



PART FIVE

BACK YARD LIVING

NATIVE FOODS

not new foods

There's nothing new about bush tucker. It's just taken the Australian and international food industries a long time to catch on to the benefits and flavours understood for generations by the Indigenous community.

BY LINDY SCHNEIDER
MARBURTON, VICTORIA

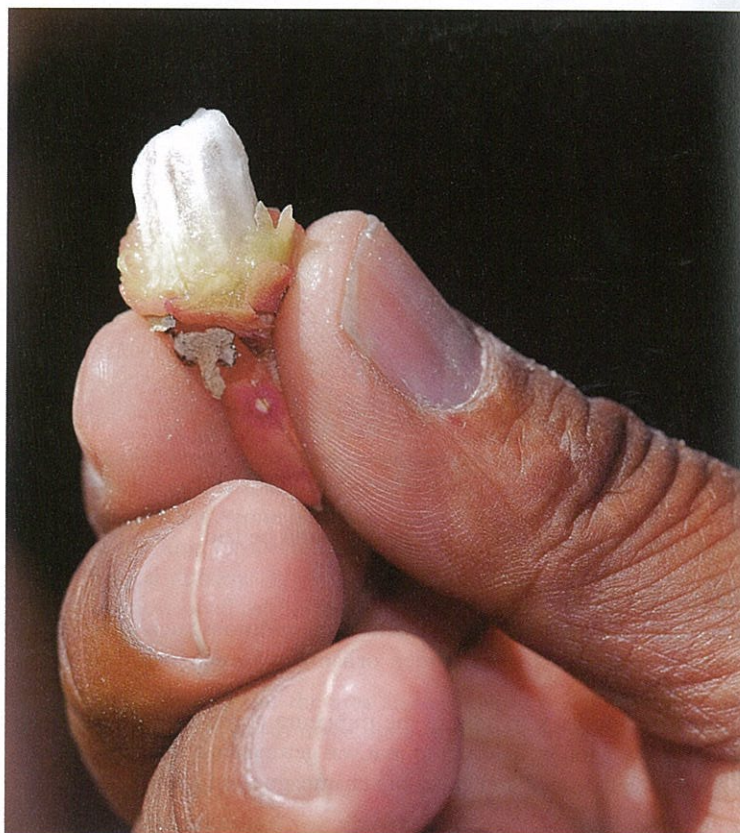
PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAN PARIS PHOTOGRAPHY
WWW.KEPAKURL.COM.AU

THE LATEST food trend to hit Australian stores is not new at all. Regardless of the current hype that surrounds native foods, we cannot escape the irrefutable truth – these foods have existed for at least 40,000 years and we have ignored them for most of that time.

Native foods have been the foundation of an Indigenous diet providing essential nutrients and sustenance long before they became the latest fashionable condiment for a restaurant menu or home pantry. The Australian food industry has finally discovered what our Indigenous neighbours always knew, and the food world is listening.

The growing interest in native food, (or bush foods) could be considered long overdue, but it is the sudden explosion in demand that is both the challenge and the boon for native food producers.

First brought to our attention in 1988 by TV program *Bush Tucker Man* featuring Les Hiddins, a real-life-style program that featured the sourcing and use of native foods, the industry is poised for significant growth both in Australia and overseas. From humble beginnings in the late 1980s, the industry grew to



BAAYN (COASTAL PIGFACE)



GOYAL (NATIVE ROSEMARY)

around \$14M in 2004, according to CSIRO research.

Visit your local specialty food store today and you will find a vast array of native foods on the shelf: from bush tomato sauce to wattle-seed based pastas, pepperberry BBQ rubs and quandong jellies. Live in an upmarket suburb and even your local supermarket will carry these lines. In a 'value-added' form these products are becoming increasingly accessible to the Western palate.

The bush food industry is unlike other primary produce sectors as it relies heavily on wild harvest. With growing demand, the challenges of growing commercially viable quantities, providing year round availability on highly seasonal products and delivering consistent quality that meets Australian regulations, all become apparent.

But there are several other important issues that must be addressed before the bush food industry is over-run by opportunists and marketers.

Maintaining the integrity of bush food products is vital. Already online bush food forums comment on the dilution of flavour they are experiencing in commercially packaged bush foods. Cost cutting, by using an essence of the food rather than the food itself, is already being touted as one of the biggest threats to the industry.

Native food purists also dislike the 'across cultures' approach being taken by some manufacturers who blend native spices into Egyptian-style dukkah mixes in an attempt to drive sales. There is a discussion to be had about adapting native foods to Western sensibilities whilst remaining authentic to traditional usage.

Native Foods are intrinsically woven into the history of Indigenous Australia and this heritage needs to be acknowledged. This requires more than placing a logo on a label or a dot painting on packaging. The knowledge, use and methods of harvesting and preparing bush foods are a cultural dynamic that must be respected. Deep inter-relationships between seasons, nature and environment have been studied and utilised for tens of thousands of years, and modern man with his belief in the dominance of modern agricultural techniques, should be reminded to consult the true growers of these foods.

Indigenous communities should benefit most from the current growth in the native foods industry. Proceeds must flow to and support the right people – the people who have always cultivated them.

South Australia is the leading Australian state in native food production and in the past decade the government has committed resources to the development of growers and dis-