

Tuesday 02/07/24 - Siri Omberg about wild orange.

Siri - My initial introduction to wild orange was heading out bush with Peter Latz and he plucked a fruit and offered me a bite. It smelt and tasted just like kerosene. Let alone all the ants that were crawling around in it. I turned my face away spat out what I had in my mouth and continued to watch absolutely astounded as he polished off the remains of the fruit and claimed to like it!

Me – OK!

Siri – What happened from that eventually was I think Peter probably suggested it would be a great fruit to make ice cream. I was already into a bit of an ice cream production with my mulberry trees, lemon trees and orange trees and so we experimented. The most difficult thing really was to find a ripe orange that wasn't completely infested with grubs or swarming with ants. In this photograph, I'm showing you there's pure looking beautiful wild orange and some seasons seem to be much better than others. The biggest stash I collected was when I had a car full of aboriginal women and we were driving to Glen Helen, they spotted trees I never would've spotted. We stopped the car every time they spotted a tree, and we came home with buckets and buckets and buckets of them.

Me – Do they ripen off the tree?

Siri – A little bit...actually I *would* wait for some by putting them in a bowl with bananas. A typical kind of thing to help ripen them quickly. But that is one of the largest most beautiful fruits I've ever seen (showing a photo on her iPad), so both halves almost take up the entire palm of my hand. That was a very beautiful one! So, I would scoop out the inside of the fruit and put it into a saucepan with a sugar syrup (not too thick) and bring it to the boil and simmer for a little while, maybe 20 minutes. The pulp was then put through a very fine sieve, and I collected all the juices. That would go into the freezer and some later stage I would put the frozen juice along with double cream into a food processor, wizz up and it was really the most beautiful flavour. It had completely lost the kerosene taste. It became a favourite with people who really knew the bush, people were really fascinated to find out if it could taste good!

Me – So when you say the juice, do you mean the pulp as well?

Siri – No, I would press as much of the juice through a fine metal sieve as possible, not the seeds or fibrous pulp. It was a cloudy mixture, rather than a clear mixture.

Me – Do you think the initial kerosene flavour that you tasted, was because the fruit was unripe or is that part of the flavour?

Siri – Its part of the natural flavour, it's an extraordinary flavour that seems to completely vanish. Something else happens when sugar and cream are added. But then a lot of things taste good with sugar and cream added to them!

So, I have become very fond of those trees, and I have had huge adventures looking for them. Australia Day was always a marker because generally I don't know when birds arrive, or when a season arrives. Seasons in the central desert are so varied and dependent on when rain comes. You look forward to the rain as you know there's going to be a lot of grass growing. Then there will be seeds growing on the grasses, which brings the budgies. The seeds will also bring the mice and then the mice will bring the black shouldered kites.

Me – A lovely chain of events to witness.

Siri - When we get rain here, often you'll be driving along the highway and suddenly the windscreen visibility disappears as you drive through a downpour and two minutes later, you're out of it again. So, the little pockets of rain have enabled the trees to ripen at different times. The wild orange here will ripen and another one only a hundred yards down the road will have unripened fruit. You'll find that it is a common occurrence that the fruit on a tree doesn't ripen at the same time. Peter Latz explained that as being a defensive mechanism. People, little possums, and all sorts of other little creatures that don't even exist here anymore, because of feral populations ate the wild orange. There were a range of creatures that would eat them. What I *also* love is that the wild orange and the caper bush have almost identical flowers.

Me – And they are gorgeous flowers!

Siri – Yes and the fruit of the caper bush is delicious. I gradually got to know the plant, and I never really expected that that the little blob on the top, that little stamen was going to end up by being the fruit!

Me – Yeah usually it's the base of the flower that forms the fruit, isn't it?

Siri – Yeah, I think it is...and the same goes for the wild caper. The caper bush is generally swarming with ants. They are spectacular and they instantly taste good and there are little black seeds all through it, when you bite on them, they are the hottest pepper flavour. That's when you must sometimes spit it out! I once saved up all the seeds in my mouth while I was eating the rest of the fruit and then gone crunching, crunch, crunch, crunch and then so *hot - oh my throat!*

Me - With the wild orange, have you tried to cultivate one or do you just prefer just to go out into the landscape?

Siri - I prefer to go out into the landscape. I know that you can buy seedlings of the caper bush, I have tried cultivating its growing in my garden. They are funny little plants because the caper butterfly comes along, leaves their cocoons and the caterpillars totally strip the whole plant. But the first time I had these plants at my house in Mueller Street when they were stripped, I thought they were dead and pulled them out. Now I know that they grow back! But here I have planted three, if they have got a bit of shade in the beginning they grow well and produce fruit. But I don't know that I've ever seen a cultivated wild orange. Maybe you could ring Geoff Miers and ask him.

Me – This is a kind of paddock to plate relationship that you have described. Is there any other facet to your relationship to wild orange?

Siri - Yes, I like that. But I liked to hear from a few of the aboriginal women when we were at the Ewaninga rock engravings. We were all up on the platform looking. There was a huge wild orange tree there and I asked somebody (Margie or one of the women from titjikala) if they still eat them, and they kind of screwed up their noses. "Oh no, we've got bananas, oranges and apples and fruit like that". So obviously that sweetness factor is attractive. Because most of our fruit is sweet, and probably bred for sweetness. They kind of dropped the wild orange.

Me - But it would be interesting to see whether a food analysis has been done on the health benefits of wild orange. Some of those stronger tasting flavoured plants and especially bitter flavours are associated with health benefits.

Siri – I am not sure about its health benefits.

Me – Thanks for talking with me Siri!