

'URU, BREADFRUIT TREE - Tree of Plenty

In Polynesia, you often just need to listen to the tales of a wise old man to discover the mysteries of the islands.

“A very long time ago, a huge famine raged across the island of Ra'iātea. Ruata'ata and his wife Rūmauari'i mourned the fate of their children. They had nothing left but red soil, *'araea*, to give to them for every meal.

One evening, Ruata'ata said to his wife, 'O Rūmauari'i, when you wake up tomorrow morning, you'll go out and you'll see my hands; they will be leaves. You'll see, my arms will be branches and my body a trunk, my head will be a round fruit.'

Ruata'ata went out but his wife had not understood his words. Upon waking, she noticed that the entrance to their cave was shaded by a glorious tree. It was thus that she suddenly understood the words of her husband who had transformed into a breadfruit tree during the night, into a *tumu 'uru*, so despaired was he to see his family dying of hunger.

The tree propagated quickly, from this valley of Ra'iātea, to the other high islands and became an endless source of food for the Polynesians.”

That is how the legend goes. The breadfruit tree is not, however, endemic to Polynesia; rather its history follows that of the first Polynesian settlers. Upon migrating, they had ensured to take a few plant species along with them in their double-hull canoes. *Artocarpus altilis* (breadfruit tree) is in fact originally from the Indo-Malay region, where it was of a particular dietary importance. The Polynesian settlers, as resourceful horticulturists, had selected to bring along with them the varieties that may be found in the islands today.

The trees of this plant are tall and powerful. Its leaves are broad and rugged and a beautiful rich deep green in colour. They look as if they had been varnished and may extend up to a metre in length. Its grey branches may unfold into the sky up to 20 metres above the ground.

From its wood, both light and soft, furniture and especially canoes may be manufactured. Its bark may also be beaten to produce fabric or *tapa*, previously used to make clothing. The thick and milky sap produced by all parts of the tree could also be mixed with coconut fibre and used to caulk canoes. This has also been used as a component in certain preparations of traditional medicine.

The fruit borne by the breadfruit tree, known as *maiore* or *'uru* in Tahitian, has a somewhat rough skin and a floury, slightly sweet taste. When the Europeans arrived, the *'uru* was a dietary staple for the Tahitians; these visitors therefore decided to name it the “breadfruit tree”.

There are currently some 50 varieties of *'uru* of which the most well known and sought after include the *pūero* (whose flesh is very popular and skin is brown-stained yellow in colour), the *pae'a*, the *huero* (characterised by its edible seeds, strewn across its flesh), the *mā'ohi* (the most widespread variety with white flesh) or indeed the *'afara'a*.

For eating, a ripe fruit must be chosen; these can be identified by looking for a brown-coloured dried sap, which should appear on the surface of the fruit once it has matured.

When prepared grilled over a wood fire or directly placed on the burners of a cooker, the skin should harden, thicken and blacken. The fruit then needs to be peeled and chopped in order to take out the non-edible middle portion. The flesh may then be eaten directly. This floury pulp may also be beaten and left to ferment for a few days, after which time the paste produced may be enjoyed as an accompaniment to fish or pork - a dish known as *pōpoi* in the Marquesas Islands. It may also be cooked like bread in a traditional oven (*ahimā'a*).

The *'uru* (whose travels throughout Oceania have been renowned) has also been the subject of many major maritime expeditions, whose sole aim was to amass a few roots to provide to the English colonies of the Old and New Worlds.

Captain William Bligh was convinced that the breadfruit tree, being so well-loved in Tahiti, would be a good culinary addition for the slaves in America. In 1787, after a long stay in Matavai Bay, he resumed his voyage on the *Bounty* with 1000 young plants aboard. The mutiny, which was declared shortly after the ship's departure from Venus Point, was due in part to the Captain's cruelty and abuses of power, but more so to the severe restriction of water on board, being used for the survival of this precious cargo. The thirsty mutineers threw the breadfruit tree plants into the sea and abandoned Bligh on a skiff along with a few other still loyal crew members.

The *Bounty* mutineers ended their adventure on the remote island of Pitcairn, to the South-West of the Gambier Islands.

As for Bligh, he survived and was able to find new transport for the breadfruit tree plants. In 1792, the species was successfully introduced into the Antilles, in St Vincent. The French later acclimatised it in Guyana.

The old story goes that the slaves did not like the taste of the *'uru*, preferring the banana plantain instead.