

Cassava

Cassava was first cultivated in the 1st. Millennium B.C. in the tropical Amazon basin by tribes of various ethnic groups. It spread to Venezuela and the Guiana, to Central America, the Caribbean, and thence to Florida. The *Tupi* Indian nations were responsible for its propagation all along the Atlantic coast, but it was from the Amazonian branch of the *Tupi* nation that we inherited the legend about this root that was decisive in the formation of Amerindian cultures in the process of setting in one region.

It is the story of *Mani*, a girl born to an Indian chief's daughter who conceived without ever having had sexual relations with any man. The chief, refusing to believe his daughter, condemned her to death for lying. In a dream, the chief was warned by an elderly white man not to execute his daughter. Freed from her death sentence, the daughter gave birth to a very beautiful and very white girl who already spoke fluently prior to her first birthday. However, to dismay of all, *Mani* died mysteriously, without any sign of sickness or suffering, when she was just one year old. A plant with large leaves sprouted on the spot where Mani had been buried, and within a few months the earth was split by its strong thick roots. The Indians, recognizing the white color of Mani in the roots that split the earth, named the plant *Manihoc*, and devoted themselves to cultivating the plant forever thereafter.

The cassava farming, a true horticulture, has more or less 10.000 years of specialization and processing technology. Cassava is an extremely poisoning vegetable and in the course of all that time, hundreds of varieties have been developed, each one with its own purpose: the sweet cassava, non-poisoning, known as *macaxeira* in northern Brazil and as *aipim* in Rio de Janeiro, eaten cooked, in the form of meal, or in cakes; and the bitter or wild cassava, the true manioc which, although they yield much more starch, are lethal prior to preparation aimed at eliminating the deadly cyanic acid they contain. The diverse products extracted after grating and pressing constituted the basic food of the primitive Brazilian populations.

The Portuguese recognized cassava usefulness as a staple food source right from the early days of colonization. They quickly expanded its cultivation, planting countless plots. Tomé de Sousa, the first governor-general, even went so far as to legislate on this matter, making the cultivation of cassava compulsory in 1549.

Cassava was also important to slave traders. When slave ships returned to Africa from Brazil, apart from the other items used as bartering currency (pressed, twisted tobacco and *aguardente* – liquor distilled from sugar cane – see 1.4.3), they carried large quantities of cassava meal which was rich in starch, fiber and minerals. Besides its trade value, the cassava meal was used to supply the barracoons where slaves were held captive prior to embarking on the dreadful slaves ships.

It was not long before cassava began to be planted near the African slave ports. From that point it was a short step for cassava to spread throughout black Africa, where it is still a major staple food today.

On their incursions into the west, the pioneers were obliged to leave groups of whites and Indians planting cassava and making cassava meal, which they then carried to their companions who had gone on ahead, and leaving planted cassava fields behind for the other groups who would come later. On the various expeditions throughout Brazil, cassava meal, *farinha-de-pau* (wood flour), as the colonizers called it, or *farinha-de-guerra* (war flour), as it was known by the Indians, came to be the basic component of the *farnel* (trail food) to people all over Brazil.

The many varieties of cassava or manioc can be grouped into two main types: *mandioca brava*, the wild, poisonous cassava that features a high cyanide content, and *mandioca doce*, the common cassava which is also known as *macaxeira*, or *aipim*.

The Indians achieved a major cultural advance by domesticating the wild cassava and managing to eliminate its poison. The cassava roots were collected, peeled, and grated on a board studded with small sharp stones. The grated cassava root was then tightly squeezed in a *tipiti* (as described in 1.2) to extract the poisonous juice. The white mass that remained after extracting the juice was then placed over the fire in large clay pans where it was cooked, stirring constantly, until it turned into cassava meal. Up to today, in many places, Indians and non-Indians go on repeating this process, some using more modern, mechanized method. But amazingly, the *tipiti* is still used in many modest homes, and even in some flour mills.

And the Indians discovered many other uses for this wonderful root. One is cassava starch, called *goma* or *polvilho*, which results from sedimentation of the juice. When used immediately it is called fresh or sweet starch (*goma fresca* or *polvilho doce*). If the juice is left to settle for 15 to 20 days, causing fermentation, the resulting sediment is known as dry or sour starch (*goma seca* or *polvilho azedo*) due to the slightly acid taste. This byproduct is the main ingredient for many recipes, the older of which is *beiju*, savored in many different ways throughout Brazil. The *beiju* is a sort of crêpe that can be made soft like a pancake or crispy like a waffle, round, small, large, rectangular, plain or prepared with ingredients, such as cheese or coconut.

When the starch is still moist and is spread on a hot sheet of metal or stone, it pops like popcorn, producing very light and irregular shaped beads – *tapioca*. Very easily digestible, *tapioca* was considered by the Indians to be the food of gods.

Another remarkable byproduct of cassava is *puba* or *carimã*, the two best known names for cassava root mass, greatly appreciated since pre-Cabral days. To make *puba*, cassava roots are left to soak in water for three to five days until they ferment. They are then pressed and packaged in balls or in one large block.



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