

the mangrove crab magician

Cheffing can be dangerous work when you're competing with crocodiles for fresh produce. Thankfully, chef Joe Junior always wins, and he's created a tiny resort kitchen that punches well above its weight.

Words and Photography **Jacqui Gibson**

FOR 27-YEAR-OLD CHEF JOE JUNIOR (JUNIOR), COOKING HAS always been a scary endeavour.

He won't break a sweat hunting crocodiles, freediving among hammerheads or wielding a machete. He's also totally nonplussed recalling the time he escaped the tsunami that struck the Solomon Islands in 2007.

But the memory of his first week in the modest, one-room kitchen of Oravae Cottage, (a family resort in the Western Province), still gets his tummy turning.

"I wanted the opportunity," the self-taught chef explains. "But cooking for four or five people with so little experience on my part was probably one of the scariest things I've ever done."

It was 2015, when Junior's Australian-born aunty and resort owner, Naomi Baea, had to return home at the same time as Oravae's head chef, which left Junior in charge of the kitchen.

He can't have been too bad in their absence, because the guests kept coming and just three-years later he beat 14 other contestants



The crystal clear waters surrounding Oravae Cottage.

"Food plays a particular role in Solomon life. You have to work hard for it, but once you have it, it's to be shared. It also forms the basis of so many of our stories."

to win the Solomon Islands' first-ever cooking competition, the Lagoon Cookoff, in Munda.

The win boosted his confidence and put prize money in his pocket. Better yet, Junior scored a month's work experience cooking under the head chef of Honiara's Heritage Hotel, learning the basics of Western and Asian cuisines.

"It was a really busy kitchen. I worked all the stations, including the buffet. I talked to guests from all over the world; people from all kinds of backgrounds. I learned about food preparation, recipe planning, plating up and the importance of presentation," he says.

A cooking scholarship to New Zealand soon followed and it was here where Junior learned about harnessing the best from local ingredients.

"There's very little red meat in the Solomons' diet," he says. "Basic items such as spices can be really hard to find. We rely on fresh fish straight from the ocean. It's our staple — I'm talking fish like trevally, Spanish mackerel, sweet lips, tuna and parrot fish.

"But I'm learning that's a strength in our cuisine. People travel from around the world to enjoy fish straight out of the ocean in a unique island environment like ours," he adds.

"Food plays a particular role in Solomon life. You have to work hard for it, but once you have it, it's to be shared.

"It also forms the basis of so many of our stories. I love mangrove crab. But to eat crab you need to know how to get it safely. It's also the food of the crocodile. To be a crabber is to move between a crocodile and his food source. Here, crabs and crocodiles live side-by-side in the mangroves. So, we've all got crocodile stories.

"Talk to my uncle Patson, who's from Malaita, and he'll give you practical tips on

how to actually wrestle a crocodile with your bare hands and stay alive."

Usually, tourists come to Oravae Cottage from all over the world to enjoy Junior's food, but visitors have been rare due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Junior has his finger's crossed that global travel will return again soon — and with a stronger-than-ever focus on supporting small-scale, family-run operators.

"We look after guests differently here. We're not your everyday resort. We want people to feel connected to this place by getting to know us, hearing our stories and enjoying Solomon Island hospitality. I like to think my food is an important part of that." 

Chef Joe Junior.



CHEF JOE JUNIOR'S RECIPE FOR MANGROVE CRAB

INGREDIENTS

- Mangrove crab
- Onion
- Garlic
- Curry powder
- Salt
- Sugar
- Chillies (finely chopped)
- Red peppers (roughly chopped)
- Fresh coconut milk
- Lime juice.

DIRECTIONS

1. Fill a large pot with water and boil the crab for 20 minutes.
2. Lower heat to medium and add onions and garlic.
3. Add to the pot curry powder, salt, sugar, finely chopped chillies, roughly chopped peppers and the milk of a fresh coconut. Stir it all together and bring to a boil.
4. Reduce heat to low, cover and simmer for 15-20 minutes, stirring occasionally.
5. Add fresh lime juice 10 minutes before serving.