

## From luxury lotions to tasty local dishes

Tonga's *mozuku* seaweed producer reinvents itself to face the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Three thousand miles from Australia, in the Kingdom of Tonga where there are zero COVID-19 cases, borders are closed due to the global pandemic and local businesses are being severely affected. The South Pacific Mozuku (SPM) company, with support from the Pacific Community's Sustainable Pacific Aquaculture Development Project (PacAqua), has been developing a line of luxury cosmetics and lotions whose key ingredient is the seaweed *mozuku* (*Cladosiphon* sp.) that grows in Tongan waters. Tonga is regularly visited by luxury cruise liners such as *Queen Elizabeth II* that can deliver up to 5000 visitors to Tonga in a single day, but now the number of visitors has dropped to zero. SPM faces a new reality where their intended luxury market for seaweed lotions has evaporated.

"COVID-19 has pretty much decimated the tourist market," said Mr Masa Kawaguchi, Director of SPM who is of Tongan and Japanese descent. "In Japan, I know that *mozuku* is valuable as an edible seaweed. It's very nutritious and reputed to have immune boosting properties. Our best hope now is to pivot away from lotions and find out whether we can launch *mozuku* locally as Tonga's own edible super seaweed".

SPM first developed fresh seaweed packs and started to sell them in two large supermarkets and through a local distributor. However, entering the domestic market has its own challenges, and SPM found that sales were slow in the retail market due to consumers' lack of familiarity with *mozuku* seaweed products, which were not traditionally eaten by Tongans. SPM needed to do more to convince Tongans about the tasty and healthy properties of *mozuku* seaweed, which is known to Tongans as *limu tanga'u*.

By linking with the Tonga Youth Employment Entrepreneurship (TYEE), which provides training in cooking, food packs were developed to increase the visibility of *mozuku* products and make them appealing to Tongan diners. Ms Lusie Latu-Jones of TYEE said, "It is a privilege to use these quality seaweed products from SPM in our meals. We made an attempt to mix the *limu tanga'u* with cherry tomatoes, onions and coconut cream for our meals. I also added a twist of fresh lemon juice to the soy sauce flavour. We served it as mini entrée packs to go with the main meals. Oh, tasty!"

These food packs were then featured by TYEE in a major fund-raising event for their organisation. They organised a *mozuku* tasting and cocktail event, facilitated with The TOP Restaurant and Lounge, a premier eatery in Nuku'alofa, whose chef created dishes using the *limu tanga'u* product as the main feature. TYEE has also set up a successful local competition to create recipes using *mozuku* seaweed.



*Mozuku* dishes on display. (image: ©South Pacific Mozuku)

Mindful of *mozuku*'s reputation in Japan for its strong nutritional and health properties, SPM next linked with Vaiola Hospital to incorporate the seaweed into their Friday lunch menus. Mr Kawaguchi said that, "The feedback we got from the hospital is that people love the seaweed, but they just didn't know it existed! This is what we heard from patients, and even from some doctors and nurses."

Vaiola Hospital's Chief Nutritionist, Esiteli Pasikala, says that "I have served the *mozuku* in Tongan style as *miti limutanga'u* to 45 doctors and nurses during our Friday doctor's lunch hour and to some other workers we invited to test the new dish, and they all liked it. They said it was delicious. They asked me how to find it and I directed them to stores where I knew it was being sold."

SPM is a family-run business that originated in 1998 to export *mozuku* seaweed, trading under the name Tangle Nano Co., Ltd. Mr Kawaguchi states that "My dad ran the business until 2007 when the business died due to the global recession. In 2015, I came back to Tonga to start the business back up, and slowly we have been growing our customer base, not only in Japan but in other markets such as the USA, and we are currently prospecting the Chinese market."

Mr Kawaguchi's dream is to make Tongan *mozuku* a global brand, and his short-time goal is to increase awareness of *mozuku* seaweed in Tonga itself. SPM employs three permanent local staff and 20–30 seasonal staff, depending on the amount of work.

### For more information:

Avinash Singh,  
PacAqua Aquaculture Officer, SPC  
avinashs@spc.int