

## **‘The native ingredient is the catalyst’. A review of some non-Indigenous bush tucker cookery books<sup>1989</sup>**

June 2025

‘Bursting out from under the rainforest canopy or rising up from the desert floor wild foods deserve to be tasted, tried and understood.’<sup>1</sup>

This is a brief look at how non-Indigenous authors of bush food cookery books presented bush foods to the interested home cook.

The books reviewed were:

Cherikoff, Vic, *The Bushfood Handbook* 1989

Cherikoff, Vic, *Uniquely Australian. A wild food cookbook*. Bush Tucker Supply Australia Pty. Ltd. 1994 (soft cover version of hard cover publication 1992)

Robins, Juleigh, *Wild Lime. Cooking from the bush food garden* Allen and Unwin 1996

Bruneteau, Jean-Paul, *Tukka*, Angus and Robertson 1996

Robins, Juleigh, and Robins Ian, *Wild Classics* Allen and Unwin 2000

Richardson, Jill, *Fabulous Flavours of Australia* 2013

Lily & O’Quinn, *Australian Bush Superfoods* Hardie Grant 2017

Newton, John *Cooking With The Oldest Foods On Earth. Australian Native Foods Recipes And Sources*. New South 2019

Fielke, Andrew, *Australia’s Creative Native Cuisine* Brolly Books 2020

In brief:

- Most said they use bush foods because of their flavour.
- Some added that the higher nutritional properties of bush food were attractive.
- Two put bush food as an alternative to current food cultivation practices.
- Two mentioned the medicinal uses of bush plants.
- Most said they created their recipes with the home kitchen in mind.
- Some acknowledged that Indigenous people were an important, if not absolutely necessary, source of knowledge.
- Two suggested making a bush plants ‘patch’ at home.
- One promoted foraging for bush foods in urban environments.
- One suggested bushfoods could be soused from road kill.
- Two advocated a role for bush foods in the Australian cuisine.

### **Why bushfoods?**

Jean-Paul Bruneteau came to bush foods after a visit to New Zealand where he sampled indigenous Māori food.

I began to believe that the reason Australian cuisine was nonexistent was entirely because of the lack of Indigenous cultural input in Australian schooling and cooking ... I was convinced that just as history ignored indigenous aspects, the culinary world also failed to avail itself of the wealth of information, flavours, and methods that Australia could offer. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robins, Juleigh, and Robins Ian, *Wild Classics* Allen and Unwin 2000 p. vii

<sup>2</sup> Bruneteau, Jean-Paul, *Tukka*, Angus and Robertson 1996 Introduction

Indeed, flavour was the reason most often mentioned. Juleigh Robins wrote: 'Bushfoods have a true flavour that hasn't been genetically manipulated or bred'.<sup>3</sup>

Richardson wrote 'This book is a celebration of the wonderful and unique indigenous flavours we have here in Australia'.<sup>4</sup>

'Why should we eat the foods?' , Newton wrote, 'Firstly for their unique flavours ...'<sup>5</sup>

Feilke was 'blown away' by his first taste of quandong. 'It was such a light bulb moment ... why had we ignored this fabulous food resource (bush food) right on our doorstep'.<sup>6</sup>

But flavour was not the only thing. Juliegh Robins further wrote:

It makes good sense to grow and eat our native plant foods. I doubt that I will ever come to grips with the dominance of European farming methods and crops in an environment that is so clearly alien to them.<sup>7</sup>

Juliegh and Ian Robins wrote<sup>8</sup>:

Increasingly the farming community is attempting to diversify and taking an interest in native plants for landcare reasons.<sup>9</sup>

Cherikoff reflected on nutrient research of bushfoods:

Further work in the unit (the Human Nutrition Unit at the University of Sydney) supported the idea that the nature of carbohydrates in bushfood played a role in protecting the Aborigines against diabetes and its complications. More recent studies on complex carbohydrates and satiety factors are suggesting that a bushfood diet may be the natural way to curb appetite and maintain an ideal weight.<sup>10</sup>

## Wild Food At Home

Most of the cookery books say that the recipes are written with the home kitchen in mind.

We have taken familiar recipes and cooking techniques and included wild foods in them. The recipes are mostly quick and easy to prepare and have been developed with the home kitchen in mind, for everyday cooking and for entertaining too.<sup>11</sup>

We have many great customers who have taken the time to let us know how and when they use indigenous flavours in their home cooking.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Robins, Juleigh *Wild Lime. Cooking from the bush food garden* Allen and Unwin 1996 p.

<sup>4</sup> Richardson, Jill, *Fabulous Flavours of Australia* 2013 Inside cover

<sup>5</sup> Newton 2019 p. 6

<sup>6</sup> Fielke, Andrew, *Australia's Creative Native Cuisine* Brolly Books 2020 p. 12

<sup>7</sup> Robins, Juliegh 1996 p. vii

<sup>8</sup> As there are two Robins I will always put their first names on their citations

<sup>9</sup> Robins 2000 p. vii

<sup>10</sup> Cherikoff, Vic, *Uniquely Australian. A wild food cookbook*. Bush Tucker Supply Australia Pty. Ltd. unpaginated

<sup>11</sup> Robins, Juleigh, and Robins Ian, *Wild Classics* Allen and Unwin 2000 p. vii

<sup>12</sup> Richardson 2013 Introduction

Our intention with this humble little cookbook, is to properly introduce you to the edible natural wonders this country has to offer and provide recipes and inspiration on how to use these exciting new ingredients in your kitchen.<sup>13</sup>

Now is an exciting time in the history of Australian cuisine and given its strong cultural connection and nutritional and sustainable aspects as well as superb flavours, is set to go from strength to strength. It is my hope that this book will help people to introduce more of these foods into their family homes and to make them a part of their regular family fare.<sup>14</sup>

Cherikoff (1992) gives simple instructions on how to make ‘an almost portable raised open fire suitable for patios and balconies’.<sup>15</sup>

He also gives recipes for home cooking that ‘have been formulated with the Australian nutritional guidelines in mind. They are predominantly vegetarian and are low in fat and refined sugars ... The main dishes are usually high in complex carbohydrates, and combine ingredients selected to accent uniquely Australian flavour of the bushfoods used.’<sup>16</sup>

In his 1992 book Cherikoff has a section on Fine Dining with recipes that ‘give some insight into the many and varied ways to use the commercially available bushfoods. Among the recipes there are some that reflect our British colonial past. Other offerings follow foreign traditions; some are as uniquely Australian as emus and kangaroos and some present dishes which are characteristic of particular geographic regions’.<sup>17</sup>

### **Sourcing Bush Foods**

Cherikoff (1989) writes:

While many of the ingredients can be easily found or grown (see later section on a Backyard Foraging Patch) as detailed in the text others can be obtained from Bush Tucker Pty Ltd (Cherikoff’s company).<sup>18</sup>

Fielke also gives information for sourcing from his online company Creative Native and also other online suppliers.<sup>19</sup> Juleigh Robins gave a list of Bushfood Suppliers.<sup>20</sup> Newton lists sources.<sup>21</sup> Lily and O’Quinn give a list of bushfood stockists but acknowledge that many ingredients are becoming increasingly available at supermarkets, delicatessens, and health food stores.<sup>22</sup>

Cherikoff (1992) writes of ‘The long supermarket’ by which he means Australian roads:

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<sup>13</sup> Lily & O’Quinn, *Australian Bush Superfoods* Hardie Grant 2017 p.8

<sup>14</sup> Fielke p.13

<sup>15</sup> Cherikoff 1992 p.22

<sup>16</sup> Cherikoff 1992 p.37

<sup>17</sup> Cherikoff 1992 p.69

<sup>18</sup> Cherikoff 1989 p.81

<sup>19</sup> Fielke 2020 p.272

<sup>20</sup> Robins 1996 pp. 196 – 199

<sup>21</sup> Newton 2019 pp.127 128

<sup>22</sup> Lily & O’Quinn p.18

‘... depending on the season, the time of day and locality, a wide range of snakes, goannas, parrots and, of course, large and small mammals can be found victim to the speeding in attentive motorist.’<sup>23</sup>

He goes on to describe how to ‘despatch’ animals which may still be alive.

## **Recipes**

‘This book’, Cherikoff wrote in 1989, ‘is the first to present up-market recipes using bushfoods’.<sup>24</sup> All his recipes here and in 1992 are for existing kinds of dishes with the addition of a bush food. For example: Wattle Terrine and Vanilla Sauce<sup>25</sup> and Emu Egg Pavlova<sup>26</sup> in 1989. Barramundi with muntharies<sup>27</sup> or Bunya nuts smoked mutton salad’.<sup>28</sup> in 1992

All the recipes that follow in the other cookbooks do the same, adding bush food to existing styles of dishes. They cover the full spectrum of dishes. A menu could look like this: Chicken and Corn Wontons with Kakadu Plum Sauce<sup>29</sup>; Parsnip and Bush Tomato Soup<sup>30</sup>; Warrigal Greens and Macadamia Nut Salad<sup>31</sup>; Spiced Tetragon Pasta<sup>32</sup>; Back strap of Lamb with Spicy Macadamia Dukkah<sup>33</sup>; Wood-Fired Crab Chilli and Lemon Myrtle<sup>34</sup>; Lemon Myrtle, Davidson Plum and Limoncello Trifle.<sup>35</sup>

## **Descriptions of ingredients**

Wild Classics has a 12 page glossary of ingredients.<sup>36</sup> Each entry gives the common English language name, its botanical name, how it is found (dry, whole etc) and a short description.

Newton gives descriptions before recipes featuring the bush food.

Creative Native has three ways of giving a description of ingredients: a table that summarises all the information that follows in the next section – a glossary of Australian Wild Herb and Spices which also includes some recipes, and a table of wild nuts and seeds with a brief glossary and recipes.<sup>37</sup>

Lily’s and O’Quinn’s book identifies ingredients that are at their best if fresh – saltbush lemon myrtle, mountain pepper leaf; can be frozen - Davidson plum, native currant; and dried – strawberry gum, kutjera. Ingredients are given a page worth of description followed by a recipe.

Cherikoff (1992) has a Bushfood Glossary with some items including the nutritional quantities.

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<sup>23</sup> Cherikoff 1992 p.27

<sup>24</sup> Cherikoff 1989 p. Inside front cover

<sup>25</sup> Cherikoff 1989 p.89

<sup>26</sup> Cherikoff 1989 p.102

<sup>27</sup> Cherikoff 1992 p.80

<sup>28</sup> Cherikoff 1992 p.114

<sup>29</sup> Robins 2000 p.63

<sup>30</sup> Newton 2019 p.43

<sup>31</sup> Cherikoff 1989 p.98

<sup>32</sup> Bruneteau 1996 p.121

<sup>33</sup> Richards 2013 p.88

<sup>34</sup> Fielke 2020 p.19

<sup>35</sup> Newton 2019 pp.26 - 27

<sup>36</sup> Robins, Juleigh, and Robins Ian 2000 pp.4 - 14

<sup>37</sup> Fielke 2020

## Nutritional value

Cherikoff had worked at the University of Sydney's Human Nutrition Unit collecting native foods and analysing them for their nutrient value. In the *Bushfood Handbook* he wrote

Generally, bush foods are nutritionally similar to their non-Aboriginal equivalents, or perhaps a little more. ... There are a few surprises and no doubt many more in store: the high vitamin C content of the Kakadu plum (*Terminalia ferdinandiana*) and of game animal liver: the polyunsaturated fat content of some seeds and animal meats; the low fat nature of many nuts; the high protein content of many seeds; the high mineral concentration of mangrove worms and a broad range of other foods.<sup>38</sup>

The nutritional value was mentioned in most of the cookery books reviewed.

Many of Australia's native bushfoods contain nutritional qualities that not only qualify them as superfoods, but in some cases outshine the more commonly known forms.<sup>39</sup>

In recent years, research conducted into the nutrient content of Australian native food plants has confirmed that they are among the richest on the planet in the nutrients we need for health.<sup>40</sup>

## Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous peoples have two roles in the cookery books.

First they are a knowledge base. Cherikoff writes that 'The species and processes described are those used by the Aborigines who knew or still use these foods as their local resources.'<sup>41</sup>

Cherikoff included Aboriginal friends in his Acknowledgements:

There are many people who have contributed to this book. First and foremost the authors acknowledge the kindness, hospitality and good humour of the many Aboriginal friends who have freely shared not only their knowledge but also their meals. How many of us would welcome outsiders into our homes and work so hard to inform them of our lifestyle.<sup>42</sup>

Juleigh Robins wrote:

No knowledge about bushfoods can be gleaned without first learning about Aboriginal culture and practices...I have been very fortunate to have met and spoken with some generous Aboriginal people who have shared their knowledge and skills with me.<sup>43</sup>

Fielke wrote:

I also wanted to spend more time engaging with and learning from Indigenous Australians.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Cherikoff 1989 p.32

<sup>39</sup> Lily & O'Quinn 2017 p. 8

<sup>40</sup> Newton 2019 p. 6

<sup>41</sup> Cherikoff 1989 p.11

<sup>42</sup> Cherikoff 1993 p. 208

<sup>43</sup> Robins 1996 pp.200 - 201

<sup>44</sup> Fielke 2020 p.13

Was there reciprocity in this? In 1992 Cherikoff writes:

Field workers organising the bushfood collections for our own research claimed the analysis results were not filtering back to the Aborigines who supplied the samples. In response to this criticism and also in an attempt to know more about bushfoods and traditional usage I began to travel to Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory and northern Queensland. Many organisations facilitated my visits to remote areas and were instrumental in allowing me to inform communities of the results of the nutritional research and of the development of a national bushfood industry.<sup>45</sup>

The second role sees descriptions of Indigenous food practice incorporated as part of the text .

Cherikoff's first chapter *Australian Food, Bush Foods and Aborigines* sketches the current state of knowledge about Aboriginal foodways . Cherikoff writes: Australians are now learning that Aborigines ate more than witjuti grubs and kangaroos, their daily diet also included hundreds of fruits, nuts, seeds, vegetables, insects and meats which are worth cultivating as part of a movement to bush foods.<sup>46</sup> He also writes: The modern view also accepts that Aborigines have always been effective resource managers and did develop a range of agricultural practices.<sup>47</sup>

Bruneteau has descriptions of Indigenous food collecting practice and sometimes cooking in several chapters in his book. For example in the chapter on the Barramundi he has an introductory paragraph, an inset on Aboriginal fish traps, another inset on the seasonal behaviour of the fish, and a brief note on cooking methods.<sup>48</sup>

### **Welcome to Country**

Lily's and O'Quinn's book was produced in this time of Welcomes to Country. At page 3 in the book they acknowledge that it was written on Wurundjen land and pay their respects to elders. 'The information we have presented has been prepared with a deep respect for the wisdom and knowledge gathered by Aboriginal people.'<sup>49</sup>

You will notice that at the end of this article I also pay my respects to the Gadigal on whose land I write this article.

### **Home grown wild foods**

Cherikoff and Juliegh Robins make a case for growing wild foods at home in what Cherikoff calls a Backyard Foraging Patch.<sup>50</sup>

'Many people,' Cherikoff writes, 'never realise the benefits of surrounding themselves with plants nor realise the satisfaction of harvesting food from their labours.'<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Cherikoff 1992 unpaginated

<sup>46</sup> Cherikoff 1989 p.22

<sup>47</sup> Cherikoff 1989 p.23. This is over 30 years before Bruce Pascoe published *Dark Emu* which argued precisely the same thing.

<sup>48</sup> Bruneteau 1996 pp. 80-81

<sup>49</sup> Lily & O'Quinn p.3

<sup>50</sup> Cherikoff 1993 pp.61-81

<sup>51</sup> Cherikoff 1993 pp. 61 - 81

‘Having bushfood in the garden,’ Robins writes, ‘allows you to experiment with different foods, and there is a certain satisfaction in having grown something yourself, and being able to go into the garden to pick them fresh, as you need them’.<sup>52</sup>

Cherikoff recommends plants suitable to different climates and has a table of all plants in a region.<sup>53</sup> Robins lists nurseries in each state which exclusively trade in native plants.<sup>54</sup>

But there is also a darker reason for having a Backyard Foraging Patch.

... with our population increasing to what may be beyond the land’s carrying capacity we can no longer freely forage for food without impacting upon the environment. By establishing our own backyard foraging patch we can make the tastes of the bush a common experience and even contribute significantly to our own nutrition and dietary variety.<sup>55</sup>

### **Bush Medicines**

‘Natural remedies have their place in medicine,’ Cherikoff writes, ‘but knowledge and a little commonsense should be applied in the treatment as well ... It should be remembered that medicines from plants should be treated as medicines and not ‘safe’ ‘natural’ cures.’<sup>56</sup> He lists 29 native medicinal plants of a ‘relatively low risk’ which could be included in a Foraging Patch, most of which are ‘topically rather than orally administered’.<sup>57</sup>

Lily and O’Quinn write ‘Many of those unique species boast nutritional and medicinal properties.’<sup>58</sup>

### **Foraging In The City**

Cherikoff discusses foraging in the city. ‘Street verges, parks, building surrounds, shopping malls, churchyards, car parks and other public areas. Bush food from large trees are many and varied. Lillipillies, candle nut trees, paperbarks, figs, macadamias, aspen trees, Kakadu plumbtrees can be found.’<sup>59</sup> He profiles a number of suitable plants – wattles, midyim berries, bunya pines and kurrajong among them.

### **A uniquely Australian cuisine**

I want to finish with three comments on the place of bushfood in Australia’s cuisine.

In 1989 Cherikoff wrote:

Contemporary Australian cuisine is most often described as consisting of fresh seasonal ingredients produced locally and used simply. Such a definition ignores the fact that modern

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<sup>52</sup> Robins 1996 pp. 61-79

<sup>53</sup> Cherikoff 1993 pp. 188 - 201

<sup>54</sup> Robins 1996 p.viii

<sup>55</sup> Cherikoff 1989 p. 11

<sup>56</sup> Cherikoff 1989 pp. 78 - 79

<sup>57</sup> Cherikoff 1989 p. 79

<sup>58</sup> Lily & O’Quinn p.8

<sup>59</sup> Cherikoff 1989 pp. 188 -39 - 61

Australian dishes are difficult to distinguish from those of Europe and even Asia. It is for this reason that many people now believe that only a cuisine using at least some Indigenous produce can be quintessentially Australian.<sup>60</sup>

In 1992 he went further:

A uniquely Australian food culture can only be based upon foods Indigenous to this country. The ingredients should be recognisable as Australian and the dishes using them should elicit a feeling of nationalistic pride.

In 1996 Bruneteau wrote:

The use and understanding of native food is imperative for the continuing development of an Australian cuisine. The native ingredient is the catalyst.<sup>61</sup>

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

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<sup>60</sup> Cherikoff 1989 p.15

<sup>61</sup> Bruneteau 1996 Introduction