

‘You don’t need culinary training to explore the potential of these ingredients’. A look at seven native food cookery books written by Indigenous cooks and chefs 2006 – 2025

June 2025

This article was written on Gadigal land. I pay my respects to elders past, present, and emerging. Always was always will be Aboriginal land.

The article looks at seven native plant cookbooks written by Indigenous cooks and chefs between 2006 – 2025. It looks at the authors’ reasons for writing the book, summarises what is in the books, and gives a recipe from each book.

The seven books are:

- Mark Olive’s Outback Café. A taste of Australia - Mark Olive (2006)
- Coo-ee Cuisine - Dale Chapman (2016)
- Warndu Mai. Good Food- Damien Coulthard & Rececca Sullivan (2019)
- Mabu Mabu, An Australian Cookbook– Nornie Bero (2022)
- first nations food companion - Damien Coulthard & Rececca Sullivan (2022)
- Bush Foods & Botanicals – Sharon Winsor (2024)
- The Australian Ingredients Kitchen – Elder Bruno Dann & Tahlia Mandi of Kakadu Plum Co (2025)

Common Themes

Education

Educating people about native foods is a theme that runs through these books. Some of the businesses offer catering and cooking classes. Some offer immersive native food experiences. Some run native food businesses online offering not only food online but a range of cosmetic products and health products from native sources.

The glossaries in the books with their descriptions of the native plants and their uses are also educative. For example, an extract from *Bush Foods & Botanicals*:

Native Ginger

Alpinia caerulea

Native Ginger (*Alpinia caerulea*) is traditional to the highland region near Cairns ... The root of the Native Ginger and the blue berries can be eaten. The root is somewhat spicy and the leaves can also be used to line earth ovens, wrap food in and line the roof of shelters. The berries have a lemon-like ginger flavour and are traditionally eaten on long journeys to keep moisture in the mouth, it is recommended that the seeds are not eaten. The leaves can be added to curries and soups for enhanced flavour. A great digestive tea can be made by steeping dried leaves in hot water for 3-4 minutes.

The blue berries are high in calcium, iron and magnesium as well as a valuable source of zinc, phosphorus and copper.¹

¹ Winsor, Sharon, *Bush Foods & Botanicals* 2024 p.81

Some books have photographs of ingredients, for example *Warndu Mai. Good Food*.² Others have drawings of them, for example *first nations food companion*.³ Both help the homecook know what they are looking for.

Educating is not limited to Australia. Mark Olive, Dale Chapman, and Nornie Bero have all spruiked Australian native plant ingredients internationally.

The home kitchen

Another theme is that the recipes are intended for the home kitchen. Let me put my homecook hat on and support that. The recipes are meticulously written and easy to follow. The recipes I have included also speak to this. Ingredients for recipes are noted as being readily available in supermarkets, online, speciality shops, grocers and food markets.

Sometimes recipes have liner notes, some humorous. For example,

Herby Ice Pops

These ice pop recipes one made with soda, one with yoghurt, recall super-hot summer days running under the garden hose in the backyard, ice pops dripping down onto the hot concrete, only to be quickly eaten by ants. The only difference here is that we've made ants part of the ice pops!⁴

Ethical practices

Two of the books write of ethical practice whether from the authors of the cookery books or the bush food industry. In *Warndu Mai* Rebecca Sullivan writes of :

We believe that although we are championing native foods and want to see a thriving industry the intellectual property of all these foods must always remain with our nation's first people.⁵

Dale Chapman in *Coo-ee Cuisine* writes that:

Ethical involvement of Aboriginal communities around Australia has the potential to have a huge impact in areas where there is historically little scope for European agriculture farming.⁶

She gives a list of suppliers who work ethically with Aboriginal communities.⁷

The native food industry

Finally, the state of the native food industry is commented on and support for it encouraged. 'Help this wonderful industry grow by supporting it where you can'.⁸

In 2022 an article on the bush food industry in the Financial Review estimated the industry was worth \$81.5 million. The article cited Dr. Adam Canning from James Cook University, who had just published research mapping out the best places to grow more than 170 bush foods in

² Coulthard, Damien & Sullivan, Rececca *Warndu Mai. Good Food*- Damien Coulthard & Rececca Sullivan 2019

³ Coulthard, Damien & Sullivan, Rececca *first nations food companion* Murdoch Books 2022 p100

⁴ Coulthard & Sullivan 2022

⁵ Coulthard & Sullivan 2022 p.11

⁶ Chapman 2016 p. 2

⁷ Chapman Dale *Coo-ee Cuisine* 2016 p.3

⁸ Coulthard and Sullivan 2019 p. 14

Australia, as saying that ‘the sky is the limit ... If it becomes more mainstream you could be talking about turning millions into billions. It’s an industry in its infancy, and it’s really just a matter of how much we want to grow.’⁹

Mark Olive’s Outback Café. A taste of Australia (2006)

Mark Olive is perhaps the highest profile indigenous chef in Australia, with appearances on several television shows and his own series both shown overseas and becoming something of a promoter of bush cuisine to tourism operators and overseas visitors through a program under Tourism Australia.

He worked with Aboriginal communities using cooking as a means of social development where ‘local people help(ed) him to find bush foods and pass on their knowledge gained over thousands of years about how to use them’.¹⁰

He began experimenting with bush foods in the late 1980s. He ran his own restaurant – The Midden – featuring native ingredients for eighteen months in 1996/97. Olive thinks the restaurant was ‘way ahead of its time’.¹¹

Olive continued cooking as a career. He regularly appeared on the Indigenous ABC show ‘Message Stick’ as the resident chef.¹² By 2006 he was using 20 bush foods in his cooking. In the Foreword for the book, Olive writes: ‘I’ve seen food trends change and grow significantly along with people’s general awareness of indigenous produce and its place in our kitchens and classrooms as a sustainable food option’.¹³

‘His dream is to see the wonderful natural produce of the outback used in everyday cooking’.¹⁴

Like the other chef’s profiled in this article, he combines bush ingredients with Anglo-Australian dishes as in this take on an Australian icon food.

Mountain Pepper Fish and Chips¹⁵

2 perch fillets

Lemon myrtle, ground, for dusting

Plain flour for dusting

300 ml macadamia or olive oil

1 sweet potato

Batter

1 cup self-raising flour

1 egg

2 dstspn vinegar

1 cup water or beer

Saltbush

Native mountain pepper

⁹ *Bush food industry worth \$80m but could double by 2025: study*, Gus McCubbing, Financial Review 4 November 2022.

¹⁰ Olive 2006 p. 9

¹¹ Olive 2006 p. 9

¹² Olive, Mark, *Mark Olive’s Outback Café*, R. M. Williams Publishing 2006 pp 8 - 9

¹³ Olive 2006 p.5

¹⁴ Olive 2006 p.7

¹⁵ Olive 2006 p.51

To make the batter, whisk egg, vinegar ,flour or beer and chopped saltbush in a medium bowl until smooth. Set aside.

Cut the sweet potato into chip portions, dry well with tea towel or paper towel.

Fry chips in batches until brown and cooked through.

Meanwhile, mix the ground lemon myrtle and flour. Coat the fillets with the flour and then dip in the batter. Cook in hot oil until golden brown.

Coo-ee Cuisine. Dale Chapman (2016)

Chef Dale Chapman says of her slim book that ‘There was no intention to create a glossy, expensive coffee table book that looks great, is read once, and gathers dust This is a straightforward collection of tried-and-true family recipes that will teach you how to absorb authentic traditional Aboriginal flavours into your cooking.’¹⁶ The book was in response to ‘many years of requests’ through her restaurant and the Dilly Bag, her catering business.

She has travelled internationally promoting bush foods. ‘The world is definitely ready for the unique and nutritious qualities of our indigenous seeds, spices, leaves and meats’.¹⁷ Her book is dedicated ‘To bush lovers of the world’.¹⁸

The book comes with a large fold out listing nine bush foods - anise myrtle, cinnamon myrtle, curry myrtle, lemon myrtle, native thyme, old man saltbush, strawberry gum, Tasmanian pepper, and wattle seed - and their uses across a spectrum of Anglo-Australian dish types – appetisers, soups and so on.

Not all her recipes are plant-based. This one is for an Anglo-Australian dish which Australians are obsessed about.

Big Bush Curry¹⁹

2 tbsp vegetable oil

500g kangaroo mince

2 onions, chopped or sliced

1 red capsicum, sliced

3 medium potatoes, peeled and roughly chopped

2 cups chopped vegetables (choose from beans, peas, zucchini, carrots, cauliflower)

1 tbsp finely chopped ginger

1 tsp finely chopped garlic

1 tbsp red curry paste (can add extra for more heat)

1 tbsp quality curry powder

½ tsp Dorrigo pepper

1 level tsp salt

1 can crushed or diced tomatoes

1 can coconut cream

1 can dried chickpeas

Heat oil in a large frying pan and fry off onions with the curry paste and curry powder until aromatic.

Add kangaroo mince and sauté until browned.

¹⁶ Chapman, Dale, *Coo-ee Cuisine* (self-published) 2016

¹⁷ Chapman 2016 p. 2

¹⁸ Chapman 2016 p. 3

¹⁹ Chapman 2016 p.80

Add all the other ingredients, stir thoroughly and turn down heat to very low. Cover lightly and cook for 1 hour. Can be cooked in a slow cooker. Economical and plenty for the family. Easily doubled for a party dish.

Warndu Mai Good Food. Damien Coulthard & Rebecca Sullivan. (2019)

Coulthard while travelling in Italy visited a winery extant for 500 years. He observed the excitement of the tour group over this. He reflected that no-one in Australia was similarly excited over 60,000 years of 'my food ... the thousands of nuts, seeds, plants and protein.' Warndu was written to share with all Australians 'these amazing foods ... so they taste the flavours of my backyard.'²⁰

Sullivan writes: 'We want to show you how to create truly Australian food at home – without labelling it as only 'bush tucker' or thinking you have to forage for hours in the bush...With a few small adjustments and a little experimentation with what normally use in the kitchen , we can all eat delicious food that better for the Australian environment, better for our cultural understanding of our nation's first people, is more sustainable and celebrates the amazing-tasting food that is truly local.'²¹

Also, native foods are 'an untapped medicinal, cosmetic, nutraceutical, and pharmaceutical world we have only just scraped the surface of', writes Sullivan²²

They have a glossary of native plants, with each entry identifying the plant's English and botanical name, a description of it, a photo of it, and its culinary use. They give a recipe for an Anglo-Australian adopted spice mix .

Warndu Dukkha²³

200g macadamias

100 g sesame seeds

15 g wattleseed, roasted not ground

3g native thyme, dried and ground

3 g lemon myrtle, dried and ground

1 g wild basil, dried and ground

3 g pepperberries, crushed

5 g Murray River pink salt

25 g bush tomatoes, dried and ground

Preheat the oven to 220C.

On a baking tray, spread out the macadamias and toast for a few minutes, or until golden brown. Remove and let cool.

Blitz in a food processor for a few seconds, or until you get small crumb.

Lightly toast the sesame seeds on the same tray used for the macadamias for a minute. Remove and cool.

In a large bowl, mix all the ingredients together and transfer to an airtight container. This dukkah will last a few weeks but make sure no moisture gets in, as macadamias are oily and will get rancid if not stored properly. Best made in small batches.

Mabu Mabu, An Australian Cookbook, Nornie Bero (2022)

²⁰ Coulthard, Damien and Sullivan, Reecca *Warndu Mai. Good Food* Hachette 2019

²¹ Coulthard and Sullivan 2019 p. 12

²² Coulthard and Sullivan 2019 p. 12

²³ Coulthard and Sullivan 2019 p. 47

‘I want to change people’s views through serving the amazing flavours of Australia,’ Bero writes:

‘I’m on a mission’, to take Indigenous ingredients out of fancy restaurants and into every kitchen. Now is the time to share the amazing food culture that has been handed down to us through generations for more than 60,000 years. ... Everyone in Australia should be cooking with native fruit, veg, spices and meats.’²⁴

To reach this goal she gives cooking classes, caters corporate events, and is a keynote speaker both in Australia and internationally.

The book has a ‘Native Pantry’, a mini-glossary of ingredients, their description and suggestions for using them. She lists stockists of native ingredients.

These ingredients meet in the popular morning and afternoon tea staple.

Wattleseed Scones.

450 g (1 lb/ 3 cups) self-raising flour

100 g (3 ½ oz butter, at room temperature

374 ml (12 ½ fl oz / 1 ½ cups) milk or nut milk

1 tablespoon ground wattleseed

Strawberry Gum Cream and Quick Lemon Jam to serve

Preheat the oven to 180C (360F and dust a baking tray with flour.

Mix the flour and butter in a bowl until well-combined.

Add the milk and wattleseed and mix with the flour and butter to make a sticky dough.

Dust a clean work surface with some flour and knead the dough until it is soft in texture, being careful not to overwork it.

With a rolling pin, roll out the dough to a 5 cm (2 in) thickness.

Use a round biscuit cutter to cut out the scones (if you don’t have a cutter, use a measuring cup or thin glass (like a wine glass)

Place on tray and bake for 20 – 25 minutes.

Serve with strawberry gum cream and lemon myrtle jam.

first nations food companion. How to buy, cook eat and grow Indigenous Australian ingredients, Damien Coulthard & Rececca Sullivan (2022)

This is arguably the only cookery book of native plants one needs. As its title indicates it is a ‘companion’ and like other cookbook companions it covers a lot of territory as its subheading indicates, not only recipes but also buying and growing.

‘The First Nations Food Companion is an opportunity,’ writes Coulthard, ‘for all people, young and old, from all backgrounds to taste the flavours of the oldest living, continuous culture in the world. ... The restoration of cultural practices reflective of complex kinship associations., strengthening the co-culture community relationships and the healing of Country are at the heart of restoring and reclaiming First Nation’s knowledge and creating a sustainable native food industry that function with integrity.’²⁵

²⁴ Bero, Nornie, *Mabu Mabu, An Australian Cookbook* Hardie Grant books 2002 p.43

²⁵ Coulthard, Damien and Sullivan Rebecca, *first nations food companion. How to buy, cook eat and grow Indigenous Australian ingredients*. Murdoch 2022 Sullivan p.9

‘The first part of the book,’ Coulthard and Sullivan write, ‘is our generously detailed but not exhaustive ingredients guide devoted to edible and accessible native plants.’²⁶ Each entry names the ingredient in its indigenous language, English and its botanical name, then goes onto to how to use it, where to buy it, in what form, picking and foraging, storing the ingredient and how to grow it.

One of the innovations in the book is the Flavour Wheel. Here each native food has its place under a flavour. For example, Earthy flavour has under it Black Ants, Davidson’s Plum and Kangaroo; Citrusy has under it Desert Lime, Finger Lime, Geraldton Wax; Green Ants; Lemon Myrtle, Lemon-scented Gum, Lemon scented gum; Lemon Tea Tree; Roselle Leaf; and Tamarind. A cook can then see what ingredients they need to bring a flavour to a dish.

The book gives a guide as to what to stock in one’s pantry. For example, under Whole fruit leaves (dry or fresh) are listed Anise Myrtle, Bush Tomatoes, Cinnamon Myrtle, Finger Lime, Geraldton Wax, Lemon Myrtle, Pepperberries, Pepperberry Leaves Quandongs.

There is a stockist’s list from whom a cook may get the ingredient in fresh, dried or frozen form. Innovatively they don’t give a street address but a URL for inquiring about or buying an ingredient.

With so many styles of coffee being asked for these days in Australia – soy milk, almond milk, decaffeinated, among them, they give a recipe for a truly unique coffee.

Macadamia, Green Ant, Rose and Pepperberry Latte²⁷

Makes one cup.

1 cup (250 ml) macadamia milk

3 cm (1 ¼ in) piece turmeric powder

1 teaspoon green ants

Pinch ground pepperberry (plus another pinch to serve)

1 – 2 tablespoons Bush Flower Water or rosewater to taste

1 teaspoon macadamia oil

1 teaspoon raw honey or maple syrup

Add macadamia milk to a blender, with turmeric, green ants, pepperberry, Bush Flower Water, and macadamia oil and blend to combine. Transfer to a small saucepan and bring to a light simmer over medium-heat. Turn off heat and sweeten with honey. Drink cold or warm. If you like your latte to be extra peppery, serve with another pinch of pepperberry.

If you want to increase the quantities and make a large batch to drink through the week, you can keep it in a covered jug in the fridge for 4 – 5 days.

²⁶ Coulthard and Sullivan 2022...p.13.

²⁷ Coulthard and Sullivan 2022...p.152

Bush Food & Botanicals. Sharon Winsor (Indigiearth) (2022)

'The perception of native foods by the public in 1966 (when she began her first business – Thullii Dreaming) was that native foods were dirty foods and the only things I could possibly serve were witchetty grubs, goanna and kangaroo. There was a lot of work to be done to break down those barriers and to educate people about native foods'.²⁸

Her book is part of how she educates.

I wrote Bush Food Botanicals as an introduction for the reader to Australian Native food and plants, where they come from and how to use them in your day-to-day cooking with information and easy step by step recipes.²⁹

She discusses her connection to Country – 'It's a deep connection to the spiritual world, mother earth, customs, beliefs and for me personally – native foods. Being creative with native foods is my personal connection to my spirituality and culture'.³⁰

She has a glossary for ingredients their English name, their botanical name, a description of the plant (fruit or vegetable), its traditional use, the forms in which it is used today, and often one or three recipes. Here the native ingredients have made it to that typical Australian means of home and holiday cooking - the BBQ.

BBQ Lamb Backstrap With Native Thyme³¹

2 trimmed lamb loin fillets (back strap)
2 tsp Saltbush
2 tsp Native Thyme
2 tsp Native Pepperberry Leaf
2 tbsp olive oil

Add dried native ingredients into a mortar and pestle and gently grind to activate the flavours and blend. Sprinkle the mix onto a board or plate.

Remove the lamb from the fridge for a least 30 minutes before cooking. Rub the lamb loins with the olive oil and then roll each fillet in the native mix, ensuring all sides are covered.

Preheat your BBQ grill to a high heat. Once it is searing, place the crusted loins on the heat and cook for 2-3 minutes on each side for medium rare. Turn the loins frequently to ensure an even cook and to prevent the crust from burning. Remove from the grill, cover with foil and rest for 5 – 10 minutes

Slice and enjoy with fresh salad or grilled vegetables.

The Australian Ingredients Kitchen. Elder Bruno Dann and Tahlia Mandie of Kakadu Plum CO. 2005

'This book is about easy Australian cooking' Elder Bruno and Tahlia write, '... Our cooking is about family, togetherness and sharing stories. Australian bushfoods are not complicated foods, so we believe we should not complicate the dish when using them ... you don't need

²⁸ Winsor, Sharon Bush Food and Botanicals, 2022 p.17

²⁹ Winsor 2022 ... p.5

³⁰ Winsor 2022 ... p.25

³¹ Winsor 2022 ... p.87

culinary training to explore the potential of these ingredients – they can simple be integrated into you home kitchen and recipes ...’³²

As with some of the cookbooks reviewed here there is a glossary - called a Bushfood Pantry here - which gives the English and botanical names of ingredients and a description of their use. They also include a guide to as to which ingredient can be grown at home and identify the form in which it can be bought – fresh, dried, powder, frozen. Kakadu Plum Co. is obviously one of the suppliers but Dann and Mandie say that there are many green grocers now who also sell native ingredients. For those who want to grow a native food plant there are also native plant nurseries or general purpose nurseries often also stock native plants.

There are also single page entries highlighting an individual or - in a generous act – other bush food companies like Bakarindi Bush Foods who specialize in making relishes, jams, sauces and chutneys.

The book is unusual as the recipes - of which there are 70 - are not only Dann’s and Thalia’s but ‘include recipes from chefs, producers and others in the food industry...’³³ Some also describe the health benefits of the native food.

Berry nice-cream³⁴

This simple, healthy, sugar-free treat is high in antioxidants and free from gluten/grains, soy and nuts.

Put all the ingredients in a blender. Starting on a slow speed and building to a faster speed, blend until smooth and creamy, scraping down the sides regularly if needed, and a touch more coconut milk to help with the blending

Concluding remarks

Books on native foods have been written before 2006 by non-Indigenous cooks. I wanted to see what Indigenous cooks/chefs said about native foods. There were two common themes: native foods education for non-Indigenous people and presenting native foods cooking as achievable in the home kitchen. The recipes were examples of a fusion cuisine, using native foods as ingredients in Anglo-Australian dishes. Native foods have broadened their reach through becoming purchasable at supermarkets in particular, specialty food shops, grocers and food markets. However, it remains an industry in its infancy. The cookery books call for consumer support for the industry.

³² Dann, Elder Bruno and Mandie, Thalia, *The Australian Ingredients Kitchen* Murdoch Books 2025 pp. 8 -9

³³ Dann and Mandie 2025 p.9

³⁴ Dann and Mandie 2025 p.176