



Dale Chapman with indigenous fruits at her Brisbane office. Picture: Lyndon Mechielsen

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NICOLA BERKOVIC

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As a four-year-old, Dale Chapman would sit around the fire with her parents and five sisters and help prepare kangaroo-tail soup, damper and johnny cakes — a traditional cross between a pancake and a scone. It fostered a lifelong love of food.

These days, Chapman is co-owner of a successful indigenous business, First Food Co, which produces relishes, jams, spices, teas and even soap, using bush ingredients.

Born in Dirranbandi, in southwest Queensland, Chapman qualified as a chef after leaving high school and started her first apprenticeship at the Greek Club in Brisbane. But in 2000, she turned her talents to bush food.

It was a journey of discovery for herself and a process of educating her own people and the wider public about the wonders of native Australian plants, many of which are nutrient-rich and have healing properties.

She said knowledge about those ingredients had begun to disappear because Aboriginal people were not encouraged to use their own foods or practise their culture.

“We all knew about dancing and art but no one knew what actually sustained our people,” she told *The Australian*, stirring mushroom soup at First Food Co’s premises in Brisbane. “When I first started (in the bush foods industry), no one really wanted to know about it. Now we’re getting calls from all over.”

Chapman was one of 33 people selected to take part in the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation program, a 15-month program aimed at building the skills, networks and capabilities of leaders from rural communities.

She recently returned from two weeks with other participants in the Kimberley, where she gained an appreciation that it was acceptable to be vulnerable and ask others for help.

At 55, she is still on a personal learning curve and is hoping to use her new-found skills to benefit the wider bush foods industry.

For the past 17 years she has worked with indigenous communities and farmers to build a steady supply of ingredients such as wattle seeds, which have a low glycaemic index and taste a little like coffee, and lilli pillies, which are used to colour cordials and jams and add a cinnamon and ginger-type flavour — as well as lemon myrtle, Davidson plums and finger limes.

She has also helped to develop technologies to produce powdered and freeze-dried bush ingredients that can be used in foods, beverages and medicines.

Her business is gaining international recognition. In 2016, it supplied international restaurant Noma’s Sydney pop-up with bush food. And when the Commonwealth Games kicks off on the Gold Coast next April, visitors will be able to buy products from First Food Co, which is an official supplier of merchandise for the Games.