

## Desert Raisin heralds ripening of the arid food industry

JODIE AHRENS  
CHIEF AGRICULTURE  
CORRESPONDENT

After years of research, experimentation and disagreement, finally a balance has been struck between Indigenous community interests, wild harvesting and commercial production of Australia's arid food favourite, the desert raisin.

Key Aboriginal food producing communities in the Northern Territory and South Australia (Dinahline, SA; Amata, NT; Mimili, SA; Pukatja, NT) have come together with oppositional forces, environmental researchers and food industry specialists to negotiate an agreed mix of commercial production zones, wild harvesting zones and private community access zones. All stakeholders have recognised the need to respectfully develop arid zone agricultural systems to meet global food demands in the face of ever-expanding desertification.

The Australian desert raisin (*Solanum centrale*), is native to Australia's central desert region and is a small fast-growing shrub that fruits prolifically the year after fire or good rains. Their strong, pungent taste of tamarillo and caramel has made them very popular in Australia's bush food revolution, however intellectual property issues and plant variety rights amongst some Aboriginal communities, along with wild harvesting limitations, have hampered the ability to satisfy growing market demands.

Seven out of thirteen of Aus-



tralia's key bush food crops were once 100% wild harvested, which was previously the largest constraint on the industry's growth. Investment in research in the early 2000s saw new farming models develop that improved yields and regularity of supply whilst at the same time honouring the delicate ecosystems of some of Australia's most important food producing plants.

This harmony has been integral in seeing the different voices in the bush foods industry reach an agreement on best interests to the community, the land and the industry. An earlier target of the bush foods industry, to become a \$100m industry by 2000, has finally been reached, some 30 years later than anticipated. Aboriginal food producing communities are celebrating the economic and cultural knock-on success this will mean after years of investment in the "sun of the centre"—the desert raisin.



TEODORA TINC PHOTOGRAPHY

# Art, the frontline of food revolution

**A six-course degustation menu and dining experience has inspired diners with the tastes and tales of native plants**

EXCLUSIVE

JODI NEWCOMBE  
INTERNATIONAL FOOD CRITIC

The Native Botanicals Dinner combined poetry, alchemy, food and art to create a unique dining experience themed around native Australian

plants. The event, produced by Melbourne collective The Australian Future Foods Lab and designed by artist Janet Laurence and chef Douglas McMaster from byJoost, was held at the McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park alongside Janet Laurence's exhibition, *The Alchemical Garden of Desire*.

The 40 dinner guests were armed with the scientific and culinary secrets of the plants featured in each course thanks to a botanical performance by Will Tait. Microscopic visuals by artist collective Scale-Free Network tied together knowledge, experimentation, creativity and sensory experiences of food culture.

A feature of the evening was the Elixir Bar, a concept Laurence developed in Japan for the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, which celebrated the



TEODORA TINC PHOTOGRAPHY

qualities and forgotten uses of local plants through alcoholic distillations of their essence. Replicated here in collaboration with Seb Raeburn from 666 Vodka, the Elixir Bar provided an accompanying draft for

each dish.

The Australian Future Foods Lab is an artist-researcher collective reigniting taste-buds and the cultural imagination in support of emergent and sustainable food systems that celebrate

our unique Australian identity. Native plants contribute to human health, landscape restoration and climate resilience, and their increased use in cuisine continues to drive Australia's food revolution.

### NATIVE BOTANICALS TEAM

**Janet Laurence** is an internationally acclaimed and widely exhibited Australian artist who works in mixed media and installation. Laurence's practice examines humans' impact on a fragile and increasingly disappearing natural world.

**Douglas McMaster** is an award-winning chef who has partnered with artist Joost Bakker to create Silo, a Melbourne-based 'zero waste' café.

**Sebastian Raeburn** is a cocktail historian and aficionado, co-owner of bar 1806 and resident mixologist for 666 vodka.

**Jodi Newcombe** is Director of Carbon Arts, an organisation specialising in trans-disciplinary responses to climate change led by the creative sector.

**Jodie Ahrens** traverses live art, theatre in education, sustainability and the senses in her cross-disciplinary arts practice represented primarily with companies, Roundangle and Our Planet Enterprises.

**Asha Bee Abraham** is a human ecologist who works at various points on the lines connecting sustainability, community development and art.

## Pepper Berry Festival carries flame for Tasmania

JODI NEWCOMBE  
TASMANIAN NEWSDESK

The annual Pepper Berry Festival filled St Helens' streets again this year with enthusiasts for the fiery native plant and the industry that has grown up around it. While locals came out in droves, the town registered the greatest proportion of visitors—at 70 per cent—since the festival began in 2025, bringing the total festival population to 8,000 at its peak.

In a survey completed by Tourism Tasmania, overseas visitors noted the festival as a key reason for visiting the state and this North East corner. The spectacular fire performances ringing George Bay have become a much loved finale of this week-long celebration of the pepper berry industry and its fruit's fiery flavour. Food stands from around the region lined the streets all weekend, alongside stalls promoting all manner of pepper berry products, including the fiendishly effective Devil's Organic Insecticide Spray.

The pepper berry, now globally recognized as a uniquely Australian plant, has brought happy economic times to this region, once in decline following the demise of the forestry sector. Extensive research by the native foods industry at the turn of the century helped bring this plant literally out of the bush and into the farm, turning uneconomic lands into organic pepper berry orchards and establishing Australia as the centre for research into the plant's many uses, from the medicinal to the gastronomic.


**"The funds raised for forest rehabilitation through the Rainforest Pioneer Program are a shoot of hope in Tasmania's journey to rebuild this native habitat and reclaim its title as a wilderness adventure destination."**

CLAIRE MCINTOSH

For many visiting the festival, the highlight is not the finale but the following day, when nature enthusiasts embark en masse at dawn for the month-long Rainforest Pilgrimage Tour. Organised by the pepper berry industry as part of its Rainforest Pioneer Program, the tour embodies the spirit of the plant as a pioneer species from the rainforest.

"The funds raised for forest rehabilitation through the Rainforest Pioneer Program are a shoot of hope in Tasmania's journey to rebuild this native habitat and reclaim its title as a wilderness adventure destination," says Tourism Tasmania's Claire McIntosh. "We're thrilled to see so many taking part in the festival and the pilgrimage this year—it's a tradition we hope is here to stay."

MELBOURNE DAMS  
**40.5%**  
20 YEARS AGO: 76.8%

**Today's Weather**  
 Sunny and Dry  
**16-38°**

## Native herbs making a hit on supermarket shelves

**Saltbush, rivermint and sea parsley hit the fresh herbs section of major supermarkets today, marking a major step for Australia's native herbs industry.**

JODI NEWCOMBE  
CONSUMER CORRESPONDENT

Long a dream of those passionate about Australia's need to embrace its local foods, the step forward also reflects the maturity of the herbs industry which only 20 years ago was struggling to supply a few innovative restaurateurs.

One saltbush company, Old Man Saltbush, is employing innovative marketing in the sales of their saltbush bunches—when shoppers choose to purchase the salty leaves, now a standard salt substitute in eateries around the country, they will also be investing in carbon sequestration, biodiversity and salinity management efforts through Australia's flagship Saltbush Regeneration Initiative.

Prior to European arrival in Australia, saltbush used to dominate large areas of arid and

semi-arid landscape. Grazed out of existence by livestock and pest species during the proceeding 200 years, the plant has recently made a comeback as a restorer of degraded farmland and a boon for farmers seeking a drought and weed-resistant crop in these drier times.

The Saltbush Regeneration Initiative was born out of the Carbon Farming Initiative of 2012 and incentives provided through the Murray-Darling Basin's plans to avoid increased salination through plantations of saltbush. With hundreds of thousands of hectares in plantation, some now reaching four metres in height, the efforts of these plants in removing salt from the water table and sequestering carbon from the atmosphere have become significant.

"We are proud that our saltbush plantations are amongst the most biodiverse in the initiative," says Old Man Saltbush



CEO, Garry Thurston.

"We know that people purchasing saltbush for their meals will want to know that the product is not only delivering carbon and salinity benefits, but is also helping to re-establish habitat for Australia's struggling fauna, like the sleepy lizard. When you buy our product you really will be eating to support biodiversity."

## Barley a distant memory

ASHA BEE ABRAHAM  
CLIMATE SCIENCE WRITER

It may seem like a distant memory but as recently as twenty years ago, in 2010, much of Australia's cultivable land was covered in vast wheat, canola and barley fields.

Australia has since become a hotter, drier continent. Average rainfall has dropped and we face longer dry periods, particularly across the southern parts of the country.

Around 2012, farmers began to transition away from climate-sensitive crop varieties, such as canola, wheat and barley, in response to a CSIRO prediction that changing climate conditions posed significant risk to productivity.

In the country's south-east, where water for irrigated cropping is drawn from the Murray-Darling Basin, all cropping was hit hard by decreased rainfall. Across Queensland and northern New South Wales, crop yields fell and the quality of cotton was greatly affected.

The highest level of warming was experienced by central Australia where grazing animals,

particularly cattle, became heat stressed and livestock breeding became an increasing challenge for farmers.

**Australia has since become a hotter, drier continent. Average rainfall has dropped and we face longer dry periods.**

As temperatures continued to warm, a dramatic shift took place in the Australian diet as innovative food and farming opportunities were explored. Those crops most sensitive to climate variation have largely been culled from the farming repertoire, aside from a few smaller farms in areas historically considered too wet to farm.

Plans were made to move the cotton industry to the top end where rainfall has increased in some areas and horticulture has expanded. However when taking the heightened risk of erosion, heat stress, flooding and cyclones into account, the cotton was finally recognised as a crop completely inappropriate for the Australian landscape.

In 2012, the CSIRO climate

adaptation flagship program predicted all these changes in agriculture. As a result, the National Farmers Federation (NFF), Australia's chief farming body, began investing in adaptation as a key part of its strategy. Different forms of agricultural production have continued across Australia, partly due to the millions of dollars invested by these bodies in adaptation and developing crops that would cope with the change in climate and soil conditions. However this is more largely due to an increased understanding of native food plants such as the bush tomato, cumbungi, wattle, pepper berry and saltbush, all much more suited to Australia and its dry and hot conditions.

It is argued that the drastic changes that Australia's farming and food culture have undergone over the last 20 years would have been much smoother if more farmers took the findings of the CSIRO and NFF climate adaptation research seriously when they were first released. In 2012, however, climate change was still a contested issue, particularly amongst farmers, with 20 per cent of primary producers not accepting the science.

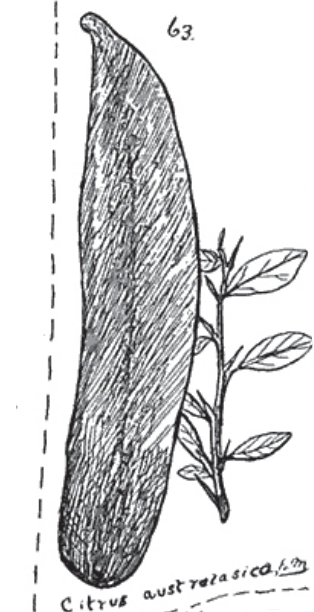


# Citrus becomes the caviar of climate change

JODIE AHRENS  
LUXURY CORRESPONDENT

The unique flavour and texture of Australia's finger lime is replacing the caviar of sturgeon as this dinosaur fish loses its fight against climate change. The sturgeon has been threatened for many years by over-fishing, interrupted spawning routes and falling to by-catch, but the ultimate threat is warming oceans, which no longer hold sufficient oxygen to sustain the ancient species. The finger lime has been readily adopted by global markets as a sustainable, vegetarian alternative to caviar. Its colourful, globular flesh is a zesty mimic of sturgeon's eggs.

The finger lime is sparsely foliated and grows extremely slowly. It bears fruit after many years or when under stress.



However, when grafted to a suitable rootstock the plant is transformed into a commer-

cially viable citrus plant.

This has enabled the finger lime to thrive on the international market, where for many years France has out-stripped Australia as the highest global producer of this remarkable citrus. Falling production in Australia is largely due to the fact that the finger lime's native habitat, like the sturgeon, is under threat.

In a move to regenerate native habitats and reclaim our most valuable export fruit, the Australian Forest Protection Agency has passed a new policy to protect the wet sclerophyll forests abutting subtropical rainforests of northern New South Wales and south-eastern Queensland that are home to the finger lime. By protecting our forests we can only hope that our more easily cultivated caviar of the citrus world does not follow in the steps of the sturgeon.

# Can native and introduced species live in harmony



ASHA BEE ABRAHAM  
ECOLOGY WRITER

Recent protests about increased weed spraying amongst the bush food industry have again sparked long-running debate about the place of weeds within the Australian diet and ecology. The Alliance of Native and Introduced Species (ANIS) have called for an annual Plant Harmony Day to celebrate how introduced plant species and native plants can live alongside one another.

Few Melburnians realise that the origin of our city's name comes from a weed. The original Melbourne, an English market town in Derbyshire, was called Melde-Bourne until AD 970, for all the melde that was growing in the area. Melde, or "fat hen" as it is more commonly referred to, is a close relative of quinoa and is cultivated widely in northern India, but also grows as a weed throughout our own city of Mel-

bourne. Its leaves resemble a nutty-tasting spinach but offer a higher nutritional value, being rich in vitamin C, riboflavin, calcium, antioxidants and measuring up to 43 percent protein by dry weight. Moreover, melde is one of the few introduced plants that survive Melbourne's regular strings of 40°C days. Edible and medicinal plants such as this have been incredibly beneficial in adapting to our warming climate.

**"Many definitions class weeds simply as a plant considered undesirable or out of place."**

There is, of course, subjectivity in this definition. Weeds, according to ANIS spokesperson Ms Myrtle Purslane, are often very high in nutritional and medicinal value and grow in places for a particular reason. "Plants we classify as weeds are largely 'pioneer plants' with the ecological niche of growing first and fastest in areas that have experienced disturbance, such as land clearance, ploughing or building set-

tlements. Weeds can therefore be seen to follow humans around," Ms Purslane explains.

ANIS sees its role as countering the commonly held belief that native species are good and introduced species are bad. "Post-colonial countries such as ours often hold the strongest anti-weed attitudes, reacting against the Europeanisation of landscapes by projecting guilt about our own ecosystem disturbance onto pioneer plant species that follow our footsteps. On a subconscious level, we identify with weeds," says Ms Purslane.

Rather than focusing on whether or not individual species are native or introduced, ANIS encourages us to understand the service these pioneer plants can provide to ecological systems and cycles to undo ecological disturbance we humans have previously carried out. At the same time, we ourselves can benefit from the nutritional and medicinal value they can provide after an evening forage around the block.

ANIS is working with Australian Future Foods Lab ecologists to understand how introduced plant species, including those from other parts of Australia, and native plants might live together in ecological harmony.

# Urban bush food farm attracts tourists and furries alike



TEODORA TINC PHOTOGRAPHY

Saltbush, samphire, sea vegetable and heirloom tomato: a new canapé at Silo Café

**This weekend marks the tenth birthday of Cumbungi City Farm, Australia's first urban bush food farm. The linear farm along the Yarra River, in the heart of Melbourne's CBD, has created quite a ripple in its first decade.**

ASHA BEE ABRAHAM  
URBAN FOOD INVESTIGATOR

Its native taste sensations have swept across restaurants both locally and internationally, while curiosity around Australia's first inner-city bush food farm has brought in the tourist dollar with the farm welcoming close to three million visitors in its 10 years of operation, contributing approximately \$25 million to the

local economy.

Cumbungi City Farm is named after the native bulrush found on the farm's banks. Commonly found across most of Victoria on the edges of lakes, billabongs, swamps, riverbanks and lagoons, cumbungi has been considered a weed in irrigation channels as it can be

known to impede water flow and increase sedimentation rate. For this same reason, however, it has recently and successfully been introduced along the Yarra River as a biological means of cleaning water of excessive nutrients, heavy metals and other contaminants. Moreover, cumbungi provides protection against stream bank erosion and nesting sites for water birds.

Like its namesake, Cumbungi City Farm also provides significant environmental benefits, providing habitat for native fauna. The Large Forest Bat, Gold-headed Cristicola, Purple-crowned Lorikeet, Richard's Pipit, Tawny Frog-mouthed Owl, White's Skink, Ringtail and

Brushtail Possums, Brown Falcon and the Australian Hobby are just some of the many critters that can be spotted in and around the farm, usually when the tourists have gone home for the day.

To celebrate its tenth birthday, Cumbungi will be presenting a weekend of food, talks, tours, workshops, music and stalls at the farm.

The highlight of the weekend for many will be the cumbungi leaf weaving workshops, as well as the bread making workshops using cumbungi root as flour, both led by local Wurundjeri elders who work closely with Cumbungi City Farm.

# BUSINESS NEWS

## Raise a glass to the devil

The team at 666 Vodka have released a new signature cocktail to celebrate reaching their \$200,000 target to assist the regeneration of the Tasmanian Devil.



As a Tasmanian enterprise, the alcohol producer has always been interested in supporting local ecosystems. Dwindling numbers of this exotic animal in the 20th century have now been boosted as their plight was made more visible through the efforts of many, including the campaign of 666 Vodka, who enjoy a strong Australian market presence. Now vodka drinkers can celebrate in support of the devil.

## Taking pride in community enterprises

Last night at the South Australian Social Enterprise Awards, self-starting community project, Outback Pride, finally received the recognition it deserves after 30 years of being the largest bush food growing organisation in Australia.

The Outback Pride Project was awarded the Community Development Award for their vision of "jobs and training for Indigenous Australians". They have always felt that the bush food industry should be in a parallel place alongside the Aboriginal art industry. "Both these industries should have a unique cultural and commercial ownership by Indigenous Australians," says Mike Quarmby, a partner in Outback Pride alongside his wife, Gayle Quarmby.

For more information visit [www.outbackpride.com.au](http://www.outbackpride.com.au)

## Healthy community connections



Long standing Fitzroy family business, The Vegetable Connection, has just extended its native food range. This makes it one of the inner city's most well-stocked grocers, as well as representing the products of extensive Aboriginal community enterprises (including Outback Pride—see above).

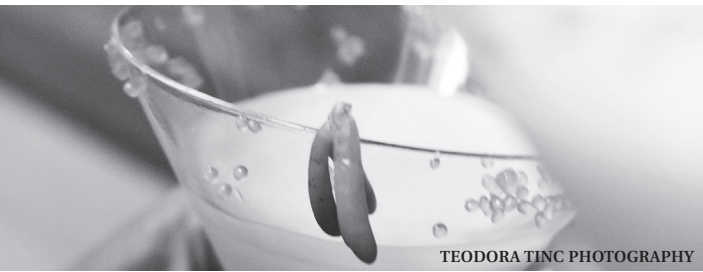


This means that when you purchase at The Vegetable Connection you are also investing in Indigenous communities. You can find them at: 255 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy. Online at: [www.thevegetableconnection.com.au](http://www.thevegetableconnection.com.au)

## BOTTOMS UP!



SEB RAE BURN  
DRINKS DESIGNER



TEODORA TINC PHOTOGRAPHY

### NATIVE SWIZZLE

2 shots West Winds Gin  
2 tsp honey (pre mix with a little warm water to ensure that it melts easily)  
1 shot of fresh lemon juice  
3 shots soda

Native herb(s) of choice (strawberry gum, lemon myrtle, rivermint, roundleaf mint)  
Small gum branch  
Ice

Using a tall glass, add the gin, juice and honey. Fill glass with ice, and add the soda. Break in a selection of native herbs, ideally picked straight off the tree, swizzle vigorously with a native twig.

### FINGER LIME MARGARITA

1 shot Outback Pride Native Passionberry Syrup  
2 shots Tromba Blanco Tequila  
1/2 shot fresh lemon juice  
1 teaspoon of finger lime spheres

Roll a martini glass in Finger Lime spheres until the rim is well covered. Fill cocktail shaker with plenty of ice, and shake hard. Give it enough energy to break up some of the finger lime, and to mix through the rich syrup. Strain into glass, and garnish with a generous sprig of sea succulent (noon flower).

### WATTLESEED CHOCOLATE MARTINI

1 shot wattleseed coffee (espresso, plunger, whatever you have at hand. Make it nice and strong)  
1&1/2 shots 666 Vodka  
1/2 shot chocolate liqueur  
1/2 Shot of sugar syrup

Pour all ingredients into cocktail shaker. Add plenty of ice and agitate well. Strain into a small tumbler with chunks of fresh ice, and garnish with a leaf of fresh aniseed myrtle. Drink, then bite the leaf, then sip again.

## OUT & ABOUT

### TV

#### THE WAIT IS OVER!

Tune in to Channel 10 at 7pm this Sunday for the first episode of season 3 of *McMaster Chef*. Follow award-winning chef, Douglas McMaster, as he journeys to the source of familiar and bizarre native Australian ingredients and learns their stories and nutritional and medicinal values, and of course creates new taste sensations which will have you wanting to eat your television!

*McMaster Chef in the Flesh* is taking place at the Cumbungi City Farm tenth birthday celebrations this weekend with cooking workshops led by Douglas McMaster himself.



TEODORA TINC PHOTOGRAPHY

### FESTIVALS

#### BEE'S-EYE VIEW

Join the Association for Urban Apiculture (AUA) for their Rooftop Honey Harvest this weekend. AUA's annual festival provides rare access to rooftops across Melbourne to celebrate the critical role of bees in our food system, and of course their sweet nectar!

This is a chance to learn about the incredible social lives of bees, do a workshop in the basics of beekeeping, taste various kinds of local honey, or simply get a rooftop view of our city.

Head to the Rooftop Honey Harvest website to get a map and program of the festival.

### SoHowDoHaiku

Haiku is a very short form of Japanese poetry. Here's a rough guide:

1. Haiku in English are poems usually written in three short lines. One line is a fragment and the other two lines combine grammatically to become a phrase.

2. A haiku is a meditation of sorts that conveys an image or feeling (it should avoid judgment and analysis).

3. Many haiku seem to focus on nature, but what they are really focusing on is a seasonal reference known in Japan as "kigo".

4. Haiku either present one idea for the first two lines and then switch quickly to something else or do the same with the first line and last two, using a "kireji" or cutting word. The two parts sometimes create a contrast, sometimes a comparison.

5. Haiku are based on the five senses. They are about things you can experience, not your interpretation of those things.

#### RIVERMINT:

*Mentha australis*

Throaty sickness soft  
Aroma most magical  
In dry margins

#### WRITE YOUR OWN:

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

### GETAWAY

Peppermint Ridge Farm  
*Taste - Learn - See*

#### TASTE, LEARN, SEE

Garden tours, bush food cooking classes and dining delights combine in a B&B with a difference. Julie Weatherhead and Anthony Hooper have done extensive research into Australian edible plants and hope to share their experience with groups of 2-6 people at 'The Haven' at Cornucopia (Julie's family home) in Tyngong North, a short jaunt from their well established, native foods farm. Peppermint Ridge Farm is also available for group tours and food anytime they are not running events such as the bush food cooking school, workshops on growing organic



vegetables and learning all about growing bush foods at home and bush food lunch events.

For more details visit: [www.peppermintridgefarm.com.au](http://www.peppermintridgefarm.com.au)

### ODD SPOT

Two modern-day adventurers who embarked on a re-enactment of the famous Burke and Wills expedition have died after poisoning themselves in exactly the same fashion as the original explorers.

Despite being aware of the danger of the thiaminase levels in the nardoo plant (*Marsilea drummondii*), an aquatic fern on which Burke and Wills survived the last months of their tragic tour, the pair insisted on



POISON!

reliving the experience as accurately as possible. They claimed that the question surrounding

the death of the early Australian pioneers was reason to test the validity of the claims.

Thiaminase is a toxic compound that inhibits vitamin B1. This can be removed from the nardoo plant when properly prepared. The early day explorers did not learn how to prepare the plant properly and consequently died of poisoning, not starvation, which was the result of the coroner's report at the time. Sadly, the four-leaf clover appearance of the plant did not reward the more recent explorers with better luck.