

# BUSH TUCKER

By Sue Jackson

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My sister, Jude, and her partner, Brien, live on a bushland block farm, north of Bendigo, in the heart of Jaara Jaara country. Brien, a Jaara Elder, is an ex-park ranger and manager of Songline cultural tours.

Like so many people, I'm on a mission to make my inner-city garden water-wise and I'm also trying to grow more of my own food. And that's one reason why I'm lucky to be related to Brien. Because of course Aboriginal people have developed expertise over millennia at living in arid conditions and can identify and harvest food where others mightn't even know it exists.

Several years ago, while visiting Kakadu, I discovered a short trail where all the indigenous edible and medicinal plants were signposted. When you know what to look for and where to look, what initially seems to be arid bush land quickly reveals itself as an Aladdin's cave of goodies. Which is exactly what happens at Jude and Brien's.

Strolling around the property last spring, Brien pointed out what appeared to be a white coating of fungus on the leaves of one of the eucalypts. This substance, called lerp, is composed of tiny insects that discharge a honey dew to repel animals. I hesitantly accepted the lerp which Brien scraped off for me and was surprised at its sweetness - lerp certainly doesn't repel humans.

Next on the menu was chocolate lilies, which were entirely camouflaged amidst the native grasses. Brien knelt and delicately dug below the luscious

growth of a mildly chocolate-scented plant. Underneath were small tubers, which proved surprisingly crunchy and refreshing. Brien explained how his predecessors only ever harvested a limited number of the tubers, so that the plants remained strong and healthy, and productive for years to come. Try as I might, I found it impossible to spot the lilies, in a paddock where Brien had no trouble pointing out hundreds. He gave me some to plant at home, but so far I've had no success, though maybe I just can't see them.

I've had much greater success with indigenous spinach, also from the farm. This plant is supremely adaptable, shrinking when it's dry and expanding rapidly when the rains come. It is a great substitute for conventional spinach and makes a fabulous spanakopita.

The farm also has chickens, which produce wonderful eggs, guaranteed to impart a buttery lemon hue to any pancakes. The secret is the creeping, berried indigenous salt bush that proliferates all year round. It's not only humans who love bush tucker.

I always return from Jude and Brien's with a car full of goodies and a mind full of new ideas.