

GASTRONOMY

# ADVANCE AUSTRALIAN FARE

**LOCAL CHEFS** are embracing our native ingredients, as wild fruits, sea vegetables and fragrant herbs add a unique flavour to the top menus around the country.

WORDS SARAH LEWIS PHOTOS BRETT STEVENS AND MATTHEW TURNER



**T**wenty years ago, the mere mention of native Australian foods had our top chefs cowering under their cloches. The prevailing mod-Oz cuisine borrowed heavily from Asia, and the closest we came to eating indigenous ingredients was wincing as we watched the Bush Tucker Man munch on a witchetty grub.

Thankfully, we've moved past that cultural cringe and are now embracing our native ingredients, with wild foods gracing menus across the country. It's no longer gimmicky themed restaurants aimed at tourists, either. Instead, Australia's leading chefs are taking a nuanced approach, integrating vitamin-rich fruits, sea vegetables and aromatics into their contemporary meals.

The rise has been helped along by the current trend of foraging, where chefs look to their local environment for foods growing naturally in the wild. Small-scale farmers have also come to the party, cultivating hard-to-find native citrus, berries and herbs.

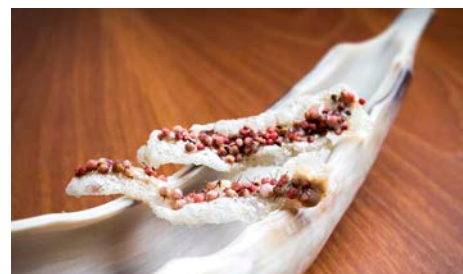
Surprisingly, one of the biggest proponents of Australian ingredients is Scottish-born Jock Zonfrillo of Adelaide's Restaurant Orana. Diners are introduced to an array of little-known foods, from kutjera (desert raisins) to karkalla (beach bananas). "The feedback we have from our customers is one of surprise and pride in Australia and its ingredients," says Zonfrillo.

The degustation menu at Orana kicks off with about 20 snacks, perhaps Davidson plum with seared prawn; beef tendon with mountain pepper; or snapper with wild radish and sea celery. Following that is eight more substantial courses, showcasing locally caught and reared seafood, kangaroo and lamb, enhanced with herbs, vegetables and berries.



#### NATIVE FLAVOURS

A selection of dishes from Orana, from top right: aged goat's cheese with riberry leaves; beef tendon with mountain pepper; taro and roast beef; native currants and coconut ash.



#### ORANA:

Because a lot of the ingredients are superfoods, our diners tell us they feel invigorated and revived the following day.

JOCK ZONFRILLO

"After that many courses, one would expect to wake up with a bit of a food hangover, but because of the nature of the foods that doesn't happen," says Zonfrillo. "Instead, because a lot of the ingredients are superfoods, our diners tell us they feel invigorated and revived the following day."

As Australia's native ingredients are only in season for a short period of time, Zonfrillo and his team tweak the menu constantly. And, unlike a regular restaurant that can simply place an order when stocks are running low, Orana's supply chain is less predictable.

"We pick our own wild foods but we're also getting things harvested by communities around the country, so we have unexpected packages arriving all the time. We'll get a call to say there's a box at the bus depot or the post office and it could have anything in it - water lilies, magpie geese or whistling ducks - it's a constant surprise," says Zonfrillo. ➤



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We drive down to the coast at Wollongong each week to pick kilos of beach flora, such as sea kale, samphire and other wild plants.

JAMES VILES





In the NSW Southern Highlands, James Viles is also kept on his toes when it comes to sourcing native ingredients for his two-hat restaurant, Biota Dining. Biota's onsite garden and greenhouse supply the kitchen with about 40 varieties of herbs, shoots and cresses, but it's not yet enough to keep up with demand.

"We drive down to the coast at Wollongong each week to pick kilos of beach flora, such as sea kale and samphire," says Viles.

"One of our customers, Jo, grows all of these wild plants for us, including yarrow herbs and feijoa," says Viles. "Over the past 18 months she's turned her quarter-acre backyard into a Biota kitchen garden."

Viles relishes this connection with his growers. "People drop things off because the produce is beautiful and they want someone to use it. It's mutual and the way cooking should be."

Sustainability also plays a major role in Viles' menu planning. He showcases local snapper, sea urchins and Australian game, and makes a conscious decision to use the parts of the animal most others would throw away. "The Aboriginal people were very smart in the way they used food. They'd use the head, throat, all parts of the fish, and it tastes fantastic."

Martin Benn of Sepia Restaurant in Sydney agrees. "Australian seafood is an important component of our native ingredients, and its sustainability is key." Along with marron (crayfish) and spanner crab, Benn's Japanese-accented menu is peppered with wild fruits and vegetables. "One of my favourites is the finger lime. I love its sharp tanginess and unique fruitiness," he says.

Benn is also a big fan of sea vegetables and seaweeds, which he sources from the Reedy Creek region of South Australia. "It picks up the fresh salty air from the Great Australian Bight, giving us really succulent, slightly briny vegetables," says Benn.

Having been named Restaurant of the Year in the 2015 *Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide*, it's clear Benn is on to a good thing, but he is keen to ensure the use of local foods is no passing fad. "It would be a pity if it was just a trend and not an evolution," he says.

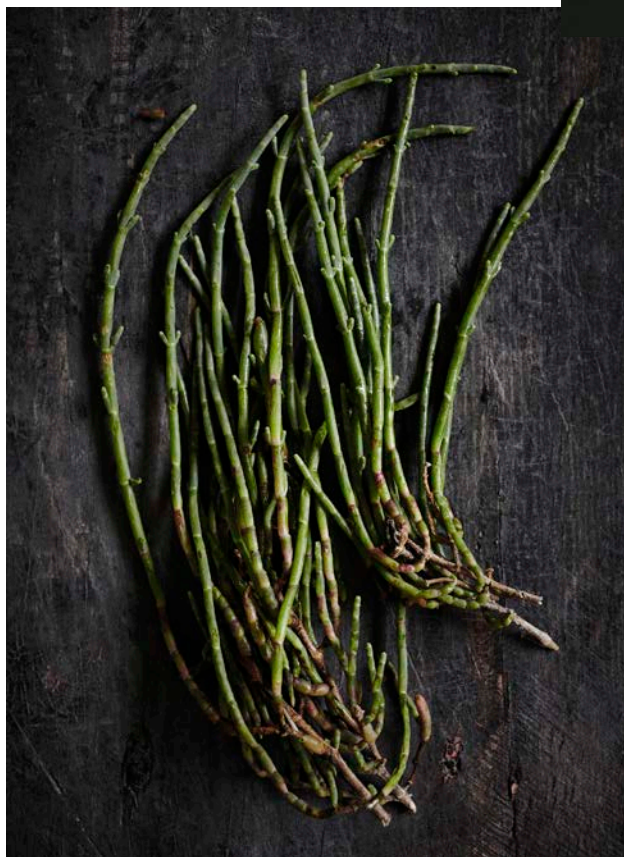
It's no mere fad for chef Greg Hampton, who has been flying the flag for native ingredients longer than most. He was first introduced to bush foods in the early 1990s by pioneering scientist Vic Cherikoff and chef Andrew Fielke, when Hampton was working as a chef in Cairns. Today, he heads up the kitchen at Charcoal Lane in Fitzroy, which, in conjunction with Mission Australia, acts as a training centre for underprivileged Aboriginal youths.

"Charcoal Lane is about teaching these kids how to connect with their food and their culture, because a lot of that has been lost," says Hampton. "I want to create dishes that represent, to me, a modern Australian food identity."

The menu reads like a roll call of tempting native ingredients: strawberry gum, native pepper, rosella flowers and aniseed myrtle. "I started off doing more comfort food, such as chicken schnitzel crumbed in wattleseed and macadamia, but I found that people were going for the more obscure items on the menu." Today, Melbourne diners happily tuck into wallaby spiced with wild harissa, salmon smoked in paperbark, or tomato gazpacho infused with native pepper and river mint.

Like Benn and Viles, Hampton is quick to point out that there's more to Australian native ingredients than the obvious fruits, shoots and leaves. "For me, it's all about using the animals that are meant to be on this land, such as emu, kangaroo and wallaby, plus oysters, yabbies and snapper from the bay."

A trained horticulturalist, Hampton is well versed in our nation's untapped bounty. "There are thousands of foods in Australia," says Hampton. "Anything you can think of – onion, celery, lettuce – there's a native version available. And we only know the tip of the iceberg really."



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**SEPIA:**  
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MARTIN BENN



#### RECIPE EXCLUSIVE

Download the first issue 2015 of the Mercedes-Benz Magazine iPad app for a finger lime dessert recipe from Martin Benn's new cookbook, *Sepia, The Cuisine of Martin Benn*.

Left: freshly harvested samphire, a coastal succulent.