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## Native Foods in Australian Restaurants: How to ensure Indigenous Australians benefit?

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### Introduction

*“Many whitefellas just don’t realise that it’s so important to have Aboriginal people involved in the industry... If you lose that link between Aboriginal people and bush food, then you lose everything. It’s hollow. It’s nothing”*

Rayleen Brown (cited in Merne Altyerre-ipehe et al., 2011:26).

A recent news article carried the headline ‘who owns a plant?’ (Newton, 2016). This follows recent media interest in native foods, with headlines declaring ‘foraging is the new black’, ‘advance Australia fare’ and ‘an all-consuming quest for a native cuisine’. Celebrity chefs such as Jock Zonfrillo are feted for making the world’s oldest cuisine our trendiest (Sebag-Montefiore, 2015; Brearley, 2015; Lovitt, 2014). The Australian food industry is working to create brand identity through developing a unique national cuisine. As the Restaurant Australia tourism campaign demonstrates, the food sector can also deliver significant tourism branding opportunities for countries such as Australia (Tourism Australia, n.d.). The Australian cuisine of distinction is that based on native foods, and chefs such as Mark Olive, Clayton Donovan, Peter Gilmore, Andrew Fielke, Shannon Bennett, Kylie Kwong and Jock Zonfrillo are creating excitement by placing native or bush foods on their menus. Arguably, it is the emerging interest in local foods that

has opened up the opportunity for renewed appreciation of native foods in Australia. Additionally, as sustainability and climate change emerge as serious concerns, native foods are promoted as more sustainable in terms of conserving biological diversity and more compatible with Australia's fragile ecology. But the opening question of 'who owns a plant' draws our attention to the question of whether Indigenous Australians have any special rights and roles in the native foods industry and what benefits they should derive from its prospering as a result of these.

This chapter analyses the native food industry in Australia, particularly the niche featuring in Australian restaurants and catering. It examines the capacity for Indigenous Australians to supply native foods to the restaurant sector and argues that proactive efforts must be made to ensure Indigenous Australians can better benefit from this emerging and important opportunity. This approach is based on an Indigenist philosophy and reflects changes inaugurated with the advancement of Indigenous rights under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and other international protocols. Our findings indicate that the interface between native foods and Indigenous tourism offers the most promising opportunities for economic and cultural self-determination; a case study of Koomal Dreaming in Western Australia is presented as an example. Decolonising this culinary space opens up possibilities for building Indigenous Australian futures and bridging Australian divides.

## **Background and literature review**

According to recent research, Indigenous Australian societies practiced sophisticated agriculture, aquaculture and land management, including sustainably secured nourishing food from difficult ecologies (Pascoe, 2014). It has been estimated that "there are up to 5,000 native food species (almost 20% of Australia's native flora and fauna) that were utilised by the Aboriginal people" (SBS Food, n.d.). These extensive practices, developed over millennia, have resulted in a knowledge base and expertise on native foods and medicine that is of enormous value to present day Australians.

In recent decades, numerous efforts have been made to feature native foods in Australian cuisine. Beginning in the 1980s, with outback stereotypes such as Paul Hogan and Les Hiddens (the 'bush tucker man'), native

foods slowly evolved in the public consciousness from disrespect to slowly gaining attention and more sophisticated engagements (Cleary, 2013). Non-Indigenous celebrity chefs such as Jean-Paul Bruneteau, Andrew Fielke and Vic Cherikoff have been inspired by native ingredients and featured these in their dishes. More recently, Scottish-born celebrity chef, Jock Zonfrillo opened Orana Restaurant in Adelaide and challenged Australia and the world to embrace native ingredients as the true Australian cuisine, stating: “Our food celebrates post settlement Australia while cooking with respect to Country and the culture of the First Australians” (quoted in Welch, 2016: 31). Additionally, world renowned chef Rene Redzepi of Noma Restaurant in Copenhagen hosted a pop-up of ‘Noma in Sydney’ in early 2016 which created a fever pitch around native foods in Australia; it was held at the newly launched, prestige development at Barangaroo and supported by Tourism Australia (Thomsen, 2016). White (2014) noted that the use of native spices has created a bush tucker brand and built an identifiably Australian national cuisine that suggests that these efforts are, in part, directed at branding through commercial nationalism. The Noma pop-up in Sydney in 2016 supports White’s claim, and it is clear that Australian native foods are being embraced for branding and tourism marketing purposes.

Simultaneously, Indigenous chefs have made notable contributions and raised the profile of native foods. Rayleen Brown, co-founder of the catering business Kungkas Can Cook in Alice Springs, has been a leader in advocating the benefits available to Indigenous communities through the native foods industry. Similarly, Pat Torres from the Kimberley region of Western Australia has presented a television series called *Kriol Kitchen* and has been instrumental in forming the Indigenous Harvest Australian Co-operative to secure access to the native foods industry for Indigenous community benefit. Celebrity chef, Mark Olive presented the television series *Outback Café* and acted as an ambassador for native foods in Australian cuisine, recently appearing on the international road shows of Restaurants Australia. Thus, a number of Indigenous-led initiatives have been undertaken to build Indigenous opportunities, share Indigenous knowledge and foster respect (Sleath, 2015; Torres, 2010). Notably, some of these Aboriginal leaders responded to the Noma in Sydney event with developing a collaboration under the title ‘the Five Kungkas’ (kungkas being the word for women from the Pitjantjatjara language) and challenging Redzepi and his team to source some of his native ingredients from them rather than non-Indigenous distributors (see <http://5kungkas.com.au>).