



# Beyond the barbie

Sarah Lang meets Vic Cherikoff, a man on a mission to take Australian food to the world

C ELEBRITY chef Vic Cherikoff's ponytail tosses and his grin widens as he proffers calamari with lemon-myrtle mayonnaise to Auckland Fish Market shoppers.

Tempted by the wafting aromas, they take a few more — "for, um, the kids".

The ambassador of the Australian native food industry — who's jetted from Sydney to Auckland as menu designer and master chef for transasman "spirit of mateship" celebration G'Day NZ Australia Week 2008 — explains it's the lemon-myrtle not the calamari that's the Australian food here.

But hang on, isn't Aussie food bush tucker, croc, "chuck another prawn on the barbie"?

"No. That bush tucker label's reflective of the culinary cringe the Australian media and public are still getting over."

But getting over it they are, as Australian cuisine gets a makeover.

As well as his pioneering work in the commercialisation of indigenous plants, industry building and export facilitation, Cherikoff's been credited for almost single-handedly getting Australians excited about ingredients from their own backyard.

The 52-year-old's sea-blue eyes light up as he describes a vision well on its way to fruition: not new indigenous food-themed restaurants to rival Australia's hundreds of Mediterranean and fine-dining restaurants, but inspiring chefs in existing restaurants — as well as adventurous foodies — to add a twist to their dishes using wild, indigenous ingredients.

Think herbs, fruits, spices, seeds, nuts, sauces, syrups, tubers, oils and more with names like wattleseed, forest anise, quandong, lemon myrtle, gumleaf oil.

"You will taste the country in this food," he says. "It's clean, intense, it's got an edge to it."

He should know. In 1983 the young scientist was employed by the University of Sydney's human nutrition unit to analyse the nutritional content of hundreds of wild native foods, the first major study of its kind.

Soliciting Aboriginal access and knowledge, for six years Cherikoff trekked the country's woodlands, rainforests, outback, deserts and coast. After six months, with no space left in the lab fridges, he started trying the

ingredients in home-cooked dishes and selling some to a Sydney restaurant.

Vic Cherikoff Food Services now exports plantation-grown, organic native foods as well as wild-harvested ingredients into 28 countries and to countless chefs, manufacturers and (mostly online) shoppers.

Cherikoff also hosts and produces TV show *Dining Downunder*, which after several seasons on national television now airs globally on online TV Joost. The series inspired the popular *Dining Downunder* cookbook, the fourth of Cherikoff's native-food books.

He also travels worldwide lecturing and promoting Australian cuisine at trade shows and food festivals. And he's never too busy for his 12-year-established native food courses for Aussie chefs, using a food-science perspective of the physiology of taste, timing and flavour balance.

Ex-trainees are now whipping up indigenous Australian fare everywhere from Iceland to Kazakhstan.

But this down-to-earth cobber hasn't forgotten who gave him a leg up on the ladder of success. The Aboriginal communities with whom he's forged close bonds and who have "shared their knowledge so freely" are involved right throughout the supply chain from harvesting to their own entrepreneurial businesses.

An evangelist for protecting biodiversity, Cherikoff has bolstered farmers' bank accounts and the regeneration of the native environment as millions of cleared, drought-eroded acres have been redirected to harvesting native ingredients.

So how would he describe himself: chef, scientist, teacher, TV host, entrepreneur, environmentalist? "Passionate foodie!"

His taste buds have been in training since he could swallow. Influenced by the culinary traditions of their Russian and Polish heritage, his parents (who ran a Sydney cake shop) and his

mother's aunt whipped up weekend feasts "from all cuisines with unusual dishes like ducks' feet".

As a teen he often bushwalked the Blue Mountains, experimenting with taste-and-spit wild food foraging. Then, "to really understand what I was eating", he completed a Bachelor of Applied Science with a triple major in environmental biology, biochemistry and industrial microbiology.

Next was six years working in a University of New South Wales clinical pharmacology team, which helped changed understanding of the development of Parkinson's disease and schizophrenia.

But he couldn't stay away from his "lifelong passion" for native food. He and John Millward, of New Zealand native food endorsement company Great Taste NZ, are promoting Australasian food with the Great Taste Downunder concept to international hospitality and retail markets, and working to develop and bring untapped native New Zealand foods on to the market.

Meanwhile, Millward has 30 Kiwi chefs, including Peter Gordon, using Cherikoff ingredients. And New Zealand shoppers can now pick up Cherikoff seasonings, sauces, splashes (infused oils), and fruit confits at selected specialty food stores and some supermarkets. (For further ingredients, recipes and tips, see [www.cherikoff.net](http://www.cherikoff.net) and [www.dining-downunder.com](http://www.dining-downunder.com).)

With another 20 food species and a medicines range to introduce, Cherikoff's not planning to slow down any time soon.

"I'm a lucky guy. Twenty-five years after native food first fell into my lap I'm as passionate about it as ever."

● G'Day NZ Australia Week 2008 is running a series of events around Auckland from April 24-May 2, concluding with the Rosemount Great Australian Lunch at the Auckland Viaduct. For information go to [www.australiaweek.co.nz](http://www.australiaweek.co.nz).

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