

‘Aborigines were not indifferent cooks’. Symposiums of Australian Gastronomy engagement with Aboriginal peoples and their cuisines July 2026

Symposiums of Australian Gastronomy (SAG) have been held every 18 months to two years since March 1984. There have been 25 SAGs, the latest being held in Launceston 8 – 12 July 2024.

Michael Symons giving the opening address to the First SAG defined the Symposium:

The purpose in my mind is to establish or help establish gastronomy in this country and also to discuss the Australian cuisine. I want to clarify the words astronomy and cuisine as I understand them. I think gastronomy is the study of eating, and studies the Australian cuisine amongst other things. Cuisine in that sense is just a style of eating.¹

SAGs have brought together academicians, food writers, non-academic food historians and those with an interest in Australian food.

I want to look at where Aboriginal peoples and their cuisines have been part of SAGs through cultural practices, papers, and food.

I draw on the SAGs’ Programs and Proceedings as digitised at australiangastronomy.net. As of August 2026, for SAG 22 the Program, some Papers and Abstracts are available; for SAG 24 only the Programme and Abstracts are available; for SAG 25 only the Call for Papers is online. I secured a copy of the SAG 25 Programme from an attendee. Material on SAG 23 is not available due to a technical fault at the Symposiums site.

Welcome to/Acknowledgement of Country

Long before modern borders or governments existed, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations had clearly defined territories. You couldn’t enter someone else’s Country without asking permission.

When guests arrived, they were met by local Elders, who would perform a Welcome to Country to:

- Grant permission to enter
- Acknowledge the visitor’s purpose
- Maintain peace and harmony between nations

This was not ceremonial fluff—it was embedded in law, respect, and spiritual relationship with the land.²

The modern Welcome to Country began in the 1970s. But just when it was adopted as protocol for beginning events or activities is less certain.

What is certain is that SAG 10 in 1998 was an early adopter. Mark Matthews welcomed Symposiums of behalf the communities involved in the Brambuk Cultural Centre, described the

¹ Symons, Michael, A potted history of Australian gastronomy. Proceedings First Symposium of Australian Gastronomy March 12 – 13 1984 p.i

² The Origins of Welcome to Country, Walking on Country walkingoncountry.co 2026

Centre and introduced young male dancers to present a Creation Dance depicting the emu (Kowwirr), the kangaroo (Myngjan) and man (Mara). Matthews described making a didgeridoo and played it to accompany the dance.

SAG 16 had a Welcome to Country.

SAG 22 had a Welcome to Country by Darug Elder, Uncle Greg Sims at the Friday Feast. An Acknowledgment of Country was published in the Proceedings giving a description of the Burramatta people of the Darug nation and about the Darug.³ As a Taster' for the Symposium an article by co-Convenor Jacqui Newling was published prior to the SAG and republished in the Proceedings.⁴ 'Where eels lie down a short note in Parramatta's history' which included material on the Burramatta people of the Darug nation.⁵

SAG 24 had an Acknowledgment of Country. The Proceedings included an article by Rodney Carter on the Dja Dja Warrung and Gastronomy.

SAG 25 had a Welcome to Country.

Papers on Aboriginal foodways

Helen Peacocke delivered the paper *If we could eat oysters: Why not witchetty grubs?* at SAG 1 1984. Her paper contrasted colonial and settler cuisine with what she knew broadly of indigenous food and food practice.⁶

At SAG 2 Dr. John Possingham gave a paper *Young, Old, and New Crops – Macadamias, Pistachios and Quandongs*.⁷ The paper contrasted the development in Australia of the three nuts: the macadamia an Australian native but having been domesticated in Hawaii, the pistachio being a Middle East native new to Australia, and the quandong an Australian native.

Betty Meehan presented three papers on three separate occasions on Aboriginal foodways: *Aboriginal Food Traditions* (Anbarra peoples) SAG 2 1985)⁸; *Aboriginal Festive Food* (Ngatja peoples) SAG 4 1988); *Living off the Land Ngunnawal Aboriginal People and food in the Canberra region* SAG 7 1993).

Meehan began her paper on the Anbarra dispelling 'a few misconceptions concerning Aboriginal dietary habits'.

1. There was no single Aboriginal cuisine
2. Aborigines did not eat every species of food available to them
3. Aborigines were not all living on the brink of starvation
4. Aborigines were not indifferent cooks.

³ 'Where eels lie down a short note in Parramatta's history', Proceedings of the 22nd Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 2018 p.9

⁴ Proceedings of the 22nd Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 2018 p.7

⁵ Newling Jacqui, 'Where eels lie down a short note in Parramatta's history' Proceedings of the 22nd Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 2018 p.7

⁶ Peacocke, Helen, *If we could eat oysters: Why not witchetty grubs?* Proceedings, First Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 1984 p.107 - 114

⁷ Possingham, Dr. John, *Young, Old, and New Crops – Macadamias, Pistachios and Quandongs*. Proceedings of the 1st Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 1984 pp. 1 – 79 - 186

⁸ Meehan, Betty, *Aboriginal Food Traditions*, Proceedings of the 2nd Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 1985 pp.131-151

For the Anbarra she described the Content of their diet, their exercise of Quality Control, the Dinner Area, and the dishes that are made from each foodstuff.

Her paper on Aboriginal Festive Food detailed the *Kunapipi* ceremony in Arnhem Land, in particular she described the making of Cycad bread.⁹

In Living off the Land, she described the catching, preparing and eating the Bogong Moth and associated ceremonies.¹⁰

Jaky Troy gave a paper at SAG 4 *A Variation Certainly on Dinners and Dining-rooms, and Toasts, and Speeches, in Either England or Ireland: Colonists at Corroborees in Eighteen and Nineteenth-Century News South Wales*.¹¹ Her paper described 'intercultural contact of Aborigines and non-Aborigines through the medium of food and festivity in colonial New South Wales.'

At SAG 5 Stephen Harris presented a paper: *Three Tasmanian plants with potential for commercial development as sources of bush food*.¹² Harris began by noting the 'awakening interest in native foods ... The time seems right for a serious examination of the commercial possibilities of Tasmanian plant foods.' Out of nearly 60 Tasmanian native plants he discussed the cider gum (*Eucalyptus gunnii*), native pepper (*Tasmania lanceolata*) and sassafras (*Atherosperma moschatum*).

At SAG 9 Pearl Wymarra described the foods she ate as a child growing up on Thursday Island: wild gooseberries, wild passionfruit, sweet potato, woneye, dugong, turtle - we had turtle eggs and pigeon eggs. She pointed to the poor health effect of moving to a Western diet and to children eating fast foods.

At SAG 16 Pata Collins gave a paper *Native plants and weeds*.¹³ She listed 20 native plants and described their uses.

Hilary Heslop gave a paper at the 21st SAG *Pathways to Food Utopia from Australia's Past*.¹⁴ Aboriginal people of Australia, she proposed 'managed the land in a systematic and scientific fashion creating a park-like landscape with open woodlands and extensive wildlife' creating an 'ordered and controlled environment'. 'Colonialism and dispossession have had a devastating effect on the Aborigines and their system of land management will all but disappear.' In response 'Interest in an empathic land management system and sustainable perennial crops is gaining a much wider audience', she said. 'Perhaps finally the time is right and a forgotten past and its people may shape the future for a more cohesive and sustainable Australia'.

⁹ Meehan, Betty, Aboriginal Festive Food, Proceedings of the 4th Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 1988 pp. 16 - 21

¹⁰ Meehan, Betty, Living off the Land Ngunnawal Aboriginal People and food in the Canberra region Proceedings of the 7th Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 1993 pp. 36 - 41

¹¹ Troy, Jaky, A Variation Certainly on Dinners and Dining-rooms, and Toasts, and Speeches, in Either England or Ireland: Colonists at Corroborees in Eighteen and Nineteenth-Century News South Wales Proceedings of the 4th Symposium of Australia Gastronomy 1988 pp.137 - 142

¹² Harris, Stephen, Three Tasmanian plants with potential for commercial development as sources of bush food. Proceedings of the 5th Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 1990 pp. 101 - 106

¹³ Collins, Pata, Native plants and weeds. Proceedings of the 16th Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 2008 pp.29 - 36

¹⁴ Heslop, Hilary, Pathways to Food Utopia from Australia's Past, Proceedings of the Twenty First Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 2016 pp. 111 - 115

At SAG 22 Hilary Heslop gave a paper *The yam daisy: Recovering its place*.¹⁵ 'In the south-eastern parts of Australia, the Aboriginal people planted the yam daisy amongst these moisture retaining plants and together they happily co-existed. The soil would sweeten and improve the tilth of the soil whilst the yam daisy became an important food source. The Aboriginal people would harvest the nutty and starchy tuber, which is eight times as nutritious as the potato, and it became an important staple for the First Australians.'

At SAG 22 Jillian Garvey gave a paper *The role of animals in Australian archaeology: How it can inform on the past, present and future of native bush tucker*.¹⁶ 'Australia's unique climate, geology and environment has meant that for millennia people have had access to a variety of unique flora and fauna. While there has been much written and discussed about native plants, we know little about what sorts of animals people hunted and how they butchered and cooked them. The 'Native Animal Bush Tucker Project' is aiming to fill some of these gaps by combining the traditional archaeological analysis of faunal assemblages with ethnography and modern practises by Aboriginal people.'

Jocelyn Bosse gave a paper *The aesthetics of a name: the emergence of the Kakadu plum*¹⁷ at SAG 22. 'The fruit of the Kakadu plum was the focal point of legal and media controversy in 2007 2011 when the US cosmetic company Mary Kay filed for patent in Australia over a Kakadu plum extract for use in skin creams. While the Australian patent application was withdrawn in the face of objections from Indigenous communities and concerned academics, similar patents were granted in the United States and remain in force. The story of appropriation by means of intellectual property rights has since been overtaken by a tale of reclamation. A consortium of Aboriginal women in the Northern Territory have developed a central business hub through which a network of remote Indigenous communities co-ordinate their efforts to wild harvest the Kakadu plum in accordance with traditional practices and on their traditional homelands ('in place').'

John Downes gave a paper *Natural Tuckerman: the history of bread, from Indigenous Australian bakers to the rise of white-sliced* at SAG 24¹⁸. Only the Abstract was available. 'Drawing on his experiences as the original owner of Natural Tucker Bakery, Firebrand bakery and the Newrybar Baker, John explores the history of bread from Indigenous Australian bakers to the rise of white-sliced and considers the place of bread in gastronomy and as a staple food'.

LaVergne Lehmann and Rebecca Sullivan in SAG 24 gave a paper *Climate adaptation through native foods in the classroom*. Only the Abstract is available. 'In developing a climate change adaptation education program aimed at upper primary school children in the Wimmera and Grampians region, it made sense to not only consider adaptation from an Indigenous perspective but more specifically to include the role of native foods'

¹⁵ Heslop, Hilary, *The yam daisy: Recovering its place*, Proceedings of the 22nd Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 2018 pp. 42 Only the Abstract was available.

¹⁶ Garvey, Jillian, *The role of animals in Australian archaeology: How it can inform on the past, present and future of native bush tucker*, Proceedings of the 22nd Symposium of Australia Gastronomy 2018 Abstract only p.111

¹⁷ Bosse Jocelyn, *The aesthetics of a name: the emergence of the Kakadu plum*¹⁷ Proceedings of the 22nd Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 2018 p.111 Only the Abstract was available.

¹⁸ Downes, John, *Natural Tuckerman: the history of bread, from Indigenous Australian bakers to the rise of white-sliced*, Proceedings of the 24th Symposium of Australia Gastronomy 2022 Abstract only p.18

In SAG 24 Max Dingle gave a paper 'Tis an unweeded garden that goes to seed'. Abstract available only. 'You can comfort yourself with the knowledge that your garden produce is fresh and all your own work, but in the end it still irked me that my garden always managed to produce a glut of produce at the same time as the markets being awash with the same – fresh and cheaper. So, I decided that I would no longer compete. I would set up a gardening and cooking challenge by growing things that were not available, at least not available on a regular basis, and decided to concentrate on indigenous edible plants.

Aboriginal Women and Power¹⁹

The theme of SAG 9 was Food & Power. Vic Cherikoff and Pearl Wymarra (Aboriginal Unit) University of Western Sydney gave a paper *Bush Foods, Aboriginal Women and Power* at SAG 9. 'We're talking here about gastronomy and about food and about power representing food in desirable ways ... I spend a lot of time with Aboriginal women and have done over the years as they are my preferred tutors in the ways of bush food ... And many of the other important nutrients from food were supplied by Aboriginal women ... It came back to the women to start putting sophistication into food again'.

First Nations Gastronomy

This was a session at the 24th SAG. Only Abstracts are available.

Rodney Carter presented *Djaara fusion cooking*.²⁰ 'Djaara Fusion cooking can be employed for a great many different reasons and add Murrumbidgee the spirit from Djandak into the flavours grown and nurtured from Djandak. It is not just a technique which may be used by chefs in order to expand their culinary repertoire. It can afford them a dish which is truly unique and distinct from its ingredients and preparation'.

Jacob Birch presented *First Nations food renaissance on Gamilaraay Country*.²¹ 'First Nations people of Australia have been sustained by cereal grains for 60,000 years. Work is underway to revitalise and restore Gamilaraay people's connection to their cultural grasses. The timing could not be more pertinent as we grapple with climate change, the extinction crisis, and land degradation.

Jodi Newcombe & Rebecca Phillips presented *Eating Djaara Country Healthy: the 50-year menu*.²² Eating Djaara Country Healthy: the 50 year menu emerged from this event as an artist-led research project that will deliver, through writing, site visits, conversation and food design, a menu designed to heal Country.

Keynote Panel at SAG 25

Only the Program was available for SAG 25.

Panel speakers and content:

Prof. Emma Lee - Indigenous marine stewardship.

Jo Cook - A culinary journey with LSACT: exploring Indigenous quota

¹⁹ Cherikoff, Vic and Wymarra, Pearl, *Aboriginal Women and Power*, Proceedings of the 9th Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 1966 pp. 93 - 95

²⁰ Carter, Rodney, *Djaara fusion cooking*, Abstracts 24th Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 2022

²¹ Birch, Jacob, *First Nations food renaissance on Gamilaraay Country*, Abstracts 24th Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 2022

²² Newcombe, Jodi and Phillips Rebecca, *Eating Djaara Country Healthy: the 50-year menu*. Abstracts 24th Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 2022

abalone through a chef's lens.

Timothy Russell-Jarvie - The business case for Indigenous food production, land and sea management (working title).

SAG Venues

The opening session of SAG 10 was held in the Award-winning Brambuk Aboriginal Cultural Centre opened in December, 1990, designed by Architect Greg Burgess in consultation with five surrounding Koori communities-the Framlingham Aboriginal Trust (Kirrae Whurong community), Horsham Aboriginal Co-Operative (Goolum Goolum Community), Warrnambool Aboriginal Co-operative (Gunditjmara Community), and the Kerrup Jmara communities which includes the Aboriginal Elders Co-Operative (Lake Condah) and Portland Heywood and Hamilton. The Centre is managed by the five communities (from South-West Victoria and the Wimmera area) and provides an important focus in the area known as Gariwerd (The Grampians).

The SAG 22 Banquet was held at the Female Factory Precinct in Parramatta. This is an area significant to the Darug people for tens of thousands of years as a birthing place. SAG worked with Bonney Djuric OAM, co-founder of Parragirls which was set up to support former inmates at Parramatta Girls Home, including many Aboriginal women. Bonney facilitated access to a tour of the home - and its gruelling story - as well as an artworks exhibition. Darug (Burramattagal) educator and performer Dr Aunty Jacinta Tobin gave the Welcome to Country and spoke about her people's Country.

Bush Food Meals

The earliest appearance of bush food at a SAG meal was the quandong at a lunch for SAG 2 where it was in the company of pistachios and macadamias linked to a paper on them that morning by Dr John Possingham.^{23 24}

Bush Food Buffet SAG 4²⁵

Vic Cherikoff, Jean Paul Bruneteau, Stephenie Dowling

Grubs and Riberry. A relative of the desert witjuti grub served with riberry from N.S.W.

York Ham with Illawarra Plum Sauce. Wood smoked kangaroo served with the blue Illawarra plum.

Smoked Roo with Rosella Chutney

Kangaroo smoked with Eucalyptus leaves and served with wild hibiscus chutney.

Peppered Water Buffalo. Northern Water Buffalo spiced with the native Derrigo pepper.

Wild Green Salad with warrigal greens, water lily stem, macadamia nuts, lemon aspen and assorted salad greens.

Samphire Salad. The mangrove saltbush

Burrawang Bread Made from the treated nut of the prehistoric burrawang served with King Island butter.

Stewed Quandong. The native peach from the outback.

Wattle Pavlova. A traditional dish but using seeds from an edible wattle.

Watile A beverage from the second Australian food plant commercialised.

The Buffet drew on native produce that was being grown and raised in Australia – Maggie Beer provided eucalyptus smoked kangaroo, Sara Adey provided a salad of Warrigal greens and samphire

²³ Lunch, Proceedings of the 2nd Symposium of Australia Gastronomy 1985 p. 205

²⁴ Possingham, Dr. John, Young, Old, and New Crops – Macadamias, Pistachios and Quandongs. Proceedings of the 1st Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 1984 pp. 1 – 79 - 186

²⁵ The Bush Food Buffet, Proceedings of the 4th Symposium of Australian Gastronomy pp. 23-24

with a lemon aspen dressing. Significantly, the burrawang (cycad) bread was baked by unidentified 'Aboriginal people in Newcastle'.

The timing of the Buffet was apposite. In 1988 Tim Low published *Wild Food Plants of Australia*. In 1989 Cherikoff published *The Bushfood Handbook* the first recipe book for bush food/native tucker. At SAG 8 Chargrilled Giant Octopus²⁶ with Roasted Beetroot Mash and Aioli was served.²⁷ The Dinner from Urs Inauen had Raw marinated snapper with couscous and roasted skin, Razorfish hearts with chargrilled asparagus & mushroom cream and Medallion of Kangaroo Island chicken in yabby broth.²⁸

Bushfoods Lunch SAG 10²⁹
Stephanie Alexander

BBQ Trout in Lemon Myrtle
Banksia Smoked Emu
Chicken Lillypilly Salad
Sweet Potato & Cumbungi Tart
Water Ribbon & Dianella Salad
Lemon Aspen Curd Tarts
Glacé Bushfruit Brioche, Illawarra Plum & Lillipilli
Bush Tea & Coffee.

Native ingredients continued to be part of meals: Cape Barren Goose in SAG 11; Tommy Ruff, Garfish, and Blue Swimmer Crab SAG12; Oysters and Mussels SAG 14; Crayfish SAG 15; Silver Perch, Prawns and Snails SAG 16; Eel, Wild Leaves SAG 18.

Friday Feast and Banquet SAG 22³⁰

The 22nd Symposium of Australian Gastronomy began with a twilight reception featuring native plants and animals: Wallis Lake oysters, John Susman of Fishtales; Eels wrapped in gymea leaves, Fred's Bush Tucker; Smoked Silver Lakes eel and duck pie Ryan Broomfield; salads of wild bitter greens, roasted kangaroo and yams Simon Evans, Caveau; native seeds and seasonings infused bok-wheat rolls, Cesare Saleme of Providence Bakery; Brookie's Byron Slow Gin with native Davidson plums, and Max Dingle Finger Limes.

The 22nd SAG Banquet featured kangaroo and warrigal greens.

At the SAG 24 opening night light refreshments were provided by Murnong Mummas

Accompanying activities at SAGs

Exhibition Culinary Affairs: Places and History.

The exhibition was prepared by the Australian Heritage Commission (AHC) especially for the 17th Symposium of Australian Gastronomy. All the places depicted in the display were listed in the AHC's Register of the National Estate. There were two Aboriginal places with short

²⁶ Throughout this article I reclaim fish, crustaceans and molluscs as native animals.

²⁷ Chargrilled Giant Octopus with Roasted Beetroot Mash and Aioli, Proceedings of the 8th Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 1994 p. 33

²⁸ Dinner, Proceedings of the 8th Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 1994 p. 33

²⁹ Bushfood Lunch, Proceedings of the 10th Symposium of Australian Gastronomy p.84

³⁰ Newling, Jacqui, Friday Feast, Proceedings of the 22nd Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 2018 pp. 20 - 21

descriptions; Shell Midden, Willandra Lakes, New South Wales and Oyster Harbour Fish Trap Site, Western Australia.

A visit to the National Botanical Garden in Canberra for bushfood identifying at SAG 18. There is little describing this in the Proceedings.

Discussion

From the 1st SAG on Aboriginal foodways have been part of SAGs. Papers have been delivered on them. They have been either a whole SAG meal or have been ingredients in dishes served at other meals during SAGs. This shows the interest in them at SAGs. They also show the adoption of them by mainstream chefs and providores, and their growing availability through the native foods industry.

Aboriginal involvement itself in SAGs has been patchy. There was a large gap between SAG 10's and more recent SAGs having a Welcome to Country/Acknowledgement of Country in the program. At SAGs Aboriginal foodways in the main were presented by non-Aboriginal people. I found just two first hand presentations by Pearl Wymarra and Rodney Carter.

I am surprised that there were no papers or discussion, apart from a mention in Heslop's paper, of the most significant book in changing the understanding of pre-colonial Aboriginal foodways, Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu* first published in 2014.

Similarly, I am surprised there was no paper or discussion of John Newton's *The Oldest Foods On Earth A History of Australian Native Foods* published in 2016.

Looking to the future, are there other opportunities for Aboriginal involvement in future SAGs? An obvious one is SAG meals. Around the country Aboriginal/Indigenous chefs with many years' experience in native cuisines are running restaurants. They could be hired for lunches or dinners. Cookery books by Aboriginal/Indigenous chefs increasingly have been published. Books have been written by Aboriginal/Indigenous peoples on local native food resources and foodways. Author talks - and book signing - in both these areas could be part of a SAG. SAG's work largely via calls for papers. These calls could emphasise papers on Aboriginal foodways. Aboriginal individuals working in the bush tucker/ native plants and animals field could be invited to give Plenary talks. Other areas of Aboriginal food practice could be the subject of talks, for example food on reserves, stations and missions.

However, I write this article when the future of Symposiums of Australian Gastronomy is in doubt.