I think that's what we all should be aiming for. It is difficult because we do have very efficient transport in Australia and it is possible to get a gorgeous mango picked in its prime and delivered to Melbourne. And I couldn't bring myself to say that one should never eat such a thing. But that is different from having asparagus flown in from California so that it's available in the middle of winter. I think regional cooking, and using what is to hand, is the way to go. If we cooked more in tune with the weather, it would be fantastic, and this is how the regional richness of other countries has developed, with people responding to landscape, climate, their own lifestyle.

It's not going to happen in a minute because we are a very derived culture, but I think this is the way things will go, and you'll find a person running a house in Wagga cooking very different things from someone in Fremantle. It worries me that glossy magazines suggest that we should all, wherever we are, rush out and buy fresh coriander (I'm not talking about growing it at home here).

Moving to the question of indigenous or native food, I would like to raise the spectre of the macadamia nut. You point out that these are more popular in the United States than in Australia. Are white Australians still very conservative about the use of such foods, to the extent that using grevillea in a dessert seems more exotic than decorating a sponge with geranium?

A year or so ago the use of native food was an issue and was taken up by writers in every type of journal. But at the back of all this I could hear a sneer, which I thought was totally unnecessary. These are interesting resources which are available to some of us. It does make sense to me at least to look at these foodstuffs. So yes, the majority of us are very conservative. Also we have been used to extremely refined foods, and the taste of a lot of bush food is very intense, so a little will give a very strong reaction which does not seem appealing at first to those used to a bland diet. Some, such as bunya nuts, which we use a lot, are instantly pleasurable to any food-loving person and strike a chord with other things in our diet to which we can relate them.
It's important in making people realise that this is not a totally barren environment, and that Aboriginal people have lived well on these foods for a long time.

Yet you also express some concern that a fad might be developing in relation to such plants, and animals, and that they might be depleted by this.

I think those who are interested in making kangaroo commercially available, or in proposing agricultural systems based on indigenous plants are very aware of this obvious criticism, and I don't think there's any wanton raping of the bush going on. Also, some Aboriginal communities I visited are very keen to use these things which they know well as a commercial resource and to overcome social dislocation through controlled industry.

How did you develop your passion for food?

I had a very unusual childhood in that my mother, who was a very good cook, was also very interested in food as an expression of culture. She would accompany a meal with information about food in a social context, for instance, with a Japanese meal she would describe rituals associated with a particular dish. I believe that this has given me an understanding that food was not just something that you stuck in your mouth. This was a great advantage to me.

I didn't know that I knew so much about food from Europe and Asia. I loved food and all sorts of things that seemed to be involved in it, like art and gardening. It was like mother's milk to me, and when I travelled I took a view of the world with me which developed from this. Yes, I'd visit churches and museums all around the world with me which developed from this. Yes, I'd visit churches and museums all around the world which developed me, and when I travelled I took a view of the world with me. I took it with me. I was only interested in food as an expression of culture. It was like mother's milk to me, and when I travelled I took a view of the world with me which developed from this. Yes, I'd visit churches and museums all around the world. I visited many places and I loved to see the young ones in the kitchen trying to replicate absolutely everything I do, down to the arrangement of the plate. I never worry that a meal will go, because there'll be another one there. It's still there in my head for another time.

Food is still not seen as a matter for deep thought or discussion in this country, is it? I don't mean that it should be regarded as grimly serious, but that it should be taken seriously. Some people think that a journal of ideas shouldn't contain a cooking column, for example.

I couldn't agree with you more, and it's tragic. It's necessary to keep saying that food is of essential importance to life. There are commentators around who find it trivial to admit an interest in food, and who refuse to deal in such 'non-political' matters. I consider that the types of issues raised around food are absolutely critical, and vitally important to our culture.

Do you think that your recognition as Australia's best chef has changed the position of women in the industry?

I hope so. It's not a calculated thing, but it's a fact that we have more women in the kitchen here than men these days. I am a feminist, and I believe that when women are good they're very good. Feminism shouldn't downgrade the role of the kitchen, as it's a way of passing on culture through a nurturing role. Obviously, the load should be shared, but the rituals associated with food should not be belittled.

Is it at all frustrating to work with food, in that the best meal you could ever prepare lasts only a short time, whereas a painter, for example, creates something permanent?

It doesn't frustrate me; I accept the nature of the art form in which I work. I do see many parallels with painters in the work I do, even if it sounds a little pretentious to say so. I feel a little like Cezanne, who painted Mont Saint-Victoire fifty times, in slightly different ways. I think of approaching something slightly differently each time. I don't like to see the young ones in the kitchen trying to replicate absolutely everything I do, down to the arrangement of the plate. I never worry that a meal will go, because there'll be another one there. It's still there in my head for another time.

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Penelope Cottier is ALR's culinary conscience.