# This delicious fruit. Notes on the rosella *Hibiscus sabdariffa* in Australia

No farm should be without rosellas. They are easily grown, they bear heavily, they make an excellent preserve, and are infinitely preferred to the mulberry for puddings. The fruit also makes a delicious wine.

Kitchen Garden

*The Bundaberg Mail and Burnett Advertiser* 1911[[1]](#footnote-1)

My first encounter with the rosella was a red tendrilled fruity homunculus dropped into a glass of champagne, turning the champagne red and sweet. I’ve grown a rosella plant and harvested it and made jam from it. But it wasn’t till I came across it while researching chutney in Australia that my interest was piqued enough for me to turn my attention to it.

# The rosella – *Hibiscus sabdariffa*

In June 1853 this advertisement appeared in the *Moreton Bay Courier*:

HYBISCUS ROSELLA

This delicious FRUIT, so well adapted for Puddings, Tarts, &c., more especially when

mixed with the Preserving Melon can be supplied by the Undersigned, in any quantities,

G. ADKINS.

Queen-street, North Brisbane[[2]](#footnote-2)

So what’s this ‘delicious fruit’? Well, to begin with it isn’t a fruit. It’s the calyx of a hibiscus flower made up of sepals, the outermost parts at the bottom of the flower holding the petals together. As the petals die off the calyx protects the growing seed. Perhaps it’s called a rosella because the calyx is often green in other plants but in the rosella its dark red (rosy). The sepals look like small leaves and in the recipes for rosella in the 19th and early 20th centuries they are often called ‘leaves’.

# The calyx that is Adkin’s ‘delicious fruit’ belongs to a variety of hibiscus - *Hibiscus sabdariffa* (*H. sabdariffa* for short throughout this article). While widespread this is not an Australian native hibiscus of which there are 40.[[3]](#footnote-3) It’s described as naturalised, that is it has adapted itself to a different environment than that to which it is native. It grows wild in northern Queensland, the tropical areas of northern New South Wales, the northern parts of the Northern Territory and northern Western Australia. In the Northern Territory and Western Australia it is now considered an environmental weed.[[4]](#footnote-4) ‘According to heritage horticulturalist Dave Grey (*H. sabdariffa)* has been in Australia for 15,000 years … It is understood that it originated in India or Malaysia, spread across tropical regions of Africa, Hawaii and other equatorial island groups and, eventually, to Australia’.[[5]](#footnote-5)

# This to me is one of the first tantalising mysteries about the jam-making rosella. Why was it the emigrant and not a native that had a career as a popular preserve? It wasn’t for want of candidates. ‘There are several other native hibiscuses with edible leaves buds and roots’.[[6]](#footnote-6) *Hibiscus heterophyllus* is one, commonly called the native rosella. When I put the question to native food pioneers Jean Paul Bruneteau and Vic Cherrikoff they both said that the native rosella lacked culinary appeal, being somewhat bland.[[7]](#footnote-7)

# The other mystery is why and when *H. sabdariffa* began to be used to make jam in Australia. In Jamaica, where it is known as sorrel the petals are used, steeped in hot water to make a popular drink.[[8]](#footnote-8) Among the Tiv of Central Nigeria the calyx is made into soup or boiled to make a drink.[[9]](#footnote-9) The only other place I found the calyx used for jam was in a recipe for ‘Oseille [ sorell ] or Rosella jam and jelly’ in an Anglo-Indian cookery book of 1860.[[10]](#footnote-10)  All that can be said for certain is that jam making from rosellas must have been established well before 1853 for Adkins to be confident he would have buyers.

# So, where did Adkins get his supply of rosellas? That he can assure his customers he can supply them ‘in any quantity’ suggests to me that in 1853 he was cultivating rosellas or had suppliers who were growing them. The cultivation of rosellas domestically became a regular feature of gardening calendars published in newspapers and magazines.[[11]](#footnote-11) While largely propogated by seeds, cuttings were also effective. Queensland emerged as the primary site for large scale cultivation of rosellas and for manufacturing jams and jellies from them, so much so that the rosella became known as the Queensland jam plant.[[12]](#footnote-12)

# Jams, Jellies and Other Ways with Rosellas

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Have you ever grown rosellas. I think with you they would do very well, unless you have a very cold frosty winter. They are fair sized bushes, simply covered with bright red flowers, the calyxes of which make a most delicious jelly. They are the prettiest things in the garden and so useful. It is something like red currant jelly, and is splendid for using with meat and game.

The Ladies Column

*Casino and Kyogle Courier and North Coast Advertiser*

4 March 1914[[13]](#footnote-13)

Jam and jelly making were the two most common ways of using rosellas. This is a recipe for jam.

ROSELLA JAM.—Pick the red leaves off the rosella and throw into one vessel: the stalk and

seed into another. Allow l lb. of water (1 pint) to l lb. of fruit and l lb. of sugar. First boil

seeds and stalks in a pan, nicely covered with water, till you see them soft. Strain through a

jelly bag. Put on your rosellas with water and sugar. When boiling add the liquid strained from the seeds, allowing l lb. of sugar to every pint of liquid. Let the whole boil well

till it will jelly on a plate.[[14]](#footnote-14)

It’s a standard recipe for making any kind of jam and all of the published rosella jam recipes are made this way. The caklyx is acidic and cooking rosellas with chokos[[15]](#footnote-15) or apples[[16]](#footnote-16) is suggested as a way to lessen the tartness. Combining rosellas with melon was also popular (as per Adkins’ advertisement). [[17]](#footnote-17)

The seeds provide pectin necessary for setting the jam. They were usually cooked separately, then strained through muslin, a jelly bag or similar and the liquid collected added to the calyx water, all the liquid being further boiled till the jam sets.[[18]](#footnote-18) One recipe called for the seeds to be tied up in moquito netting and boiled along with the fruit, the parcel being removed when the jam is ready to be poured off.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Rosella jelly was the next most common use. Here, too the recipes follow standard practice in making fruit jellies. Rosella wine was also popular using simple fermentation of rosellas with sugar, sometimes with the addition of brewer’s yeast.

While jams and jellies used no spicing, rosella pickles and chutnies did, in common with their condiment types. This was one of the recipes for Rosella Chutney

Mince 2 lbs rosellas (after seeds have been taken out), l lb onions, six apples (peeled and cored). Then boil till tender, with one tablespoonful salt, one bottle vinegar, peppercorns, allspice, and cayenne pepper to taste. Add 2 1b sugar and boil a little longer. If too thick, more vinegar may be added. This is a very economical chutney, as it can be made from rosella jam left over from previous season.[[20]](#footnote-20)

But rosellas were more versatile than this. Appendix 1 briefly describes some other uses to which they were put.

# Dried rosellas

Rosellas are often described as being quite profuse fruit growers. One of the ways to manage quantities at the one time or to have rosellas all year round was to dry them. This was a simple process of laying them on a sheet of iron or calico placed outside in the sun for two or three days.

Rosellas being revived by soaking in water did not lose their flavour. Indeed, Mr. Orr, a rosella grower and jam maker, told the *Mackay Mercury and South Kennedy Advertiser* that ‘the rosella fruit, after beng dried for six months make a superior jam than that made in the ordinary way from green fruit.’[[21]](#footnote-21)

# *Hibiscus sabdariffa* goes native

When I arrived in Australia in 1962 and for the next two decades I knew nothing of the rosella. It was not sold fresh at the local grocers nor the large produce markets I went to. It didn’t appear on supermarket shelves and certainly did not appear on menus of restaurants I went to. Recipes for rosellas in newspapers and magazine also peter out from the mid-1950s.

Then in the early 1980s the foodscape in Australia had a major shift. ‘Interest in native foods had stayed at the fringes of public Australian eating since colonisation … Native foods began to take their place in Australian cuisines more decisively during the 1980s.’[[22]](#footnote-22) Where this change was most noticeable was at high-end restaurants.

Among the native foods that appeared on menus was *H. Sabdariffa*. Jennice and Raymond Kersh opened *Edna’s Table* in 1981*,* the first fine dining restaurant in Australia to put native food on the table. In their 1998 cookery book *Edna’s Table* they write ‘Australians have embraced a rich variety of European and Asian cuisines. We firmly believe they will now begin to turn to the food of our land.’[[23]](#footnote-23) They give recipes for Rosella Bud and Ricotta Cake with Macadamia Praline (p.151) and Hot Australian Christmas Pudding With Wattle Seed Crème Anglaise (p.152). They don’t say but I expect the rosella was *H. sabdariffa* but it does not come described as ‘wild’ or ‘native’.

In 1984, Jean-Paul Bruneteau and Jennifer Dowling opened ‘Rowntrees’. Rosella was on the menu as a crystallised fruit and chutney. In his 1996 book *Tukka* he identifies the rosella he uses as *H. sabdariffa.*[[24]](#footnote-24) Bruneteau didn’t describe this as ‘native’ or ‘wild rosella.’[[25]](#footnote-25)

In 1988 Vic Cherikoff (‘scientist, author and entrepreneur and pioneer of the Australian Wild Food Industry[[26]](#footnote-26)) and Bruneteau curated a Bush Tucker Buffet for the Fourth Symposium of Australian Gastronomy which included:

SMOKED KANGAROO WITH ROSELLA CHUTNEY smoked with Eucalyptus leaves and served with wild hibiscus chutney.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The rosella used here was again *H. sabdariffa*, but it was now described as ‘wild’. The term, was suited to the image of the emerging bush food industry suggesting something uncultivated and foraged/gathered.

Damien Coulthard & Rebecca Sullvan in their 2019 *Warndu Maui* write of *H. sabdariffa*, ‘While the rosella is not actually native to Australia (it’s from Africa) it grows wild here and has adapted its own unique flavour in Australia. It is used in many bush tucker recipes and is sold as a native flower.’[[28]](#footnote-28) Their Rosella Relish (p.186) is a traditional rosella jam that is infused with a true Australian native, the lemon myrtle.

The final step in the nativisation of *H. sabdariffa* is reflected by Damien Coulthard & Rebecca Sullivan in their 2022 *First Nations Food Companion.* They write that the plant, known as Wyrrung by the Aboriginal people on New South Wales ‘has been here for long enough to be treated as a native.’[[29]](#footnote-29) Recipes given here include Rosella and Tamarind Pie (p.158) and Rosella Native Jam Tart (p.165)

It isn’t only writers of bush food cookery books who have given *H. sabdariffa* citizenship in the realm of native foods. Tucker Bush, ‘a range of Australian native plants with edible fruits, nuts, shoots, leaves and roots’ gives a recipe for Rosella Jam accompanied by a picture of *Hibiscus sabdariffa*.[[30]](#footnote-30)

And what of *Hibiscus heterophyllus*? In *Tukka* Bruneteau says of it: ‘The cultivated plant (*Hibiscus sabdariffa* ) is a relative of our own native yellow or white *H heterophyllus*. The flower of the native plant is bland compared to the bright red North African species’.[[31]](#footnote-31) Vic Cherikoff said that it didn’t have the culinary appeal of *H. sabdariffa*.[[32]](#footnote-32)

But there is hope for it yet. Andrew Fielke in his 2020 cookery book *Australia’s Creative Native Cuisine* writes:

For culinary purposes, the flowers (of *Hibiscus heterophyllus)* have a tart berry flavour with hints of rhubarb, which works well with fruit compotes, jellies and other sweet dishes and is also said to have been eaten by Indigenous Australians as a vegetable In this book … The attractive plant also makes an attractive garnish. [[33]](#footnote-33)

He gives a recipe for Rosella Flower Harissa Roast Chicken (p. 101).

#  Whereto with rosellas now

I write this in August 2023. The rosella - *H. sabdariffa* - is in full comeback mode. A search on the internet with the terms ‘rosella jam’ gave me 30 recipes, that’s nearly twice the number of recipes I found via *Trove* over a hundred year period 1853 (the year Adkins advertised having quantities of rosellas to sell for preserve making) – 1953. All are basically the same as the recipe in this article. There are dozens of sites advertising sales of rosella jam. There are a number of sites advertising rosella seeds and plants for sale, some of them general nurseries, others align themselves with the bush tucker/native food industry. Many identify the seeds as *H. sabdariffa*. I suspect most buyers would not think twice about their provenance and imagine they are purchasing jams and seeds of a native plant albeit not wild harvested. Rosellas appear in season at farmers’ markets. And every day somewhere someone is having a glass of champagne with a red tendrilled fruity homunculus at the bottom, a sweet red syrup drifting upwards from it.

# Appendix 1. Other ways with rosellas

**Rosellas and Apple Charlotte (French) –** whole fruiyt off the rozsella boiled strained, adds liced apples and boil till tender, line pie tin with bread doused in butter, pour on the apples, cover with more bread and butter and bake.[[34]](#footnote-34)

**Rosella Arrowroot** - rosellas in water for ½ hour, throw away the rosellas, water back on stove to boil, add two and a half tablespoons arrowroot, when thick put into jelly moulds, let set and serve with cream or custard.[[35]](#footnote-35)

**Rosalla Cream** – gelatine, milk boiled sugar added, beaten egg yolk added, vanilla essence, then whites of egg and into moulds t set, top with cochineal and sugar and rosella jelly.[[36]](#footnote-36)

**Rosella Gateau** – sponge cake, sugar, currants, rosella jam, cream, sherry. Rosela and currant boiled together. Spread n slice of sponge cake, pile up and add cream and sherry.[[37]](#footnote-37)

## Rosella Mould – A rosella and apple jelly turned into a ‘Chinese’ mould and served with cream or custard.[[38]](#footnote-38)

**Rosella Pudding** – Line a basin with stale bread, boil together rosellas sugar and water, pour this over the pudding, cover with more bread, press down to absorb sauce, weight down the lid, eat when cold.[[39]](#footnote-39)

**Rosella Syrup** – Sugar and rosella are boiled then left to ferment, bottled when the fermentation is complete. ‘ A little of this in water makes a very pleasant summer drink.’[[40]](#footnote-40) In 1857 W. Easy & Co. auctioned imported First Quality Rosella Syrup.[[41]](#footnote-41)

**Stewed Rosella and Apples** – Rosellas and apples are gently stewed together in water with a pinch of baking soda till tender.[[42]](#footnote-42)

**Rosella Tea –** There was just one advertisement for Golden Tips from which to make this and the name notwithstanding I think it was dried rosellas that were being sold. [[43]](#footnote-43)

**Rosella Trifle** - Prepared rosella in a bowl lined with bread, more bread on top, pressed with a weight. Serve with boiled custard. ‘This is a very attractive dish for children.[[44]](#footnote-44) .

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accessed at [11 Oct 1911 - FARM AND GARDEN - Trove (nla.gov.au)](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/215778257?searchTerm=rosella) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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4. [Hibiscus sabdariffa (lucidcentral.org)](https://keyserver.lucidcentral.org/weeds/data/media/Html/hibiscus_sabdariffa.htm) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [Birds of a feather – rosella jam | The Cook and the Curator | Sydney Living Museums](https://blogs.sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/cook/birds-of-a-feather-rosella-jam/) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Low, Tim, ‘Wild Food Plants of Australia’, Angus and Robertson, 1988 p.144 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Vic Cherrikof and Jean-Paul Bruneteau in conversation with Paul van Reyk 10 August 1923. A food historian friend semi-humouredly suggested also that the native rosellas grows too tall to be easy picking. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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10. [Riddell, R.](https://archive.org/search.php?query=creator%3A%22Riddell%2C+R%22) *Indian domestic economy and receipt book*. *: comprising numerous directions for plain wholesome cookery, both Oriental and English, with much miscellaneous matter, answering all general purposes of reference connected with household affairs likely to be immediately required by families, messes, and private individuals, residing at the presidencies or out-stations,* (publisher not identified) 1860 . The recipe is for Oseille (Sorrel) or Rosella jam or Jelly p.311 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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12. ‘The Rosella’, *The Farmer and the Settler (*Sydney) 5 October 1923 p.11 [05 Oct 1923 - THE ROSELLA. - Trove (nla.gov.au)](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/115950581?searchTerm=Melon%20and%20Rosella%20Jam.); also The *Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney) 3 June 1868 p.3 accessed at [03 Jun 1868 - To the Editor of the Herald. - Trove (nla.gov.au)](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/13167219?searchTerm=rosella) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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16. [08 May 1924 - HOW TO USE ROSELLAS. - Trove (nla.gov.au)](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/20748087?searchTerm=rosella) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. ‘Melon and Rosella Jam’, The *Brisbane Courier* (Brisbane) 21 May 1925 p.11 accessed at [21 May 1925 - ROSELLA COOKERY. - Trove (nla.gov.au)](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/20928246?searchTerm=rosella). This is one of four recipes for melon and rosella jam I came across. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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30. [Rosella Jam - Tucker Bush](https://tuckerbush.com.au/rosella-jam/) [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Bruneteau Jean-Paul, *Tukka.* Real Australian Food Angus and Robertson p. 156 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Vic Cherikoff in conversation with Paul van Reyk 9 August 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
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