire - "the way my mother and grandmother used to". He's also considering adding to his growing number of tattoos. The subject of his next one just happens to be one of his favourite ingredients: lemons.

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