GOLD NUGGET

Early Food Cultivation in Australia May Be Your Future

Bruce Pascoe's book *Dark Emu*, which took out Book of the Year in 2016 NSW Premier's Literary Awards, is a thesis that challenges the generally accepted theory of Australian Aborigines as solely hunter-gatherer societies. Its premise is simple — that the original inhabitants of this land were also farmers, cultivating crops that made best use of what the natural environment had to offer.

"I'm talking about plants that don't need water, plants that are adapted to Australian conditions that don't need superphosphates, that don't need pesticides," Bruce says. "Most of the grains grow with no more moisture than the country can provide. "We've already ground some into flour and baked some bread out of some of them — albeit with mixed success."

In an era where food security is constantly being challenged by a changing climate, the effect of these discoveries is far-reaching. One plant that Bruce says has multiple benefits for farmers is myrnnong (aka Murnong) or yam daisy. "Chefs have already picked it up — they drive us mad with requests for it but we can't supply enough of it because we're experimenting ourselves," he says.

The Yam Daisy is the standout in Victorian edible indigenous plants. It was the starchy staple of the Victorian Koorie population and early settlers report to seeing fields full of the yellow flowered perennial herb with amass of Koorie woman and children harvesting the plump roots with digging sticks. Unfortunately the above ground leafy foliage was highly attractive to the first introduced grazing animals and this essentially caused the demise of the Murnong.

"What we've discovered is where you grow this yam the soil is better. "One of the first settlers in the Western District of Victoria reported that yam was growing through moss and that when the sheep ate the moss and the yam, the dews in that area ceased. "Overnight, the soil conditions began to change and within nine months the soil had become compacted and hard and he started to get run-off and erosion where he could once have run his fingers through the soil it was that light. That's a really important bit of science for us."

He says kangaroo grass is another plant with unacknowledged potential. "It's terribly hard to get flour out of it, but the thing about kangaroo grass is that it is prolific and every farmer has got it in one form or another," Bruce says. "If they were able to crop it to get the grain off, they'll still have the plant because it's a perennial, so their sheep and cows could use it as fodder and it'll come again the following year as soon as it rains." "How could Australia have missed this information about Aboriginal agriculture? ..this information should help every Australian be proud of all of our history rather than ashamed of Aboriginal people — there's no shame in it." The value of these discoveries to young members of the indigenous community, says Bruce, cannot be over-estimated. "This heritage of achievement is an opportunity for Aboriginal people to have more pride in their culture — to know that it's not natural for black fellas not to work, it's not natural for black fellas to waste their lives — because we used to work hard, we were inventive, we were productive."

So Bruce has a red hot plan to resurrect this almost extinct food plant by launching an online campaign called Gurandgi Munjie to raise $25,000 to plant a commercial crop of daisy yams to be grown by aboriginal men, initiated in lore, and to be sold to top Australian restaurants. The program is part of a groundswell of food-led reconciliation where indigenous Australian traditions and ideas are being adopted by high-profile chefs, both in Australia and around the world and it's going beyond token usage of bush foods.

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