

Breadfruit Rising

A new staple takes root



“Whenever I travelled through the Caribbean,” says Nick Miaoulis, “I stumbled onto breadfruit. On every island. Jamaica. Trinidad and Tobago. Wherever I went, I found it.” But not, he says, in his native Bahamas.

Eventually, Nick and his wife Daphne, who own and operate Abaco Neem, decided to try planting breadfruit on their farm. “One tree gave us over 100 breadfruits last year,” says Daphne. “We mash it, make fritters, dice it, and fry it with a bit of oil and some onion, garlic, salt, and pepper. And it freezes really well.”

Native to New Guinea and the Indo-Malay region, the starchy breadfruit – whose flesh is similar in texture to a potato – was first introduced to the West Indies during the late 1700s. Originally used to feed slaves toiling on Jamaican plantations, breadfruit is now a staple in that country’s cuisine. Over time, it was transported to other islands within the region, as well as to South and Central America.

But whereas Nick, Daphne, and most residents of the West Indies have known about the virtues of breadfruit for years, Bahamians are just discovering this nutritious fruit, which some call a potential superfood.

“Breadfruit was never really introduced here in the Bahamas,” says Lance Pinder, Operations Manager of Abaco Big Bird. “I’m not sure why.”

“ONCE PEOPLE GET IT, THEY LIKE IT.”

Whatever the reason, Nick, Daphne, and Lance are hoping that will change. They and other Abaco farmers are poised to be on the leading edge of what is being described as a revolution in food.

One of the leaders of that revolution is Mary McLaughlin who, along with her husband Mike, founded the Winnetka, Illinois non-profit, Trees That Feed.

Having worked as a geologist, Mary says, “I was interested in natural phenomena. As a geologist, you understand what happens if we go off balance.”

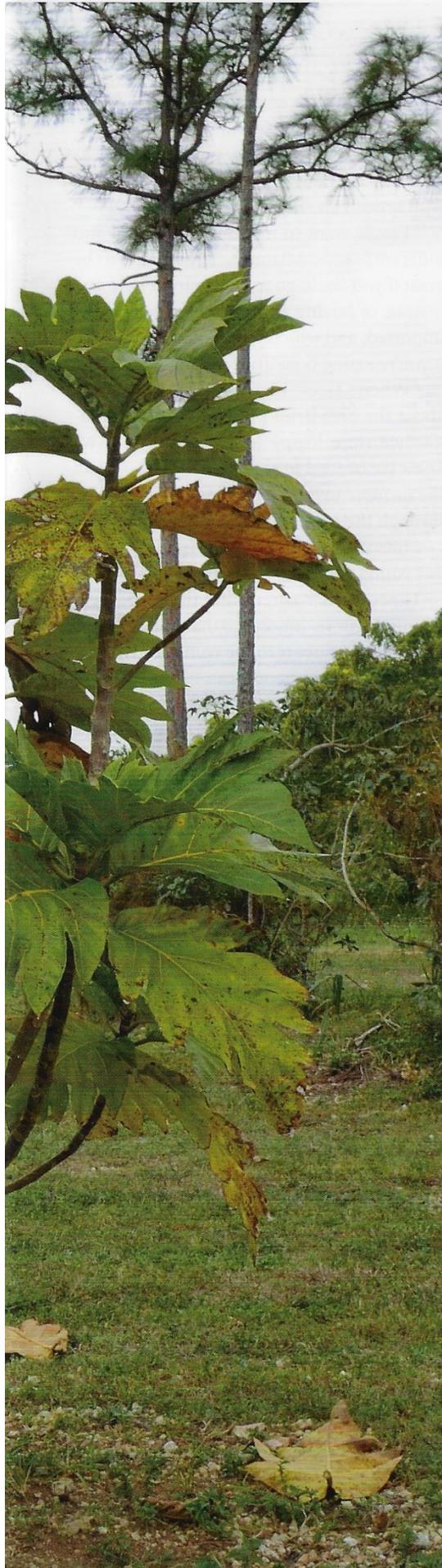
Concerned about climate change, McLaughlin wondered what she could do to help. “I knew that one tree captures carbon dioxide and stores it away in its trunk. I thought if I could just plant trees, a lot of trees, that would help.

“Then, I thought, what if we planted trees that are food? And what if we could get economic benefit from that? That’s a triple whammy – sequestering carbon, feeding people, and creating jobs!”

At first, says McLaughlin, they considered fruit trees, like guava or mango. But they’re sweet and sugary, she says. “They don’t fill your belly. They don’t replace a meal.”

On the other hand, she says, the mildly flavoured breadfruit provides bulk and calories, as well as vitamin C, potassium, riboflavin, and other nutrients.





“Growing up in Jamaica, I’ve loved breadfruit from childhood to this day and I want to share it with the world. It’s nutritious, and versatile – it’s like tofu on a tree.”

McLaughlin travelled to Hawaii, to the world’s leading breadfruit research center, the Breadfruit Institute of the National Tropical Botanical Garden.

“I met with them and explained my idea,” she says. “I told them, ‘You come up with the scientific information and research, and I’ll raise funds, give plants away, and stick with the farmers to ensure we have survivability. And when they’ve grown food, we’ll come up with creative ways to commoditize it, because excess fruit without value is just litter.’”

Though Trees That Feed distributes other varieties, breadfruit remains their flagship species. They’ve been involved in cultivating breadfruit in Barbados, Belize, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Kenya, Nigeria, Puerto Rico, St. Croix, Saint Vincent, Tanzania, and Uganda.

And in the aftermath of Hurricane Dorian, they shipped young breadfruit trees to The Bahamas.

Some were delivered to Abaco, where Assistant Agricultural Superintendent with

the Bahamian Ministry of Agriculture, Josephina Curry, coordinated efforts. “She helped with import permits,” says McLaughlin. “She received the plants at the airport, and organized farmers in Abaco to repot them and create houses to protect them until they were ready to go in the ground.”

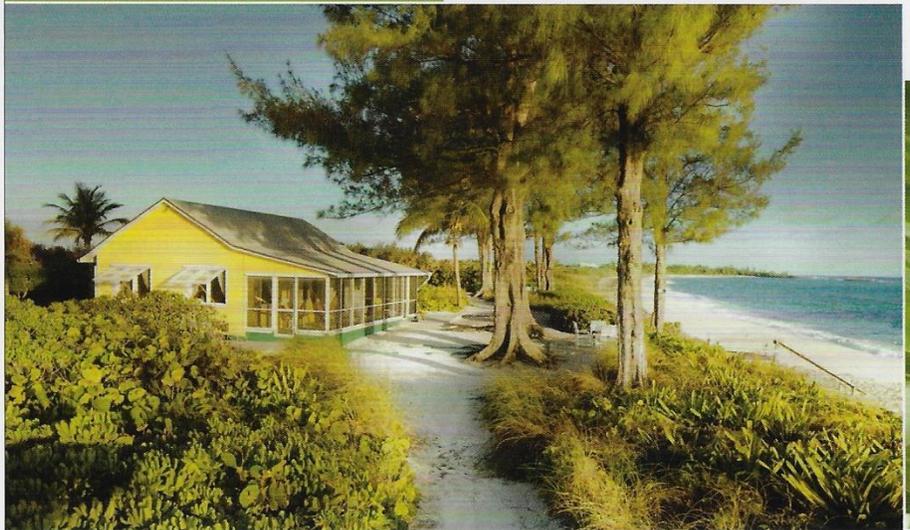
Not only is breadfruit easy to grow, says McLaughlin, but a single tree can live for decades and yield more fruit than comparable food crops. “We’re planting trees in Uganda,” says McLaughlin, “and an acre of breadfruit produces much more than an acre of maize or corn.”

Plus, she says, when properly pruned, breadfruit trees are resistant to hurricanes. “It’s like the sail on a boat. If it’s a big sail, the wind catches it and it’s more likely to blow down. If you prune it back, it’s likely to survive.”

Trees That Feed is far from the only organization interested in breadfruit, which has been the subject of several recent scientific studies.

In 2020, researchers at the University of British Columbia (Okanagan) studied the health impacts of a breadfruit-based diet. They concluded that breadfruit is nutritious,

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sustainable, and has the potential to mitigate diabetes and improve worldwide food security. In short, UBC scientists said, it could be the next superfood.

And in a 2022 Northwestern University study, breadfruit proved more resilient in climate change projections than many other crops. Since yields of other staple crops decreased in the study's projections, its co-author, Gordon J.P. Shallow says, "Food security and food sovereignty for the next millennium lies in the endless untapped possibility of breadfruit."

"Breadfruit's popularity is increasing as an up-and-coming exotic food," says a recent *Forbes* magazine article, "taking it beyond the specialty food aisle and into functional foods and high-end menus. All trends point to this crop's potential for growth in the months and years ahead."

According to *Forbes*, UK celebrity chef Jason Howard incorporates breadfruit into his cooking, and chef Gordon Ramsay "was blown away by the staple and its versatility, using the super food as the primary ingredient in Shepherd's Pie in an episode of the National Geographic Series, 'Gordon Ramsay: Uncharted.'"

Lance Pinder admits that, prior to receiving breadfruit plants from Trees That Feed, he'd never tried the fruit. But last year, when the trees bore fruit for the first time, he finally had the chance. How was it?

"Awesome!" he says. "I sliced it thin and roasted it in the oven with a bit of oil. And I cut it thin in wedges and fried it. It was really good like that, too."

Pinder says that breadfruit makes a good alternative for French fries. "They're even better than sweet potato, which comes out soggy. Breadfruit fries come out nice and crispy."

Having substituted breadfruit for potato in potato salad, Pinder says, "I'd almost say it was better than potato salad, because it has a tiny taste of sweet to it. It's really good."

"You can do so many things with breadfruit," says Nick Miaoulis. "You can make fritters or pancakes. And breadfruit flour makes a wonderful coating for frying things."

On a recent visit home to Jamaica, Mary McLaughlin says, "We had a lovely breadfruit salad, full of crunchy, healthy, and delicious ingredients. And when we were in Barbados, there's a restaurant that serves nothing but breadfruit bowls. They fire-roast them, cut them in two, scoop out the heart

and fill them with an assortment of savoury things, like fish stew or kidney bean stew."

"Imagine a Bahamian souse in a breadfruit bowl," she says, "or a guava duff made with breadfruit. That's what I want to see."

"People want to try something local and different," says Miaoulis. "Wouldn't it be great if you could go to a restaurant here and instead of having French fries – which are imported, and which you can get back home – you're eating breadfruit fries?"

"When Trees that Feed contacted us about the breadfruit program," says Miaoulis, "we were happy to participate, but we knew we needed to reach the masses. Get all the farmers involved. We suggested they go through the Ministry of Agriculture, so they can introduce it in the schools and educate our young people."

Lance Pinder agrees that there will be a learning curve among Bahamians. "We'll need to introduce it to the community, cook and prepare it, so people can try it."

But early indications are that the response will be a positive one.

Last year, says Pinder, most of Abaco Big Bird's first modest crop of breadfruit went toward testing and trial. "But we did sell a couple in the farm store," he says. "One person bought one. I told them how to cook it. The next day, they were back looking for more! Once people get it, they like it."

"Once you turn them on to it, they get it really quick," says Miaoulis. "We're going through changing times, and we've seen recently how easily the food chain can be interrupted. Being self-sufficient is very important and breadfruit can play a large role. It's a wonderful, nutritious staple. It grows well in this climate. It's a hardy tree. Plus, it's beautiful to look at – a nice shade tree."

Both Abaco Big Bird and Abaco Neem expect to introduce more Abaconians and visitors to breadfruit this summer. Lance Pinder anticipates that his breadfruit trees, now four years old, will bear enough fruit to sell at Abaco Big Bird's Farm Store.

And Nick Miaoulis says that when Abaco Neem's breadfruit crop ripens in late spring, "It's going to be on the table with our farm-to-table meals. You can't get any fresher than that."

Though breadfruit trees are prolific, McLaughlin says that the fruit itself has a short shelf life and doesn't travel well. In light of this, Trees That Feed spends a lot of

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time working with growers on ways to preserve the excess fruit and create value-added products.

“For example,” she says, “in times of plenty, you can use the sun to dehydrate breadfruit and turn it into gluten-free flour which is much more portable.” Trees That Feed is currently assisting Jamaican companies with commercializing breadfruit flour, which is now sold on Amazon.

“People in the Dominican Republic do something different with breadfruit,” says McLaughlin. “They chunk it, fry it, mash it, and then fry it again, like a roasted chip. It’s called tostones. The food company GOYA produces frozen breadfruit tostones in the Dominican Republic and it’s wildly popular. People can’t get enough!”

And in the U.S. Virgin Islands, a former Washington, D.C. chef named Todd Manley

distills a combination of breadfruit and rainwater to make Mutiny Island Vodka.

Researchers at Purdue University say that flour, tostones, and vodka are only the beginning of breadfruit’s economic potential. In other parts of the world, they say, breadfruit is used as feed for domestic livestock. Leaves from the breadfruit tree are used medicinally for various natural remedies. And the wood, though not considered hard, is strong and resistant to many types of termites. Due to its light weight, it’s in demand for the construction of drums and surfboards.

Working alongside farmers to create value-added items isn’t an afterthought for Trees That Feed. It’s central to their climate-change goals. “Breadfruit trees need to be seen as a valued commodity within the community,” explains Mary McLaughlin. “The more people who make money from

the tree, the more trees will be kept alive, and the more CO₂ will be saved.

“When we first began in the Bahamas,” says McLaughlin, “people said, ‘Nobody wants breadfruit. Bahamians don’t eat them.’” But when the first trees were planted, “People started stealing them. Actually digging them up and stealing them. And I thought to myself, ‘Guess what? Bahamians do want breadfruit!’” ●

For more information about breadfruit in Abaco, contact Abaco Big Bird at (242) 699-2542 and Abaco Neem at (242) 357-5255. To learn more about Trees That Feed, visit TreesThatFeed.org.

Scalloped Breadfruit

By Cheynea Levarity, chef at Green Turtle Cay's new Café at Seagrapes, opening soon.

2½ cups boiled breadfruit, cut into small chunks
1 cup heavy cream
2 ounces cream cheese
½ tsp garlic powder
½ tsp onion powder
½ tsp salt
½ tsp black pepper
Italian seasoning and red pepper flakes

Instructions:

1. Place cooked breadfruit in a loaf pan.
2. Mix together heavy cream, garlic powder, onion powder, salt, and black pepper. Pour mixture over the breadfruit.
3. Chunk cream cheese and place throughout the breadfruit.
4. Top with a sprinkle of red pepper flakes and Italian seasoning.
5. Bake at 350° for 25-30 minutes or until bubbly.

