

MARKET UPDATE

~ A Cook Islands transplant checks the pulse of Rarotonga's Punanga Nui ~

Life on the island is sweet and juicy, and from my calculations, it's a bull market. Like Friday nights at Trader Jack's, Punanga Nui is the place to be on Saturday mornings. The earlier the better, due to supply and demand. Fresh fish is usually gone by eight. By nine, the best of Jim's herbs and greens are taken, and though there is still plenty of food, coming late means a certain trip to the Foodland in town as well. Being a morning person, I come early, arriving before the tourists to get the best selection. This morning the weather is cool, still and overcast, but it's been a great growing season, and produce is piled high on every table and hanging off the backs of pick-up trucks – bananas, oranges, lemons and limes, peppers and melons, cucumbers and avocados, long purple eggplant, taro, star fruit, mangos. Jim has fresh rosemary today and cilantro, basil, beautiful greens from his hydroponic greenhouse. And freshly made mango chutney – a favorite for my spinach salad dressing or seafood curry. My neighbor's daughter takes plump sugary tomatoes from a basket and fills a bag, handing it to me with a wink. It's a great season for commodities and friendships.

I love the market – its smells, sights, colors, people. It's the island's equivalent of Facebook and Twitter. It's the Buzz; it's island google. Located in Avarua town, near the harbor, it draws both locals and tourists from around the small island of Rarotonga and takes stock in human capital, creativity, and hard work. Parking at the west end, I make my way down one side then back the up other, stopping to chat with the islanders. They offer bites and samples and island updates. Mama, nearly ninety, is always stalled at the entrance to the market with her bananas, tomatoes, oranges, and other ripe offerings from her garden. Enjoying a long-term cycle, she beams when she sees me. "Kia Orana, Mama," I smile, bending to kiss her leathery cheeks. Every time she fills my bag she adds a few extra bananas or limes with a twinkle in her eye. "Try this mango," says Ru. "Better than Hawaii." It was. It was the sweetest, most 'mango' mango I'd ever tasted – a juice-running-down-arms, heart-be-still mango. I buy a bag full. It's money in the bank.

"Kia Orana," singsongs from friends passing by. "Aloha," I smile back. I have been here long enough that no one mistakes me for a tourist anymore. "Hi, Kate, how's the house coming?" they ask. "Oh, you're back. Where did you go this time?" I take moments to fill

them in on my work and travels, then we discuss the rugby playoffs, the dance competition or netball championships, political shenanigans and local gossip. My soul is being woven into a social capital that holds this place, and all of us, together.

Before long I stop to enjoy a warm banana-pawpaw muffin and a cup of tea with Mata at her colorful stall. The islanders are tea drinkers, so I have learned to drink it instead of coffee, although I still prefer it black and not sweet, making me an oddity. “It looks wonderful on you,” exclaims Mata as I try on one of her head eis. It is woven with tender leaves – hibiscus, tiare, gardenia – and smells like heaven. In her small mirror I look like a goddess and purchase it without hesitation. “Try the figs,” she suggests. I do and am transported back to my childhood and my grandmother’s back yard, to succulent fig trees and lime pies, chasing chickens around the pen for her world famous chicken and dumplings. I was the first girl child in a generation of boys, welcomed dearer than the one she never had. Grandma Van died when I was not yet out of school, and I miss her still, but I imagine her now, a shock of silver hair, enjoying a black mission from Mata’s pile. I will see Mata later at the sailing club and wave off with “ciao!”

“Kia manuia,” she calls back.

Ann has a great investment portfolio – a stall filled with scrumptious veggies and fruits, and occasionally a potted plant I simply must have. I make easy conversation with her as she recommends the ladyfinger bananas. “Sweeter,” she says, eyes crinkling. I taste one and vow never to buy the others. Then I spy a maidenhair fern, large and lacy. “It will be perfect for my new spa. I’ll come back for it before leaving,” I tell her as she puts it aside. At the next table I pick up a bundle of young taro greens and fresh coconut cream in a corked coke bottle. “Made this morning,” Tua says proudly, as if to announce a three am rising, shaking loose the rumour of lazy islanders. Fresh coconut cream is the critical ingredient for a perfect batch of rukau (coconut-creamed young taro leaves) – which I’ll then use to stuff in little steamed dumpling appetizers for friends coming by later for wine tasting and nibbles. Passing a couple of booths I spy Brad, recently located from Maui to build a small bungalow boutique on the West side. I invite him for cocktails as we linger over baskets of ripe breadfruit, talking of home...and our new homes here in this paradise. A marketplace of ideas seems to occupy our quarterly reports.

Music starts up in the central gazebo, amplifying sweet sounds from a couple of

ukuleles, a guitar and a handful of old islanders with voices like angels. Dancers, just home from an off-island competition, fix their costumes and arrange head eis, while mothers fluff daughters and sons, and aunties watch adoringly. About six musicians set up their large drums to accompany the dancers. Putting down my bags, I stand in a growing crowd, taking it all in and filling my senses. Then I find way back to the car to drop off bags of produce and head back across the lawn towards the hard goods vendors. Low-hanging stratus clouds hover as the wind picks up. Still it doesn't rain.

Stalls and booths on the seaside offer pareus, woven fans, shell jewelry, ukuleles, and handicrafts. Hard currency. I pick through a rainbow of pareus, selecting one for my sister-in-law, who arrives for a visit in a couple of weeks. And an island t-shirt for my brother. One stall reminds me of the tie-dyes we did in the 60's. Wild with color, pareus hang on lines and dance in the sea breeze coming off the ocean. Fragrances made from local fruits and flowers entice from another booth, which offers homemade tiare lotions and massage oils, jasmine soap. Another stall has tivaevae, the fabulous quilts made mostly on the outer islands, white flat rimmed woven hats and rito fans, carved wood and slit drums known as *pate*. Inexpensive hand-carved ukuleles and local music CDs lie displayed on a picnic table where an old islander strums and sings. If I could make it sound like that, I'd buy one, but I already own a uke, and it never sang like that. It's all about asset management.

Cook Island black pearls are a uniquely sensational strategy. They whisper investment secrets from the spectacular lagoon at Manihiki. Sporting a wide variety of lusters, flaws ('pearl personalities'), sizes, colors – green, purple, peacock, aubergine – they totally enchant, and I take my time, enjoying them all, finally picking the most uniquely beautiful one for my daughter's birthday. Tony knocks a bit off the price. "Local rate," he chuckles, carefully calculating income and expense ratios, taking my cash and offering a small, carved dolphin "for your boy."

The local bank has set up a little stall on Saturdays, part of its wealth-building strategy, delivered as customer service. A teller pulls out colorful bills from a cash box in exchange for my check then asks about my house. Apparently she has a crush on the youngest of my workers. "We race canoes on the Muri mixed team," she tells me. "Don't you think he's cute?" Of course I do. I think of him always daydreaming and wish he'd just finish the deck. I continue on, purchasing green pawpaws for salad, ripe ones for breakfast,

sweet corn and cabbage and cucumbers, the best of the season. I don't need star fruit or avocados as baskets of each have been left on my verandah by friends and neighbors over the last few days. Market surplus.

The cooked food booths advertise by smell. Steaks on the grill and caramelized onions shout from clear across the market. Fish and chips, curry stew – breakfast is everywhere...and always irresistible. My nose draws me on to the hot coconut rolls which seduce me as usual, but for once I impose restraint, selecting instead a couple of fresh baguettes, one for tonight smothered in garlic and fresh dill, the other a kind of forced savings for Sunday morning's French toast, custarded with coconut cream.

Aside from a booming tourism sector, agriculture and handicrafts support most of the islanders still. Farmers and fishermen work the land and sea, wading knee deep in taro patches and hip deep in lagoons, throwing net when tides come in, developing their assets. Their children go away to universities in Auckland, Sydney, and elsewhere, learning trades and skills likely to keep them from coming back home. Out-migration has been a problem on the island for years. And now that there's work, there are too few workers and talk of importing foreign labor to work the local hotels which are popping up like spring tulips, feeding the bull market.

But this morning I forget the economics of this small island nation, lost in the sensuality of its Saturday market. People and plants, borne of the rich earth and nurtured by mother sea, smile and laugh, infusing an overcast morning with a sunshine all their own.