

# NATIVE



# TITLE

The Kakadu plum has been harvested by First Nations people for tens of thousands of years across northern Australia. Now the burgeoning industry is being shaped on country by Indigenous-led businesses, writes ALECIA WOOD.



**K**abinyn. Madoor. Kerewey. Murunga. Gubinge. The many Indigenous language terms for the native fruit, most commonly known as the Kakadu plum in English, reflect the epic spread of its wild-growing trees, stretching from the Dampier Peninsula in Western Australia along the Northern Territory coastline and into far north Queensland.

There may be steadily growing interest in Australian native ingredients, but the tart, green Kakadu plum (*Terminalia ferdinandiana*) has seen particular attention thanks to its crowning as one of the world's most potent natural sources of vitamin C. To fight off the common cold, many will reach for an immune boost by way of oranges; the size of a walnut, the Kakadu plum boasts 50 times more vitamin C than that humble citrus.

The mid 2000s saw an international patent application for Kakadu plum extract by cosmetics giant Mary Kay; the American company had been adding it to their TimeWise range as a skin-repairing antioxidant. The patent was rejected within Australia following challenges from the Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation.

Biopiracy – patents or intellectual property control based on biological resources and/or traditional knowledge, extracted without suitable consent or benefit-sharing, often from Indigenous communities – is nothing new, but this case highlighted a risk for the coveted Kakadu plum and broader concerns for ensuring Indigenous Australians' traditional knowledge is protected and benefits its owners if used.

“We’re always thinking about how this can benefit people on the ground in our region and the people that belong to this fruit,” says Jacinta Monck, >



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who co-owns Kimberley Wild Gubinge with her husband and business partner Lenny O’Meara, an Aboriginal man with Bardi/Kija heritage from the Kimberley region. “We believe the only way, which is why we created our business, is that it’s got to be on country. It has to be in the place where the full cycle of processing, right up to retail, is happening where it grows [for there] to be profit and employment locally.”

Based in Western Australia’s Kimberley region, the Indigenous-owned company handpicks fresh Kakadu plums each year – the season runs from January to February in Western Australia, and March to May in the Northern Territory – with their own team of harvesters made up of O’Meara’s family members. “There are options to go and get backpackers; we’ve decided not to. This is totally for people who live here to do. This is their home.”

The fruit is air-dried at a low temperature, then milled to a fine powder for adding a tangy flavour and vitamin C boost to water, smoothies or yoghurt.

Monck explains they save seeds from the fruit’s processing to replant in the specific areas they were harvested, to support the Eucalypt woodlands where the Kakadu plum grows and natural variations in the wild plant: “Some are a beautiful, big, sweet-tasting fruit, then you get others that are more wonky-shaped and bitter, and smaller ones that are ‘wow’ tart. At the end of the line, we have to look after the country, those trees and all of that biodiversity. It’s the number one thing.”

A recent industry survey indicated that Indigenous Australians represent just one per cent of the native food products supply chain. “In the past, we were not included in the conversation,” says Pat Torres, who has family

connections to Djugun, Yawuru, Nyul Nyul, Bard and Jabirr Jabirr peoples, and owns Broome-based native foods business Mayi Harvests. “It’s only because Aboriginal people are coming to the forefront and having our say, so our voices are being heard now.” Producing frozen Kakadu plums and a powder, Torres’s company is a member of the Northern Australia Aboriginal Kakadu Plum Alliance (NAAKPA) – a consortium of Aboriginal-owned enterprises that are ethically harvesting and processing Kakadu plums.

Launched in 2018 by the Indigenous Land & Sea Corporation, NAAKPA funds and supports the development of an Aboriginal-led Kakadu plum industry with an eye on connecting suppliers directly with buyers to ensure transparency. “This is our heritage. This is our knowledge area and we need to be fully engaged in it,” says Torres, explaining that building infrastructure in the remote regions that members operate in, plus educating on sustainable harvesting methods, are key. For example, picking fruit in smaller quantities over a longer period of time supports local wildlife and habitats. “We have to remember that the gubinge is being eaten by animals and insects, too – bees, butterflies, wasps. Humans are just one part of that ecosystem.”

Torres plans to plant Kakadu plum trees on her own small farm, creating a way to apply harvesting and land care knowledge closer to home while revitalising the traditional, local language and food ways. “We’re a new industry based on old, traditional foods. We’re still growing and learning ... You’ve got worldwide interest, you’ve got Australian businesses getting into it, and Indigenous people want to have a share of it,” she says. “Bush foods are our way of building a future.” ●

## INDIGENOUS-OWNED FOOD BUSINESSES AROUND AUSTRALIA

### Mabu Mabu

Named after the Torres Strait saying for “help yourself”, this Melbourne café and catering company has its own line of native-ingredient-based pantry goods. Owned by chef Nornie Bero, who’s from Mer Island in the Torres Strait, the café serves dishes like seared kingfish with lemon aspen and saltbush chimichurri. Shop online for its wattleseed hot chocolate or saltbush damper-making kit. [mabumabu.com.au](http://mabumabu.com.au)



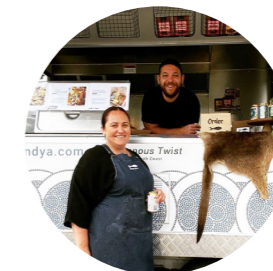
### Sobah

Pepperberry IPA, Davidson plum ale, aniseed myrtle stout. Not only are these beers infused with native ingredients, they’re also alcohol-free. Launched by wife-and-husband duo Lozen and Clinton Schultz, a Gamilaroi man, this Gold Coast-based brewer aims to tackle the stigma of socialising without alcohol while fostering cultural awareness through Aboriginal arts and language. [sobah.com.au](http://sobah.com.au)



### Something Wild

Whether it’s wallaby salami, green ant gin, kangaroo-saltbush meatballs or quandong yoghurt, Something Wild offers a range of wild game meat and native ingredient products. Headed up by Larrakia man Daniel Motlop in South Australia, the family business is focused on ethical cultural and environmental practices – that means working directly with Indigenous harvesters and communities to create economic opportunities. They have a stall at Adelaide Central Market, and an online shop. [somethingwild.com.au](http://somethingwild.com.au)



### Mirritya Mundy

Yuin man Dwayne Bannon-Harrison and his wife Amelia founded this food truck, catering and food tour business, based on the New South Wales South Coast, with the aim of sharing cultural knowledge through food experiences. Keep an eye out for their pop-up dinners, serving dishes like smoked whole baby snapper in paper bark with lemon myrtle, and slow-cooked spiced beef brisket with Davidson’s plum sauce. [mmundy.com](http://mmundy.com)



### IndigiGrow

Founded by Bidjigal man Peter Cooley, this social enterprise runs educational and training programs to sustain Indigenous Australian culture through the propagation of native plants. Based in suburban Sydney, their nursery operates a storefront and online shop stocking plants and seeds for growing a range of native ingredients, including yellow elderberry, powderpuff lilly pilly and murnong or yam daisy. [indigigrow.com.au](http://indigigrow.com.au)