**Guradji – the Next Big Thing in native food?**  
  
The invitation from Slow Food Sydney intrigued. ‘Jesse [Gurugirr] is a First Nations Guringai man who will help unlock the health secrets of our traditional ancestors passed down over thousands of generations, and guide us through the tradition of a Gurạdji tea ceremony’. I hadn’t heard of any Indigenous tea ceremony nor any food preparation method that sounded like making tea. A check in with Bruce Pascoe’s *Black Emu*, John Newton’s *The Oldest Foods on Earth*, and an email chat with colonial food historian Jacqui Newling confirmed this. There are written descriptions of Indigenous groups using hot stones to heat water, but no descriptions of brewing dried leaves in hot water and drinking the result as refreshment.

We gathered in the tiny sitting area of the narrow terrace that houses Zensation Tea House in Sydney’s Surry Hills, some sitting on the floor in the centre of which on a mat was a sheet of paperbark with dried green cut leaves on it and a large charcoal ceramic bowl. What followed was not a tea ceremony but an excellent talk from Jesse about the place of native plants in the health and ceremonial practices of the Guringai and a sampling of the guradji (he didn’t know the botanical name and my searches have turned nothing up) made by his company Lore Australia.

Some sites I’ve visited as background for this article promote guradji as ‘one of Australia’s most powerful superfoods’. Happily Jessie made no such claim. What he did say is that the Guringai use guradji as a mild analgesic for tooth pain when ground with lime, and for cramps, including menstrual cramps. He has had material bioanalysed at Southern Cross University and there are interesting compounds including ones with strong anti-inflammatory action, and it is also high in antioxidants.

Lore’s guradji is sustainably hand harvested from wild groves that have been managed by the Guringai for millenia. It’s then either just sun-dried, or harvested and steamed to stop oxidisation, then hand rolled and again dried. The Guringai also offer a smoke of guradji to welcome strangers to country, reportedly giving a mild buzz, which pleased one of the attendees who I expect bought some for later experimenting.

So where does the tea ceremony come in. Jessie was understandably unable to say much about what is women’s business, but there is a Guringai ceremonial practice of steeping dried leaves in cold water in a bark container for several hours, the women continually stirring the mix while singing. Again, Jessie didn’t know what the song was about but thinks it probably describes the care, use and preparation of the plant, a sung passing on of knowledge. In one of those excruciating moments one of the attendees asked Jessie where the song came from. Jessie replied that he imagined it had developed over thousands of years. The attendee then asked ‘Did the plant give the song to the women?’ Jessie’s response was diplomatic.

Another attendee suggested the process was similar to that of making ‘sun teas’, steeping leaves in water and exposing the mix to the direct rays of the sun. I misheard it as ‘sung teas’ which given Jessie’s description of the process I think is a more accurate and poetic term.

Disappointingly, I had looked longingly at the leaves on the paperbark and the empty bowl for nought. We sampled the two products as tisanes, which Lore sells them as, a more accurate culinary term for a health drink of leaves steeped in hot water than ‘tea’. Both were much like familiar leaf based tisanes: pale gold in colour (which darkens with longer steeping), lightly lemongrass perfumed, and tasting somewhere between jasmine and lemongrass.  As with both of those, the longer the guradji is steeped the more the bitter flavonoids emerge. Not really, it must be said, my preferred cup of tea.