

WILD FOOD TOPS 'FOAM FAD'



Menu makers: Chef Athol Wark and his mentor Rayleen Brown.

BUSH TUCKER REDEFINED

Executive chef Athol Wark has catered to highly discerning palates in Europe, Japan and the United States. But when it comes to serving faddish plates of foam and molecules, he's not interested.

"Molecular cuisine undoubtedly has that 'wow' factor with its dry ice, gels and foams," says Wark.

"But I'm unconvinced that it's much more than small serves, reduced taste and exorbitant expense."

Today the 43-year-old works as an ambassador for Australian bush foods, surprising overseas diners with the likes of blackened Wakha Pukha Dukha-crusted salmon with a lemon myrtle aoli, followed by macadamia nut pavlova with wattle seed thickened cream.

"Thanks to Australia's Aboriginal people, we have the benefit of 60,000 years of ingredients, flavour and history.

Why bugger up a good flavour by turning it into a foam?"

Born in Zimbabwe, educated in South Africa and trained in Europe, Wark moved to Alice Springs in 2001 to start experimenting with native wild foods in anticipation of the Year of the Outback.

During that time, he came under the mentorship of Aboriginal woman, Rayleen Brown.

"At first I was using the likes of lemon myrtle, wattle seed and bush tomato as spices and rubs. But Rayleen taught me about process and how to properly utilise these ingredients. I learned that these foods have core values, that they have culture and integrity."

Wark has since served native Australian cuisine to guests in Fiji's five-star island resorts, to dignitaries such as John Howard, Emperor Akihito and George W Bush.

"I like to think food is a journey and that

you can taste the country in wild foods - which is why international audiences are so excited by them," says Wark.

Rayleen Brown is a mix of Nanggiwumerrri and Arrente. Based in Alice Springs, she is also the driving force behind Australia's largest indigenous catering group, Kungkas Can Cook.

"I met Athol when he was busy trying to change the perception that local chefs have of bush tucker," Brown says.

"And yes, I was surprised by him! I was surprised that a white man wanted to learn about what bush tucker means on a cultural level - but also that he was brave enough to get people enthusiastic for raw product."

But Brown says the exchange has gone both ways. "We work with kids from the communities, inviting them to come and work in my kitchen. And they get to meet and work alongside Athol - a professional chef who has served presidents!"

According to Brown, wild foods are yet to excite the domestic market as much as the international, but she and Wark envisage young ambassadors with knowledge of traditional wild foods taking messages and skills all around Australia.

"It's about getting more indigenous people trained up and referred into the hospitality industry," she says.

Wark and Brown believe wild foods are part of both the physical and the cultural landscape and, as such, are part of a story that is "rich, long-lasting and satisfying".

Which, as Wark says, "is more than can be said of a foam."

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