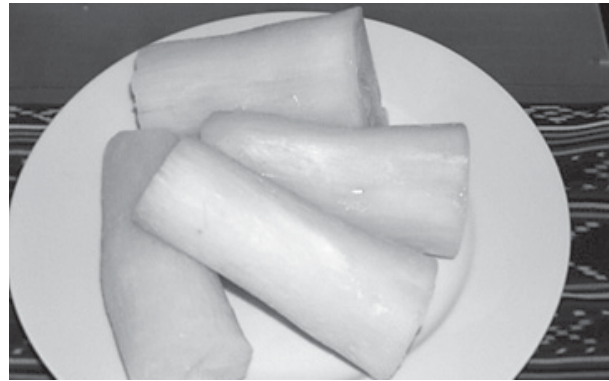


■ By Pepito Frias

**C**ASSAVA is a root crop like *camote* (sweet yam), *ubi* (purple yam), and *gabi* (*taro*). It looks like wood that is why it is called *kamoteng kahoy* or in the Visayan regions *balanghoy*. It has two common varieties, the white and yellow and both have brown outer layer or skin.

Rural folks prepare cassava by simply peeling and boiling, and with just salt or sugar, a full meal is ready. It can also be paired with *ginataang dahon ng balanghoy* mixed with sardines. These and other cassava sweets like *suman*, *pitse-pitse* or *niyubak* is good substitute for a full meal in the absence of rice.



Boiled cassava read for serving [www.tribo.org/.../boiledkamotengkahoy.html](http://www.tribo.org/.../boiledkamotengkahoy.html)

# ‘POISONOUS’ CASSAVA

Reports say that there is a growing demand for its use in livestock and poultry feeds; it is also raw material for starch, tapioca, and snack foods.

Cassava is a versatile root crop. Aside from food, it has various industrial uses. Reports say that there is a growing demand for its use in livestock and poultry feeds; it is also raw material for starch, tapioca, and snack foods. “Cassava starch is used as additive in cement manufacturing and used as glue in paper production. It is also a material for powder in cosmetic industries,” *Manila Standard Today*, March 15, 2005 reports.

Both businessmen and industrialists profit from cassava.

When the news about food

poisoning involving cassava broke out, many were surprised especially those who, for years, subsist on it as alternative to rice or corn. Temporarily, some became cautious on eating cassava and consumption has declined disrupting cassava-eating-and-producing areas.

Residents of Mabini, Bohol, are affected the most. In this town, eating cassava is a way of life. People here were shocked when on 8 March 2005, 27 children died after eating *maruya* or sweetened cassava delicacy during a school recess. Another 104 students were downed and hospitalized. All children affected by contaminated cassava aged between 7 to 13.

Reports say that immediately after the incident, the

Bohol provincial government ordered the uprooting of

white cassava believed to be the cause of food poisoning. Residents were also told not to eat this variety pending investigation of the real cause of the incident.

For a time, confusion over the real cause of the food poisoning prevailed. A man said, “I am still lucky. I have been eating cassava for almost 30 years now.” Before this incident, “fate” had kept many ignorant of such a “poisonous” cassava.

Subsequently, government authorities announced it was pesticide that caused the poisoning. Officials of the Department of Health (DOH) and the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) ruled that the vendor responsible for the food poisoning has unintentionally mixed either a carbamate or coumaphos substance—deadly chemicals found in household and agricultural pesticides—in the food preparation.

The finding allayed fears. People who eat cassava as part of their daily meal are unburdened by the scare of the cassava poison that killed many children and downed more than a hundred people. Neglect in the food preparation by an individual vendor rather than cassava poison or curse of God caused the disaster.

The food poisoning in Bohol revealed one thing: Cassava is one of the community’s preferred foods. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* in its March 12, 2005, issue quoted Mabini Mayor

Cassava root fresh from the harvest.





**Cassava *suman* sold in the streets.**

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Stephen Rances as saying “They had gotten used to eating *balanghoy* (cassava), camote and ube to conserve on inadequate rice supply they produced so that they would have enough left until the next harvest.”

This preference indicates the level of economic condition (source of livelihood, agricultural production, purchasing power, among others) the people of Mabini have. Maybe the government needs to account how many communities are like Mabini that uses pesticides in their cassava cultivation and augment their rice shortage with cassava produce and other root crops. The government, then, could draw lessons from the Mabini experience and ensure that what happened there would not happen again in other communities.

One way to avoid such incident from happening is for the local governments to strictly implement *The Consumer Act of the Philippines (RA No. 7394)* that mandates the State to protect consumers against hazards to health and safety. Under this Law, food adulteration is punishable. Food is said to be adulterated “if the food has been prepared, packed or held under unsanitary conditions whereby it may have become contaminated with filth or whereby it may have been rendered injurious to health.”

Government responsibility to protect the rights of the consumers does not end by just having the violator prosecuted and penalized. Instead, the local government could launch an information drive on the proper handling of hazardous che-

micals or the national government strictly enforces control on more deadly substances.

Also, an information drive on what other foodstuffs have natural poisonous content and their levels of toxicity when eaten, can caution people and further help prevent future food poisoning incidents. This could also prevent unnecessary disruption of the normal way of life as in the case of uprooting of cassava crops as ordered by the Bohol provincial government. Such knee-jerk reaction has denied the residents of their only alternative source of food for the time being. The decision to uproot cassava was unwise and could have been avoided if the local government, as well as the populace is educated on this matter.

But among others, it is important for the government to promote cassava delicacies and support local residents engaged in cassava food preparation, production of cassava additives, and consumption. It means that the government needs to provide portions of agricultural land that would be planted not only to cassava but other crops including rice as the Filipino staple food.

Finally, it also means that because of the higher demands for cassava by industrialists and businessmen, the government has to regulate its production and consumption in a way that more cassava produce would still be available to ordinary folk—in its costless, purist and natural form. Because whether cassava has poisonous content or having nutrient content, it would still be a favorite Filipino food. ■



**Cassava plant.**

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