



The bush tucker man

FROM FINGER LIMES TO QUANDONGS, THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIAN FINE DINING CUISINE IS FOUND IN ITS FLORA. AUSTRALIAN NATIVE FOOD SPECIALIST ANDREW FIELKE ADVANCES AUSTRALIA FARE

WORDS | KATHRYN CLARK

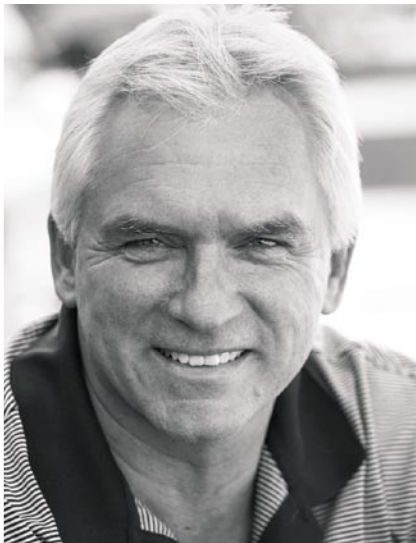


IMAGE | Gallo / Getty Creative

It's 1989, and in a random suburb in Canberra, Australia, the Clark family is sitting around the television watching a grinning man in a peaked Akubra hat prepare to eat an ant with a grotesquely swollen abdomen. The man's name is Les Hiddins – aka "The Bush Tucker Man" – and in this episode, he has travelled to Australia's vast red centre to investigate exactly how the Aboriginal Australians get by out in the desert. My outdoorsy father is wistfully gazing at the

screen, dreaming, presumably, about starting his own bush tucker show. My mother is earnestly explaining how non-indigenous Australians have destroyed native Aboriginal lands by clearing them for cattle and wheat farms, and how it's very important to show them respect as they were there first. But at eight years old, I am watching Les in a transfixed state of voyeuristic horror. My little sister has run from the room. "That's coool," my six-year-old brother breathes as Les decapitates the struggling insect in a burst of gooey gold that turns out to be honey.

While perhaps Hiddins offered the most legendary introduction to the cornucopia of unique ingredients bursting from Australia's diverse environments, the Australian native food industry has grown up since the *Bush Tucker Man* days. Today, Australian native cuisine is teetering on the edge of becoming a bona fide fine dining movement. It has certainly been a long time coming, compared with the glorious histories of the Indian, Japanese and Italian cuisines. But Andrew Fielke, fine dining chef and Australian native food consultant, hopes that all this is about to change.

"An Australian native cuisine is emerging, but it's early days yet," begins the Adelaide-based Australian in an accent that Steve Irwin would be proud of. "When I take native cuisine overseas, I am always overwhelmed by the response – foreign markets are amazed by the unique textures and flavours. It's just a matter of time before specialist restaurants start emerging. There's no reason why Australian cuisine can't go global."

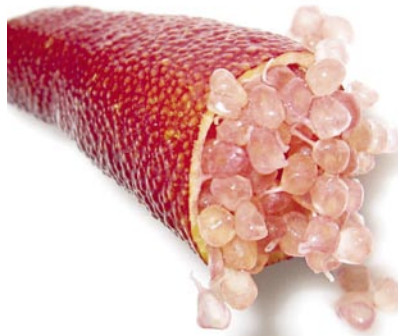
So what exactly is Australia native cuisine? The celebrity qualities of kangaroo steaks, barramundi, Murray cod and Pacific Rim shellfish have had their fine dining fans for decades. But it was the little known native flora that captured Fielke's imagination.

"There are literally thousands of species," he says. "We haven't even scratched the surface of the age-old Aboriginal ingredients." The top three ingredients currently being exported are: lemon myrtle, a fragrant leaf with floral notes that goes deliciously into desserts; quandong, a wild desert peach; and native pepper. "And there is the finger lime," Fielke says. "It's an extraordinary citrus ⇒"

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PREVIOUS PAGE: An Aboriginal Australian holding the flower, fruit and seeds of arrowroot; Andrew Fielke
LEFT TO RIGHT: Rare fillet of kangaroo with steamed kangaroo tail bun; Australian finger lime; an assortment of desert foods



the potential – it was a very Anglo mentality. I often ask people what would have happened if Australia had been populated by the French first rather than the English. Who knows?”

Fielke spent years experimenting at Tally Ho Lodge, an equestrian and hunting lodge 35 kilometres into the Adelaide Hills that

on television appearances, consulting, guest cheffing and developing new products. “I’m keen to promote Australian ingredients,” he says. “Education is vital. Australia is proud of its produce – but the focus has been on introduced species. We have actually had more interest from international chefs.”

lime in the shape of a finger. If you squeeze it, crunchy citrus bubbles come out – like caviar in green, pink or yellow. Adding a teaspoon to an oyster or a gin and tonic is breathtaking – it’s like heaven. Its annual production is just four or five tonnes per year. But what a future that fruit has – Ferran Adrià [the world-famous El Bulli chef] takes the pick of the crop now. It’s a very exciting, very tantalising new world ingredient,” he says excitedly.

Ironically, it was whilst cutting his culinary teeth in Europe that Fielke started thinking about Australian native ingredients. “I saw a lot of regional cuisine in Europe,” he says. “I thought why don’t we have an indigenous Australian cuisine? When I came home in the mid-1980s, I met a biological scientist called Vic Cherikoff who knew a lot about Aboriginal foods. He had a small business collecting and distributing native Australian foods and sent me a box of samples. I was captivated. The textures and flavours were completely unlike anything I’d come across.” Assimilating Cherikoff’s ingredients into his cooking by a trail and error process, Fielke became a pioneer of Australian native cuisine.

“In the mid-1980s, native ingredients were expensive and difficult to procure,” Fielke remembers. “Much of it was hand harvested. In outback towns, certain dishes such as quandong pie became popular, but it never went further than these rural communities. Farmers were too busy growing wheat, carrots, lambs. As a country, we failed to see

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specialised in game and hunting foods. “I honed my skills with native ingredients there,” he explains, “but I wanted to make an Australian statement. In 1992, I opened the Red Ochre Adelaide, a restaurant specialising in native Australian cuisine. It was a runaway success: it caught the attention of the international media from day one.” Two other Red Ochre restaurants followed, in Alice Springs and in Cairns. Today Red Ochre remains at the forefront of the Australian culinary movement, with Brisbane’s Tukka.

In the 1990s, Fielke enlisted a few Aboriginal friends and went walkabout into southeast South Australia and the Flinders Ranges. “It is really important to engage with the Aboriginal community; to learn from them and get them involved,” he says. “They introduced me to indigenous foods. But I learned the basics from Vic [Cherikoff]. A lot of information had been recorded. Even Captain Cook [the English explorer credited with ‘discovering’ Australia – a controversial contention these days] travelled with the botanist Joseph Banks, who recorded the plants that the Aboriginals were eating.”

Today Fielke has extracted himself from the restaurant game in order to concentrate

Despite the challenges, the industry is gaining ground. Australian Native Food Industry Limited was established in 2006 to give the fledgling movement coherence and critical mass. Fielke remains on the board today. “We are establishing standards and getting ingredients on the international register. But there is still so much to learn. For example, there are thousands of species of wattleseeds, but the Aboriginals taught us that only 35 – 40 are edible. It’s about harvesting techniques as well as handling.”

Today, Fielke is busy playing Pied Piper to the young generation of Australian chefs. He has created industry-respected native Australian food courses as part of the TAFE curriculum (a nation-wide vocational college), and is currently tailoring multimedia educational packages for Australian hotel and catering schools, which will be rolled out in the next two years. The word is getting out. “Hotels and restaurants are starting to use bits and pieces,” he explains. “Most are not making Australian statements *per se*; instead they are incorporating Australian ingredients into their existing concepts. And that’s how the industry is going to evolve.” Maybe they’ll get me eating honey ants yet. ☺