

Bush foods come of age

Vic Cherikoff celebrates distinctive, healthy and delicious authentic Australian ingredients

■ AS TOLD TO KATHY BUCHANAN PHOTOGRAPHED BY TANYA ZOUÉV STYLING BY JANET MITCHELL



AUSTRALIAN FOODS have always been a passion of mine. I grew up in Sydney and Adelaide suburbia, and the Blue Mountains were a favourite spot to go bushwalking on my own or with mates. It seemed totally natural to eat the wild fruits.

I got hold of the few reference books available in the 1970s about indigenous food and used them as a basic guide. If it looked good, I tasted it and luckily never got sick, though I must admit I developed a refined taste-and-spit technique!

Scientist and now celebrity chef Vic Cherikoff kick-started interest in bush food 25 years ago. His company, Dining Downunder, now supplies indigenous food products nationally and to more than 18 countries.

Living off the land

From top left, clockwise: Australian Wildfire Spice (spice mix); Red Desert Dust (spicy seasoning); Wild Rosella Confit; Fruit Balsamic; Bush Tomato Chutney; Yakajirri (bush tomato spice mix); Alpine Pepper; Quandong Confit; Forest Anise (aniseed flavour); Desert Lime Confit (green berries) and Riberry Confit (pink berries). Centre (from the top down): Wattleseed; Paperbark Smoke Oil and Rainforest Lime Confit





Top-class tucker

From top left, clockwise: Salt and Alpine Pepper squid; artichokes; prawns with Yakajirri mayonnaise; smoked salmon with Lemon Myrtle Sprinkle; red capsicums; bocconcini

One reason I later did my science degree was that I wanted to know more about the botany of what I had been eating for years.

During my research into Aboriginal foods at the University of Sydney's Human Nutrition Unit in the 1980s, I went bush with Aboriginal women who showed me how this food was used traditionally.

When I collected samples and analysed the nutritional values, I discovered Australian foods are actually nutrition-packed powerhouses: Kakadu plums are the world's richest fruit source of vitamin C, and Illawarra plums, pepperberries and wild rosellas are wonderful sources of antioxidants –

they surpass even blueberries. Forest anise and lemon myrtle, which you can use instead of conventional herbs or in teas, are both strong immune boosters.

These ingredients may sound exotic, but they are becoming more readily available through speciality stores, farmers' markets and the internet. And these days, through my company, I supply many manufacturers with traditional ingredients.

Berri has a rosella-blend fruit juice; you can get Alpine Pepper in sausages from Woolworths; and we supply a range of spices to McCormick Foods Australia and flavours for fruit pieces in Dick Smith Foods' Bush Foods Breakfast Cereal. There are also sauces under the

Taylor's brand from SPC Ardmona; a spice-blackened, hot-smoked trout from Springs Smoked Seafood; and a whole range of cheddar cheeses flavoured with a bunch of my wild ingredients and made by Charles Sturt University's cheese factory.

Australian ingredients are generally cultivated using organic methods where they were once found naturally, in such areas as Queensland, Victoria, northern NSW and Tasmania, and from Broken Hill through to central Australia and up into the Kimberley.

Australians and the rest of the world are slowly realising we have unique local ingredients that are good for us and taste fantastic. ✚

Recipes

Marinated or char-grilled vegetables and bocconcini

Various vegetables, sliced bocconcini and seasonings such as Australian Wildfire Spice, Forest Anise, Lemon Myrtle Sprinkle, Red Desert Dust, Rainforest Rub, macadamia nut pieces, Bluegum or Paperbark Smoke Oils

Simply sprinkle different seasonings liberally over the vegetables and cheeses and serve. Alternatively, toss the vegetables onto the barbecue to warm them through and season just before you remove from the heat. The brief heat brings out the flavour of the spices and does not reduce the herb aromatics too much.

Salt and Alpine Pepper squid

Squid (calamari) tubes
Alpine Pepper
Salt
Quandong Confit

Clean and skin the calamari tubes, slice up one side to open up the hood and score one side with a crosshatch pattern to help the squid curl when it's pan-fried. Season both sides with salt and Alpine Pepper and fry in a hot pan, cooking both sides for no more than 2 minutes, until milky white. Slice the tube into 5mm strips and garnish with strips of Quandong Confit.

Prawns with Yakajirri mayo

Prawns
Mayonnaise
Yakajirri

Shell and de-vein the prawns, leaving the tails on. Pan-fry them until done. Meanwhile, add a generous amount of Yakajirri (bush tomato seasoning) to the mayonnaise and stir. Leave to stand for 5-10 minutes and test taste. Add more Yakajirri to get a

strong, rich taste of outback Australia. Place a spoonful of the mayo on your plate or serving dish, add the cooked prawns and get ready to make more as they disappear.

Smoked salmon with Lemon Myrtle Sprinkle

Australian smoked salmon, sliced
Lemon Myrtle Sprinkle

Simply separate each slice of salmon onto a plate or plastic wrap on a tray, then coat the top of each slice generously with Lemon Myrtle Sprinkle. This can be done the day before and the flavours will get time to penetrate the salmon overnight. Just wrap the prepared salmon and refrigerate. Other Australian seasonings also go well with salmon, such as those for the marinated vegetables.

Roast leg of lamb with Illawarra Plum Sauce

1 easy-carve lamb leg or rolled mini roast
1-2 spears of asparagus
Alpine Pepper
75ml Illawarra Plum Sauce
Roasted pine nuts

Using a knife-sharpening steel, make a tunnel through the meat. As you withdraw the steel, follow in from the other end with a spear of asparagus. Brown the outside of the roast in an oiled pan. Use macadamia nut oil or another good frying oil such as cottonseed, peanut, canola or sunflower.

Season with Alpine Pepper and bake in a moderate oven until just starting to firm or the juices flow clear. Alternatively, use a temperature probe to 65C. Remove from the oven, season again with Alpine Pepper and leave to rest.

Slice the lamb and serve with Illawarra Plum Sauce and garnish with toasted pine nuts.

Vic Cherikoff's Top 10

easily sourced, tasty and versatile Australian foods

1 Wattleseed

comes as a ground powder, a liquid extract and a paste. It tastes like a toasted, roasted mix of coffee, chocolate and hazelnut.

Studies have shown wattleseed can lower the GI (as tested in bread) of any food it is mixed with, so it fills you up and won't give you a sugar high.

Uses: Buy a good-quality vanilla ice-cream, let it thaw and very lightly mix through the paste or extract and refreeze to create wattleseed ice-cream. For a beverage, add a teaspoonful of the wattleseed liquid to hot water and milk and infuse it with finely grated nutmeg, cardamom and cinnamon to create a chai.

2 Lemon Myrtle Sprinkle

is a blend of two Australian native rainforest leaves (lemon myrtle and aniseed myrtle) and two rainforest fruits (wild lime and lemon aspen), intensified with lemon myrtle essential oil.

Uses: Try a hot infusion or tisane the next time you get the first tickle of a sore throat. The essential oils in this mix are immune stimulants and are powerfully antimicrobial.

Use instead of salt and pepper, or as a herb sprinkled over fish, chicken, red meat, vegetables, cheese and even desserts such as cheesecake.

3 Alpine Pepper

is a mix of the leaf of the mountain pepper and the pepperberry along with a little sumac (a Middle Eastern peppery fruit) and aniseed myrtle.

It's a good source of polygodial, a compound shown to be effective in treating arthritis.

Uses: Try it instead of ordinary

pepper, bake with it in breads (no more than a quarter teaspoon per 500g bread mix, or you'll kill the yeast), and in savoury pancakes.

4 Australian Wildfire Spice

is a versatile seasoning that contains a number of indigenous components including dried lemon aspen fruit, aniseed myrtle and mountain pepper.

Uses: You'll love it sprinkled over ribs, pizza, eggs or any meat. Mix it into mayonnaise or create a Wildfire Spice hollandaise for eggs Benedict with a difference.

Health benefits: All the Australian herbs, fruits and spices will contribute to your overall health. Using these aromatic seasonings means you won't need to rely so heavily on salt or fat for flavouring.

5 Yakajirri

is named after an Aboriginal word for the Central Australian bush tomato (which is also the primary flavour in this easy-to-use seasoning). It contains some conventional tomato, bush tomato, Alpine Pepper, mintbush and aniseed myrtle. It has a caramel and tamarillo (tree tomato) flavour with fruity notes and a hint of Vegemite, which makes it great to add to stocks and sauces.

Uses: Basically use Yakajirri as a dry marinating tomato sauce, which you can use over prawns, chicken or meat, as a pizza seasoning or as an all-purpose seasoning.

Health benefits: Yakajirri is a great source of different nutrients and antioxidants for general health. Research has shown that lycopene, which is high in ripe tomatoes, is a powerful antioxidant and is important as an anti-ageing nutrient and in

maintaining and supporting healthy cells. It is recommended as a preventative for heart disease and prostate, lung and stomach cancers.

6 Rainforest Lime Confit

The wild limes we use for this sugar-cured treat are 100% edible, skin and all.

Uses: Substitute for ordinary lemons and limes or North African preserved lemons. Chop and use these lime slices as a garnish for desserts or savoury dishes. Great with cheese or in a gremoulade (finely chopped with coriander leaves and garlic) and served with chicken, swordfish, lamb shanks or beef steak.

Health benefits: Compounds called limonoids and limonene are anti-cancerous because they are great antioxidants. Both are abundant in rainforest limes.

7 Quandong

This native peach is one of Australia's most well-known dryland fruits.

When fresh, the fruit flesh contains vitamin C and other antioxidants.

Uses: Substitute for dried apricots and serve with cheese, or cut into slivers as a garnish on meats and in sauces or desserts.

8 Wild Rosella

Botanically, this is a fruit formed from modified leaves but it actually looks like a flower. It is available as an extract or a confit.

Rosella has brilliant crimson-coloured antioxidants found in all sorts of berry fruits and is said to be restorative, aiding in the body's recovery after illness. It may have some action in lowering blood pressure, too.

Uses: Put a splash of the extract into tea, desserts and sauces to give a rich red colour. Or dilute it with mineral water to use instead of cordials, pomegranate concentrate or Ribena. The confit tastes like a delicious mix of rhubarb and raspberry.

9 Red Desert Dust

Consider this an Australian Cajun seasoning – it blackens when grilled.

Uses: Mix it with yoghurt to create a tasty substitute for tandoori sauce. It is also delicious as a flavouring for hollandaise, mayonnaise and sour cream (or to add some zing to a boring cheese sandwich!). Use it to make blackened redfish, dust it on pork ribs or blacken tuna or roasted chicken under a grill.

The Australian spices in this seasoning contain compounds which are antioxidant and anti-arthritis. The paprika, which gives the mix its colour, is also beneficial as a digestive and regulator of blood pressure and circulation.

10 Paperbark

This was – and still is – a common traditional food wrap, which today is often used to bake chicken, pork, fish and vegetables.

It is great for low-fat and low-salt cooking. You won't need to use any oil, and it helps lock the flavours so everything cooks in its own juices.

Paperbark adds a subtle, delicate smoky flavour to food. You don't eat the paperbark, but it is harmless if you ingest a little.

Products available from www.dining-downunder.com as well as local farmers' markets and better speciality food stores.



Traditional with
a tangy twist
Roast leg of lamb with
Illawarra Plum Sauce



Organic chicken with mushrooms and lemon myrtle fettuccine

Whole organic chicken
Paperbark sheet for roasting
Red Desert Dust
Fruit Balsamic
Good vinegar
Marinated or plain champignon mushrooms (small white button)
Wattleseed Extract
Forest Anise
Lemon myrtle fettuccine (store-bought or generously season fettuccine with Lemon Myrtle Sprinkle and drizzle with Lemon Myrtle Oil)
Macadamia Nut Oil
Shallots to garnish

Rinse the chicken in cold running water. Pat dry. With a pastry brush, brush on Fruit Balsamic over the skin of the chicken and sprinkle on the Red Desert Dust to coat well. Wrap the seasoned chicken in an appropriately

thinned piece of paperbark and either tie it with string or place the paperbark parcel into an oven baking bag. Bake for 1 hour in a moderate oven or until done and let rest in a warm place for 10 minutes. Remove the chicken from the wrapping and cut Asian style.

Meanwhile, cook the pasta in salted boiling water until al dente. Drain and oil lightly with Macadamia Nut Oil. Infused oils can be used here if you wish.

The mushrooms can be prepared as the chicken cooks, as they will need time to marinate. Drizzle the mushrooms with Macadamia Nut Oil, a splash of vinegar and just a dash of Wattleseed Extract. Mix well and sprinkle with Forest Anise. Leave to marinate for at least an hour.

If you are in a hurry and have the mushrooms pre-prepared, cut the chicken into pieces, wrap them in the paperbark, cover the parcel in foil (which should never touch any food directly) and bake at a higher temperature in a fan-forced oven. The cooking time can be reduced to less than 30 minutes.

Mix mushrooms into pasta and serve with chicken, garnished with shallots or herbs.

Wattleseed pavlova

4 egg whites
1 tsp lemon juice
1 tsp cornflour
100g fine sugar
1 cup toasted muesli
2 tsps Forest Anise
300ml wattleseed cream (see recipe)
Fruit coulis:
4 tsps Rosella Confit
2 tsps lemon juice (or Lemon Aspen Juice)
To serve:
Toasted macadamia nuts, coarsely chopped
Lemon Aspen Syrup

Whip the egg whites to soft peaks. While still beating, add the lemon juice and cornflour and slowly follow with the sugar. Stop once the stiff-peak stage is reached and take care not to over-whip.

Spread baking paper on an oven tray and lightly spray with oil. Spread out the pavlova mix to a thickness of 1.5cm and square off the edges. Bake at 150C until just beginning to brown. Cool.

Meanwhile, blend or process the muesli and Forest Anise to a medium fine crumb. Sprinkle this topping over the pavlova. Then, holding the baking paper by the edges, flip the pavlova onto a clean tea towel and peel back the

baking paper. If the paper sticks, place a hot wet cloth on it for a few minutes. The paper will then come away easily.

Spread the wattleseed cream and, using the tea towel, roll up the pavlova lengthways. Trim the ends obliquely, cut into slices 4-5cm thick and serve with a teaspoon of Rosella Confit soured with Lemon Aspen Juice or Lemon Aspen Syrup. Garnish with the toasted macadamia nuts for their crunch and drizzle some Lemon Aspen Syrup around for its aromatics.

Wattleseed cream recipe
300ml thickened cream, whipped to firmness
1 tbs Wattleseed and 50ml water, or use Wattleseed Extract

Boil the Wattleseed and water in a microwave (easily done in a jar without the lid), watching to stop the mixture from boiling over. This slurry can be kept chilled almost indefinitely. Cool slightly, then add some of the liquid along with as much of the softened grounds as is visually appealing to the whipped cream.

If you are using Wattleseed Extract, it is easy to add it before whipping the cream – using enough to get a light tan colour.

Wattleseed cream is best after a day in the fridge as this allows the flavour to develop more fully.



Quintessentially Australian

Wattleseed pavlova topped with Rosella Confit and a drizzle of Lemon Aspen Syrup

