HERITAGE MATTERS

Eating an Anniversary Pie By Dr. Edward Harris, MBE

The Company orders that Mr. Wilmott (who is to help with the whale fishing) shall go to the Savage Islands and trade there for things fit for England as for the Plantation, such as Cattle, Cassava, Sugar Canes, Negroes to dive for pearls, and plants.—**An Order to Governor Daniel Tucker, February 1616**.
A.C. Hollis Hallett, *Bermuda under the Sommer Islands Company 1612–1684, Civil Records*.

This soil by its nature produces a great variety of simples, many fine tall cedars, an innumerable number of palmettos, many mulberry trees and wild olives. Several other species of plants, since they are unfamiliar both in name and use, as yet remain not only nameless, but lacking in benefit, which time and application will no doubt one day reveal.

Now besides these natural products of the earth, providence and work have, since the settlement of the plantation, brought several other types of seeds and plant, which the soil has eagerly welcomed and fostered. As a result, there are at present (circa 1622) *a great abundance of fig trees, numerous plantains, plenty of pomegranates, many vines, orange and lemon trees, wild olives, a profusion of mulberry trees, fine tobacco, and a supply of corn (that is, Indian corn, for the European species of grain crops have not as yet proved successful, since the rough ground is over-run with grass). Besides these there are many other profitable roots, such as an endless quantity of white, red, and orange-coloured potatoes, sugar cane, indigo, parsnips, very large radishes, the American bread-fruit, cassava, Indian pumpkin, water melons, musk melons, and the delicate pineapple, and in short, whatever else of this sort may be wanted to satisfy either necessity or pleasure.*—**C.F.E. Hollis Hallet, *Butler's History of the Bermudas*.**

It is most fitting that the traditional Bermuda "pie" at this time of year is made of cassava, for that plant is a true native of this hemisphere, having originated in what is now western Brazil thousands of years ago. A couple of years ago, archaeologists found a garden of cassava that had been buried and preserved under layers of volcanic ash in the Mayan region of El Salvador. The leader of the expedition from the University of Colorado at Boulder, Payson Sheets, declared that "what we essentially found was a freshly planted manioc field that was 1,400 years old", having been buried by the eruption about 600 A.D. of the Loma Caldera volcano, some 15 miles west of San Salvador.

The discovery is apparently the first archaeological evidence of the cultivation of the calorie-rich cassava tuber in the New World and "manioc's extraordinary productivity may help explain how the Classic Maya at huge sites like Tikal in Guatemala and Copan in Honduras supported such dense populations". The Mayas of course were also eating those other great American food inventions, corn (not wheat, but "on the cob") and beans, to which may now be added cassava.

While originating in South America, the plant rapidly spread around the world in the 1500s, as the Spanish and Portuguese would have exported it from their western possessions. Today the largest producer and consumer is Africa south of the Sahara, with Thailand and Vietnam being the greatest exporters of dried cassava to the rest of the world.

Like some other plants, cassava has several alter egos, known as manioc, yuca, tapioca and mandioca, while for the scientific purists, it is *Manihot esculenta*, which is as hard to pronounce for some, as it is to taste or eat for others. As I was to discover in my youth, cassava, like its cousin, sago, is an acquired taste, better acquired at birth if you wish to enjoy the stuff. However, like it or not, cassava is apparently number 3 on the world list as the greatest source of carbohydrates for human consumption and it is also used as feed for some other animals.

Part of the reason for the unique taste of cassava must be related to the presence of "cyanogenic glucosides" in the leaves and roots of the plant. As a baby, you have little choice when being fed a pabulum of cyanide and if not properly processed, cassava can bring on "konza", a neurological disease. However, for some of the "sweeter", or less toxic varieties, cooking removes most of the cyanide. The ground-up root can also be soaked in water, which in some processes gives off hydrogen cyanide gases!

So you can see why some of us have an instinctive wariness about cassava and probably why it has to be, literally, sugarcoated and baked with almost equal amounts of eggs and butter. This makes the basics of cassava pie in Bermuda, which is a Christmas cholesterol time bomb, if you will. Chuck in some chicken or turkey meat and the cassava "pie" tastes almost like pound cake from the Crow Lane Bakery of yesteryear.

In historical interests, I grew some cassava in my Scaur Hill garden, which was harvested just before Christmas. My friend, the owner of the Freeport Restaurant at the Dockyard gate, kindly assisted in the de-cyanidification of the root, which he then put through an industrial grating machine, which accomplished in minutes what otherwise would have taken half a day.

The root produced seven pounds of tapioca, to which was added 24 eggs, several pounds of butter, a hundredweight of sugar and other ingredients, too secret to mention. Into the oven went half a dozen pans of batter, one pan also contained raisons, and the "cured" cassava in pie format soon appeared, ready to eat.

Out of respect for the 400th anniversary of our settlement in1609, I dutifully ate my potions of that cassava pie on New Year's Day and have survived to tell this tale of the cyanogenic properties of one of Bermuda's great gastronomic traditions. By the way, if left for a day or two in water, grated cassava ferments and produces excellent liquor, which we should perhaps add to our traditional tables. We may need such moonshine for the global difficulties that we are likely face in our anniversary year, so drink up and celebrate 400 years of cassava consumption while you can.