

TRAVEL

Australia: Top End tucker in the Kakadu region

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5 minutes to read



Kakadu National Park. Photo / Tourism Australia

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By: Caroline Berdon

Caroline Berdon meets an Australian championing the health-giving qualities of edible treasures he finds in the rainforest and Outback.

Green ants and goannas may have given Aussie bush tucker a bad name, but there are plenty of delicious goodies growing in the Top End of the lucky country that can easily be used in everyday cooking.

Kakadu plums, bush tomatoes and native herbs are just some of the highly nutritious foods growing abundantly in Australia's tropical north.

Opting for more food grown in the native soil will not only help Australians lower skyrocketing levels of diabetes and obesity, but also strengthen their connection to the land through its flavours, say converts.

Geoff Mark, who serves up gourmet meals at his Stockman Camp Tucker Nights at his Katherine home, says the Aussies he serves are blown away by the quality of native food they had no idea existed.

"We live in one of those lucky countries that most of the time is untouched. The taste from the natural things are quite sensational and it's really just a matter of what to use with what and the quantities," he says.

Mark, known widely as Marksie, grew up in Melbourne but has been living in Katherine since the early 1970s and is passionate about marrying European and Aboriginal culture in cooking.

On the night we eat at his camp, he serves a beautiful meal that includes roast beef with native pepperberry, roast potatoes with aniseed myrtle and damper with cheese and roasted wattle seeds — washed down with his famous Jungle Juice made with native mint and forestberry herbs.

The key to working with native bush food, he tells us, is learning from the first Australians, particularly those who still live the more traditional way of life in remote communities.

"Traditional Aboriginal people still have that very close contact with the land, the bush and their culture," he says.

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While urban indigenous people have largely abandoned their traditional diets for western food, many of them, including Marksie's friend and former bush tucker teacher Katie Young, relish the opportunity to eat bush tucker on regular family camping trips.

"If I'm camping I'll use what's out there," says the Larakia tribal member, from Darwin, who has a penchant for freshwater turtles, dugong and fish. "If I catch it, I'll consume it, and then I'll gather whatever's around to complement that meat. There's heaps you can get from the bush."



Marksie's Camp Tucker site, Kakadu.

MARKSIE'S TOP FIVE BUSH FOODS

KAKADU PLUM

Not many people realise that Kakadu plum has the highest vitamin C content of any food on the planet — reportedly more than 50 times the concentration found in oranges. Growing wild in Darwin and throughout the Kakadu region, this green fruit starts flowering just before the wet season. Not only is it perfect for jams, chutneys and spreads, the Kakadu plum is also now being used in face creams. The freeze-dried fruit and bars can be found in health food stores across Australia.

BUSH TOMATOES

The tiny bush tomato needs dry conditions, so grows best in the deserts of Central Australia, although its small trees with their pretty purple flowers can also be found in the Top End. The bush tomato is Marksie's favourite bush food.

"I use it in lots of different things ... as a seasoning with fish, particularly with the wild barra, in breads, in dips, on my meat. It's really versatile." Bush tomatoes have up to 10 times the vitamin C of oranges and are packed with potassium and iron. They are sold around Australia in specialist food shops.

ROAST WATTI SEED

ROAST WATTLESEED

Indigenous people in Australia have relied on wattleseed as a highly nutritious staple for tens of thousands of years. It boasts more protein, energy and trace elements than rice, pork and chicken — and has even been investigated as a possible famine relief crop in African desert countries with poor soil. Marksie adores it.

As well as a fantastic spice to use on meals, roasted wattleseed also makes great coffee that "tastes like hazelnut". It doesn't dissolve though, he warns, adding that the syrup at the bottom of your cup makes a great sauce poured on top of ice cream and served with fruit. "You can flavour bread and scones with it, too," he adds. "It's just delightful."

LEMON MYRTLE/ANISEED MYRTLE

Lemon myrtle is the world's richest source of citral, an essential oil found in lemongrass. Marksie says he loves sprinkling it on eggs, vegetables and wild barramundi, and he also likes to "break it down into a lemon sauce". Aniseed myrtle is delicious added to roast potatoes and fresh fruit, he says, and is "very kid-friendly because it has that soft licorice scent as well". But keep the effect subtle, he warns — too much and these herbs can be overpowering.

NATIVE PEPPERBERRIES

Bright purple pepperberries come with an intense heat and lots of aroma. "Use them sparingly, they can be quite hot," warns Marksie, but describes their taste as "sensational" with roast meat.

CHECKLIST

Getting there:

Qantas

flies from Auckland to Darwin. Kakadu and Katherine are both around three hours from Darwin by road.

Accommodation: Cooina Lodge; Nitmiluk Chalets

Further information: Marksie's Stockman Camp Tucker Nights, April to October. Adults \$75, children \$30. Bookings essential. Email: marksie@marksiecampucker.com.au.

- AAP

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