



A truly local brew to slake our patriotism



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AS you fire up the barbie on Monday, you'll probably be thirsty. You might be feeling a tad patriotic, too. So the question is: what's the quintessential Australian drink?

If you're a wine-lover, there are many answers. Crisp white semillon from the Hunter Valley; luscious muscat from Rutherglen — loads of distinctive Australian classic wines.

Distinctive — but uniquely Australian? After all, wine is produced from a plant — the grapevine — that was cultivated for millennia across Europe before arriving here only 200 years or so ago. It's the same story with beer, made from introduced grains and hops. As good as Australian wines and beers undoubtedly are, you could argue that they are local versions of traditional European drinks.

So here's another question: are there any truly unique Australian drinks — drinks that predate wine and beer? The answer is yes.

Like many, I suspect, I thought that producing and consuming alcohol did not occur in traditional Aboriginal culture. Then I heard about Tasmania's Miena cider gums, an endangered species of eucalypt endemic to the island's Central Plateau. There are historical and contemporary accounts of the honey-like sap of this tree being tapped,

collected, and allowed to ferment naturally to form a kind of light beer-strength gum "mead" drunk during corroboree.

This discovery sent me off on a journey that is revealing other instances of ancient indigenous drinks — most of which were highly seasonal concoctions strongly associated with ceremony.

Australian National University social anthropologist Maggie Brady writes about alcohol

and Aboriginal communities. In her 2008 educational publication, *First Taste* (\$22, fare.org.au), she describes a fermented drink called mangaitch, made from banksia nectar in south-western Australia, and a Northern Territory drink called kambuda, fermented from roasted, crushed and soaked pandanus nuts.

And the other day I talked to Bruce Pascoe, author of *Dark Emu, Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* (\$35, Magabala Books), a remarkable book about indigenous farming that demolishes the myth of pre-colonial Aboriginal Australians as mere hunter-gatherers. Bruce told me about the enormous quantity of nectar exuded from the banksias that flower every three years in his part of east Gippsland: each bloom, he said, yields enough delicious "honey" to fill a Vegemite jar.

I asked Bruce if anyone had ever fermented this banksia nectar. "Aboriginal people," he said. "A lot of plants were used like that. Many flowers were used to make slightly fermented drinks."

You can't go out and buy these drinks, of course. Fermenting the nectar of a plant that only flowers once every three years — or the sap of an endangered eucalypt — is hardly a commercial proposition. But I'm now obsessed with the idea of making — and tasting — one of these drinks myself. And I've realised that the big sprawling tree in my neighbour's front yard is a banksia ...

darkemu.wordpress.com

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