

How 'bush tucker' became flavour of the month for foodies

After years of neglect, Australians are rediscovering the ancient culinary traditions of the Aboriginals.

By Kathy Marks

29 September 2007

As Aboriginal people have done for perhaps 60,000 years, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Bauman catches long-necked turtles by hand in the billabongs of the Daly river. But while her ancestors roasted turtles in hot coals, or baked them in a hole in the ground, Ms Bauman serves them up to her family stir-fried or in the form of turtle liver risotto.

Ms Bauman, an elder of the Nauiyu Nambiyu community, south of Darwin in Australia's Northern Territory, is one of a growing number of Aboriginal women learning new culinary skills – thanks to a "whitefella".

Steve Sunk, a senior lecturer in hospitality and cookery at Charles Darwin University, is showing them innovative ways to cook the animals they traditionally hunt, and their wild fruit and vegetables.

He started his courses because he was concerned about health problems caused to a large extent by poor diet. Indigenous people suffer from high rates of diabetes, obesity, renal failure and heart disease.

Their traditional diet was healthy, combining low-fat meat (kangaroo, emu, crocodile, goanna) with a wide variety of fruit and vegetables: bush tomatoes, water lilies, wild limes, yams, quandongs (native peach), Kakadu plums and wild spinach, to name but a few.

After white settlement, though, Aborigines abandoned their nomadic lifestyle. Forced to live on missions and reserves, they stripped the surrounding vegetation. They were also introduced to Western processed food, and nowadays many of them live off fried chicken and potato chips, washed down with Coke and other sugary drinks.

Mr Sunk wants indigenous people to return to their millennia-old supermarket: the desert, the rivers, the sea. To encourage that, he shows them how to cook their traditional produce more creatively and healthily. Ms Bauman, who is principal of St Francis Xavier primary school in Nauiyu, says: "Steve has

helped us to realise there are better foods we can eat, that won't make us sick later."

While Mr Sunk spreads the message in Aboriginal communities, mainstream Australia is belatedly waking up to the rich flavours – and nutritional value – of "bush tucker". The Kakadu plum contains five times the volume of antioxidants found in blueberries, well known for their antioxidant qualities.

Other wild fruit and vegetables have been found to have extraordinary qualities. A government study published last month found that fruits such as brush cherries, finger limes and ribberries are a rich source of phytochemicals, which help protect against disease and ageing.

While Australians pride themselves on their adventurous palates, and their multicultural dining scene, they have always resisted eating the produce of their own backyards. For many people, bush tucker evoked visions of squirming witchetty grubs – fat white insects found in the desert, which Mr Sunk swears are delectable fried in garlic butter. Previous attempts to popularise bush cuisine, particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s, were unsuccessful.

Public perceptions are now changing, thanks to new restaurants devoted to "native Australian food", as bush tucker has been rebranded, and the appearance of products such as bush tomato chutney and lemon myrtle-infused fruit juice on supermarket shelves.

Tjanabi, an Aboriginal-owned restaurant in Melbourne, features starters such as tempura battered crocodile on its menu, and main courses that include emu fillet wrapped in prosciutto on a saltbush and potato tart with a red wine and quandong peach sauce.

However, mainstream chefs are increasingly using native ingredients such as wild lime and river mint. They are adding saltbush to their olive tapenades, garnishing meat with lilly pilly berries, and serving fish and chips with lemon myrtle mayonnaise. Ice cream made with wattle seed – a nutty, coffee-flavoured berry – is popular.

Domestic cooks are cautiously joining in. Rather than toss a steak straight on the barbie, Australians are seasoning it with mountain pepper and then wrapping it in paperbark – a process that simultaneously steams and smokes the meat, according to Benjamin Christie, a celebrity chef who promotes bush foods.

Benjamin Christie says: "People didn't want to eat food from the bush. They were afraid of it, wondering where it has been grown and what animals have been walking over it. But there's been a psychological change that has coincided with a trend towards healthier eating and going back to your roots, knowing where food comes from."

The cuisine is also being popularised through cookery books and television shows. Mark Olive, an Aboriginal chef who calls himself "The Black Olive", has a cult following. The second series of his programme, **The Outback Cafe**, which sees him travelling around Australia and cooking with different local ingredients, has just begun screening on a cable channel.

One of Mr Olive's signature dishes is "roolet mignon", which uses kangaroo instead of beef, served with bush greens and native pepper sauce. In a recent interview, he said: "We've embraced every other culture from around the world, foodwise. Here we have this amazing produce in our backyard and we don't utilise it."

Mr Olive partly blames the reluctance of white Australians to eat kangaroo and emu, which adorn the national coat of arms. He points out that the continent's original inhabitants have been tucking into those two meat sources for tens of thousands of years. The trend is benefiting Aboriginal communities, where people are employed or paid to supply specialist companies, supermarkets and restaurants. It might be on a small scale, with enterprising individuals digging under acacia trees for witchetty grubs, or using their knowledge of local geography and the seasons to hunt out bush tomatoes. Or it might be on a larger scale, with thriving businesses engaged in growing and harvesting ingredients whose popularity is soaring. Lemon myrtle, wattle seed and quandongs are among the products now being grown on big plantations. Mr Christie's business partner, Vic Cherikoff, sources Kakadu plums from a plantation in the remote Kimberley region of Western Australia, run by a company uniting five communities. Such enterprises give indigenous people a degree of economic independence, while enabling them to retain their connection with the land. Some have called this serendipitous meeting of demand and supply "edible reconciliation". Mr Christie says: "Aboriginal communities have created real businesses and returned money to their communities by growing and selling native foods co-operatively."

Mr Cherikoff, who has pioneered the use of native produce in Australia, says: "There is an Aboriginal art industry, but only the best artists make money. Everyone can go out and pick bush tomatoes. The expansion of the native food industry is bringing real benefits to these communities."

At Nauiyu, the former Daly River Mission, children are eating fruit and yoghurt instead of salty, high-fat snacks. They drink watered-down fruit juices; Coke and lemonade are just an occasional treat. The health kick has extended beyond food. Children at Miriam Bauman's school regularly take long walks, and enjoy exercise classes.

Ms Bauman says: "It makes the kids feel important too. It reinforces the culture. We still have all the skills and knowledge surrounding bush food. We just have to start using them again."

She hunts freshwater turtles most weekends during the dry season, when the waters of the Daly river – about 200 miles south of Darwin – recede into creeks and billabong pools. She wades through the shallows, occasionally

poking around with a stick for the long-necked turtles that hibernate in the mud. Some young people spear the turtles, or put on swimming goggles and dive for them. The locals keep a careful look-out. The waterways of northern Australia are home to large numbers of "salties" – saltwater crocodiles – that grow up to 15ft long and regard humans as prey. Aboriginal people are permitted to hunt crocodiles for meat, although Ms Bauman says that she prefers to gather the eggs. "It's safer," she laughs.

Freshwater crocs lay eggs at this time of year and salties lay them during the rainy season, which begins around December.

There are plenty of other foods to hunt and harvest in the area, including wallaby, barramundi (a local fish), and waterlilies. The waterlily pods and roots are edible. After the rains, there are seeds, berries and yams. The locals make honey from native sugarbag bees, which are stingless.

Naiyu was where Steve Sunk taught his first course 12 years ago. Since then he has crisscrossed northern Australia, teaching 140 students a year and visiting communities so remote that they require two plane rides or a 14-hour road trip. He is booked out for the next year.

Aboriginal people have given Mr Sunk his own "skin name"—Jingalla. Sometimes they just call him "Cookie Boy". "It's an exchange of culture. They show me how to hunt and gather, then they come to me and learn new methods of cooking."

He says: "I teach people basic cooking methods: roasting, baking, poaching, grilling, boiling. I'm saying to them, 'this is your stuff, but this is what you can do with it by using these methods'."

"I get a kangaroo or a dugong (sea cow), cut it up into the primary cuts, cut all the fat off it, then make it into schnitzels or whatever and serve it with vegetables. Then I show people how to freeze what's left. The cooking helps to teach literacy and numeracy too. I also teach hygiene – keeping the fridge clean, washing the floors, the importance of washing your hands.

Mr Sunk also works with community stores, persuading them to stock healthier food, and with takeaways, encouraging them to improve their menus. Most stores sell only high-fat, high-salt processed and frozen food. Prices are high, and there is little incentive to stock fruit and vegetables, which have to be transported from hundreds of miles away.

Despite the growing popularity of native foods in Australia, it is overseas markets that are fuelling much of the demand. Vic Cherikoff exports products such as wild lime tartare sauce to 40 countries including the US. British supermarkets are stocking bush tomato chutneys and desert lime jams. New York is home to half a dozen Australian restaurants, most of them using native ingredients.

Selected bush recipes

Steve Sunk of Charles Darwin University has produced a new cookbook, *Walkabout Chefs*, in conjunction with the photographer David Hancock. Mr Sunk's recipes include: turtle broth, dugong steaks with bush fruits, pan-fried magpie goose breast with a bush peach glaze, chargrilled crocodile tail with bush tomato chutney, bush-meat pie with kangaroo, bush-turkey and emu, goanna and vegetable stew, waterlily salad with red claw yabbies, kangaroo bourgignon and wattle seeds pancakes with sugarbag caramel. Here are three of Steve's more appetising creations...

Kangaroo tail soup with witchetty grubs

Wash, blanch, then lightly brown in olive oil one kangaroo tail cut up into small pieces. Add several litres of water plus three peeled carrots, three roughly chopped onions, four celery sticks and one shredded leek, bring to the boil. Add two bay leaves, 10 pepper corns and two beef cubes. Simmer for three hours or until meat is tender, adding more water if necessary. Season with salt and pepper. Serve topped with lightly fried witchetty grubs (three grubs per serving).

Wild greens and crocodile frittata Lightly brown six to 12 finely chopped bush onions in olive oil. Add one cup of crocodile meat, cut into strips, and cook until tender. Add one cup of roughly chopped wild spinach and toss lightly. Reduce heat. Whisk five eggs with three tablespoons of milk plus salt and pepper. Pour mixture into pan and mix well. Oven cook at 180-200C for 10 minutes. Serve with a salad or roasted yams. (Emu eggs may be substituted for hen's eggs)

Stir fried turtle (serve with rice)

Wash, peel and cut into small strips two medium carrots, two celery stalks and one red pepper. Shred one large onion. Partly cook vegetables in boiling water, then strain. Lightly brown two crushed garlic cloves and one tablespoon of shredded ginger in olive oil. Add three cups of turtle meat sliced into small strips, cook for five minutes. Add vegetables, plus four tablespoons each of soy sauce and oyster sauce. Stir fry for two minutes. Salt and pepper to season.