

FOOD FOR  
THOUGHT

Home-grown treats  
(from top left): bush  
tomato scones and  
plants; researcher  
Jenny Cleary; a range  
of finished products

# GOING BUSH

Foods that were once relied upon by indigenous people are gaining headway in Australia, reports Sue White

**A**lthough thyme, rosemary and basil were staples in chef Athol Wark's kitchen when he arrived in Alice Springs almost a decade ago, it didn't take long for the desert to seduce him into a new way of cooking:

'I replaced my herbs with indigenous ingredients like lemon myrtle, bush pepper and bush tomatoes. It's been a learning process, but I wanted to seize the opportunity to study indigenous cuisine,' says the UK-trained chef who has served native cuisine to prime ministers, emperors and celebrities.

After years of lobbying and education by industry pioneers such as author and TV chef Vic Cherikoff, the bush food industry is finally on an upward trajectory. Although you don't need to dine high-end to find basics like wattleseed muffins or lemon myrtle tea, ambassadors such as Wark have perfected the art of cooking by enticing gourmet fare from native ingredients:

'I'll do smoked kangaroo loin with pear fondant pinwheels, or emu-egg and macadamia-nut pavlova drenched with wild berries and wattleseed thickened cream,' he says.

With the bush food industry now valued at AUS\$10-\$16 million (\$9-\$14 million) a year, high performers are gaining a global reputation that is driving sales and awareness.

Jenny Cleary, a researcher at the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) is assured of bush tucker's place in the market, 'The kakadu plum has a higher Vitamin C content than any other fruit on the planet, so it's highly marketable as a super-food. People are looking to these foods as a healthier alternative.'

But while kakadu plums join wattleseed and lemon myrtle as some of the better recognised bush foods nationally and internationally, it's the

bush tomato that best represents the current state of Australia's native food industry. Hand-harvested by indigenous women in central Australia, these bite-sized fruits are in high demand and short supply.

Chefs use bush tomatoes in chutneys and sauces as an intense burst of flavour, but for



that we will make available to the aboriginal groups

**'I love bush tomatoes – their pungent flavour is like an explosion in your mouth. They're very seasonal – only available for two or three months.'**

Rayleen Brown, head of Australia's largest indigenous catering group, Kungkas Can Cook, the bush tomato has a more personal connection. A Nanggiwumerri/Arrente woman based in Alice Springs, Brown has been eating bush tucker since she was a baby.

'I love bush tomatoes – their pungent flavour is like an explosion in your mouth. They're very seasonal, and only available for two or three months a year, so when they're ripe your mouth starts to water in anticipation,' she says.

As demand for bush tomatoes continues to outstrip supply, increased commercialisation of the bush tomato harvest is on the agenda. Cleary says the Desert Knowledge CRC has learned a lot about how bush tomatoes could be produced in greater

interest in commercialising bush tomatoes. Some of the central Australian women who harvest wild want to continue that; for them it's about caring for country, but other indigenous groups are keen to grow on a larger scale,' she says.

But while supporters such as Brown are excited the word is finally spreading about native cuisine, the bottom line in the bush food industry goes way beyond profit.

'To me the bush foods have significance, and they have a story. The bush tomato belongs to a special group of people who own the story, the plant, and the dance for it. When I cook with it this means a lot, because I respect the women who have given me the knowledge about the plant and the meaning of the plant to them,' she says.

