

biota

GROW. GATHER. COOK.

JAMES VILES



This book is for all cooks.

It's ok to lose your way: sometimes it's needed.

For my beautiful family: Polly, Harriet and Henry.

You make me a better cook.



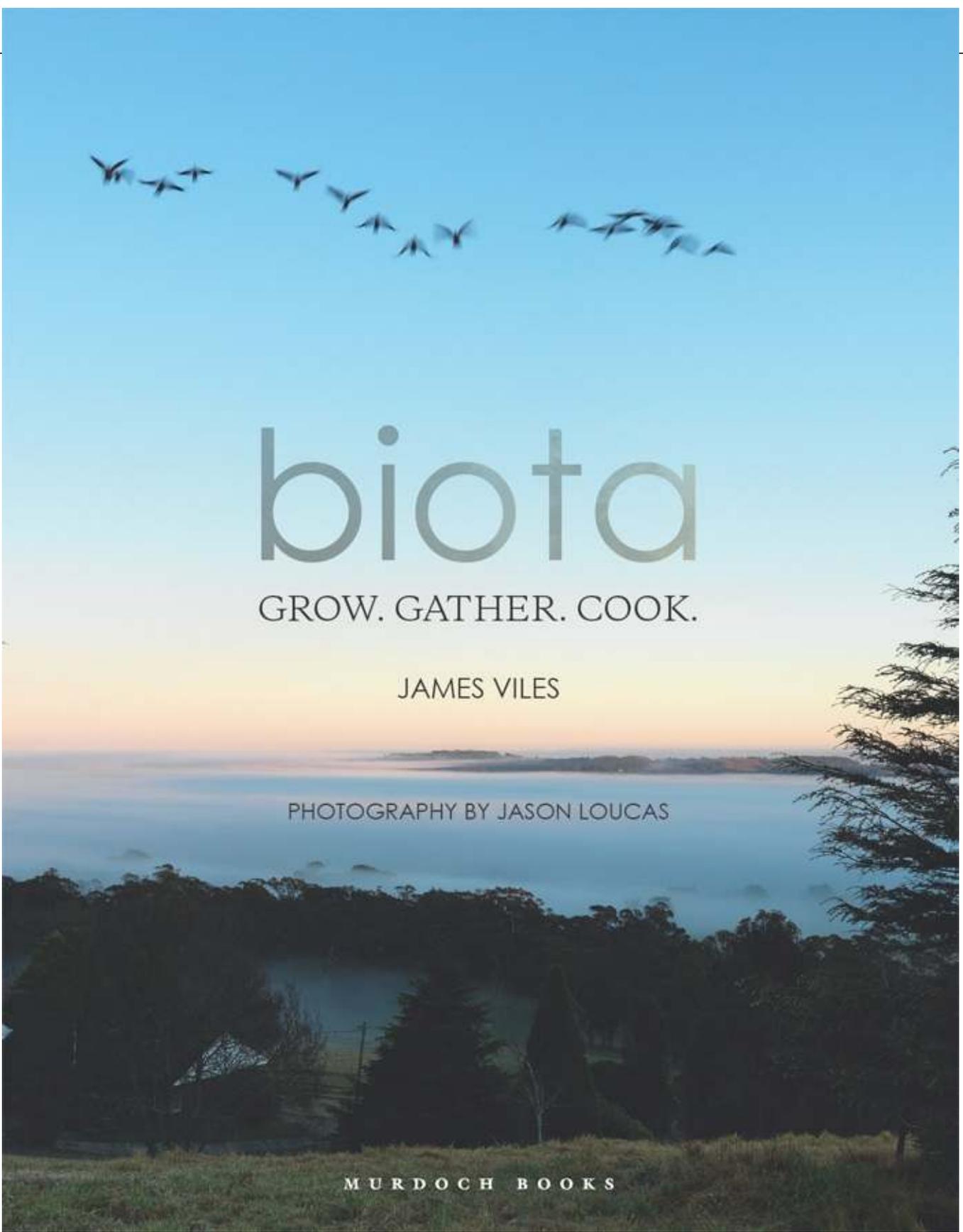
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MURDOCH BOOKS





# Contents

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Cover

Title

Foreword - Peter Gilmore

A journey - James Viles

A meal with James - Josh Evans

How to use this book

Simple recipes

Garden

Farm

Forest

Glossary

The people of Biota

Index

Acknowledgements

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# Foreword

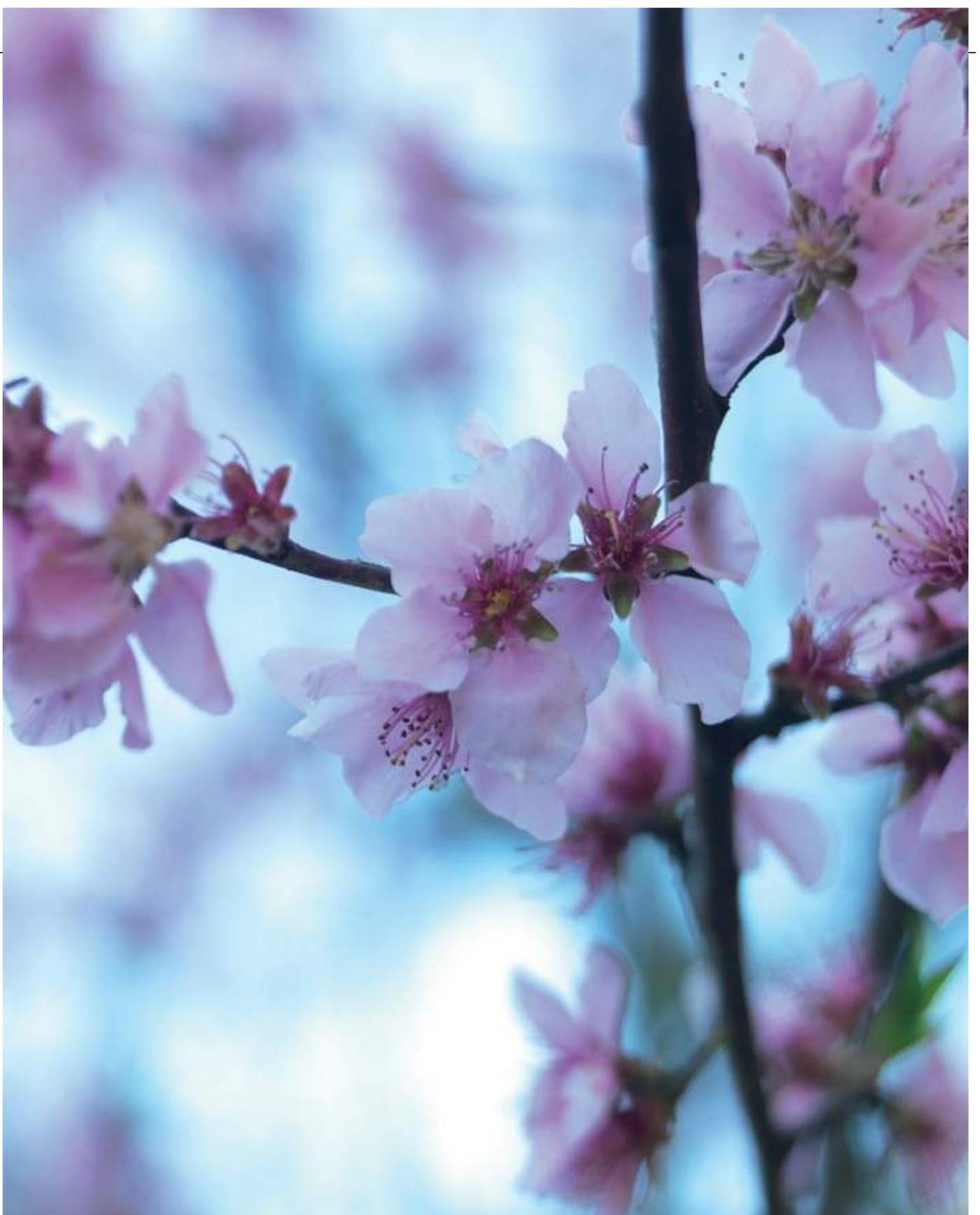
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Peter Gilmore, Executive Chef, Quay and Bennelong restaurants, Sydney

In many ways James Viles is a man after my own heart. His interest in the sheer diversity that nature offers the chef and his passion for growing his own produce have shaped and informed the way James approaches his cuisine at Biota Dining.

James cooks in a very modern way and over the last four years he has developed a personal style that truly embraces and reflects his local environment. James has built genuine relationships with local farmers and producers and these have become an integral part of his cuisine; the evidence of this bears fruit on his menus.

This book represents James' passion for his region and documents his commitment to hunt and gather, grow and cultivate from his environment to create a truly regional cuisine.





# A journey

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James Viles

What is biota? Not just the restaurant – biota is the plant and animal life of a region, our region. To me, biota is a notion, a philosophy that guides us towards mother nature and helps us create from our local farms, forests and gardens. We find ourselves making the most of every ingredient. To some this would be called a sustainable approach; to us it's just a way of life.

But it didn't start like that for me. At the age of 24 I was fresh into a restaurant in Bowral in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales, a small town 690 metres above sea level with a yet-to-be-discovered diverse microclimate. I thought I had found the food that I wanted to cook, food that was pretty damned special – when in fact, what I was cooking was food with no home and no heart. I was working among a bounty of streams, wild meat, weeds and lush roadside fruit, in a region that was untouched, raw and ready and I didn't even know it. I don't remember visiting, talking to and learning from the surrounding farms. I bought meat from local butcher, but I didn't ask where it was from. I certainly don't remember asking what breed it was and what it was fed or for how long. I didn't know that the oxalis growing in the cobbled steps outside the kitchen door was one of the most beautiful weeds I could find; I didn't even notice its tiny yellow flowers come to life for six weeks of the year. So what happened?

I went away, like many chefs. But I didn't go to Europe and work in the best Michelin kitchens; I went to the Middle East, to Dubai. I was an eager young guy from the country and ready to see and experience everything I could, and I did just that. I took a position as chef de cuisine of a 500-room hotel that had over 200 chefs. I had never seen so many different nationalities, so many different restaurants and cuisines in one place. The hotel was like its own little city. I suddenly found myself running one of the top western-style restaurants in the Middle East. It was two levels of pure excess – 30 chefs for 60 seats, the same in floor staff and me with my own office. Now why the hell does a 25-year-old chef who should be cooking need an office? I found that out very quickly – I would sit, 50 floors high in the Arabian sky, ordering duck foie gras from France and goose foie gras from Morocco, branded caviar from Russia, seafood from New Zealand, beef from Argentina, Australia and the USA, fruit from Syria, lamb from Pakistan and vegetables from France – all to the sound of the lunch service. For two years I learned the politics of running a hotel kitchen; I cooked tastings for already well-fed hotel executives; I made sure my uniform was pristine and that I looked the part. I was young and it was all new.

'I found myself driving and looking at the side of the road more than the road itself, hoping to see the young shoots of wild fennel or red stem dandelion. The more I looked the more I found.'

Then I took on a role as executive chef of a five-star hotel in Oman. When I got there, a cyclone had just ripped through the city of Muscat and the hotel had to be closed down for five months for rebuilding. I have never felt so far out of my depth. I had 110 chefs waiting to come back to work and five restaurants to rebuild and refit. I had bitten off way more than I could chew, but I chewed like buggery and we opened. And the same thing happened: I wore a chef's uniform and looked like a chef, but I didn't cook; I didn't even touch the food I was ordering; sometimes I didn't even know if it had come in. Two years later, I was extremely well versed in supply chain logistics, menu engineering and the running of a large multi-national kitchen, but I had an itch.

So, I had experienced a small local restaurant with five staff, and a kitchen in the Middle East that made Las Vegas feel organic. I had a choice to make. I missed the country, I missed the smells, I missed Australia and I missed the freedom to be myself. I was more mature and I had purpose, something that I had never had before. I walked around this property in Bowral with my father, and he kept saying, 'Do you think we could make this something special?' My senses were alive: there were blackberries, dandelions, ducks, water, honeysuckle, snakes, sorrel and clovers; the air was clean, the grounds were lush, although somewhat wild, my heart was alive and I was excited. I found myself asking questions: what is this, is it edible, how can I use it? I was hungry for answers. I met local growers and farmers and they inspired me; I went into the woods and there were deer to watch and mushrooms to pick from the forest floor; I gathered lavender, wood sorrel, fiddle fern and oily pine needles. I found myself driving and looking at the side of the road more than the road itself, hoping to see the young shoots of wild fennel or red-stem dandelion. The more I looked the more I found.

Finally, it was making sense; the ingredients and the food had found me when I wasn't looking. I was just aware of my surrounds and all I had to do was join the dots and do things with integrity. I started asking, what is produce to a chef? Is produce the same as ingredients? What is the difference between a cook and a chef? I can only say what I think, but the reality of produce versus ingredients is simple to me: produce belongs to the producers, the farmers and growers who invest blood, sweat and tears in what they believe; ultimately that belongs to mother nature. Ingredients, on the other hand, belong to us, the cooks. We cook the ingredients that belong to the environment, the producers and the growers. As cooks we have a responsibility to treat the ingredients with good intent, and try to tell beautiful stories of the habitat, connection and the producers.

This might sound very simple, but we are all at the mercy of mother nature in everything we do; she is one variable that cannot be tamed. So why waste any of our time trying to change her? Why waste energy trying to make tomatoes grow

for two months longer? Or try to pick saffron milk caps in the forest in summer?  
~~We need to teach ourselves to be patient, be happy with what's on offer and use it~~  
to our best abilities.

'If we, as cooks, set ourselves boundaries, a series of borders, and train our  
hearts and minds to ask each other questions, we might just end up with a  
plate of food that makes sense.'





If we, as cooks, set ourselves boundaries, a series of borders, and train our hearts and minds to ask each other questions, we might just end up with a plate of food that makes sense. Does this dish need a garnish? Here's a question: what the hell is a garnish? Why do we need to make a beautiful leek, pulled fresh from the garden, roots and all, look any better than it already does? Why should a plump duck breast need a garnish - is it not beautiful enough? So, if there is a weed on one of our duck dishes, it's because it belongs there, because the ducks were enjoying that weed before we cooks set eyes on them.

It's hard to cook like this at first. It's hard in spring when everything around you is blooming and you want to use every flower, every shoot. This is called inspiration. It's the best feeling in the world, but like all good things it needs to be contained. That's when the boundaries come in: a less is more approach.

Sometimes I feel that I've wasted 20 years of my cooking life, but maybe I needed to see things that didn't make sense, and maybe those years were the most important. I hope that I can keep discovering, learning and working with nature to redefine regional Australian cuisine. This is what we are working towards at Biota Dining. It won't take months or even years: it will take a lifetime, a special bond and a commitment to a region to do this.

The recipes and stories in this book don't belong to me, they belong to biota: not the restaurant, but the biota of our region. They belong to the people who gather, grow, hunt and cook them, all of which means the world to me. Enjoy these recipes from our region and if you can't find an ingredient because it's not in season or not in the forest or at the farm near you, then think about connection and habitat and ask yourself a few questions.

Cook with principles, cook with purpose and, most of all, cook with heart.

# A meal with James

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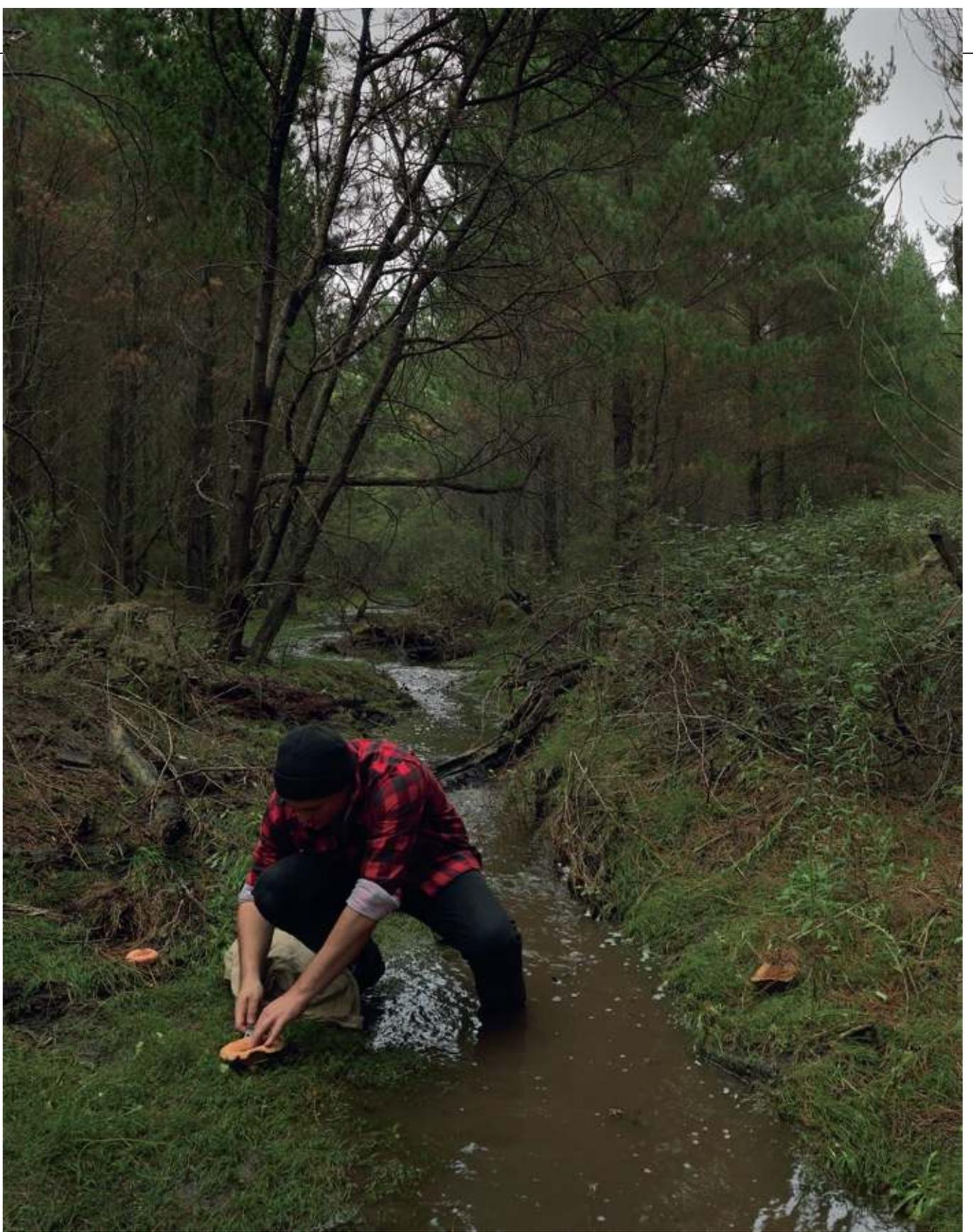
Josh Evans, Lead Researcher, Nordic Food Lab

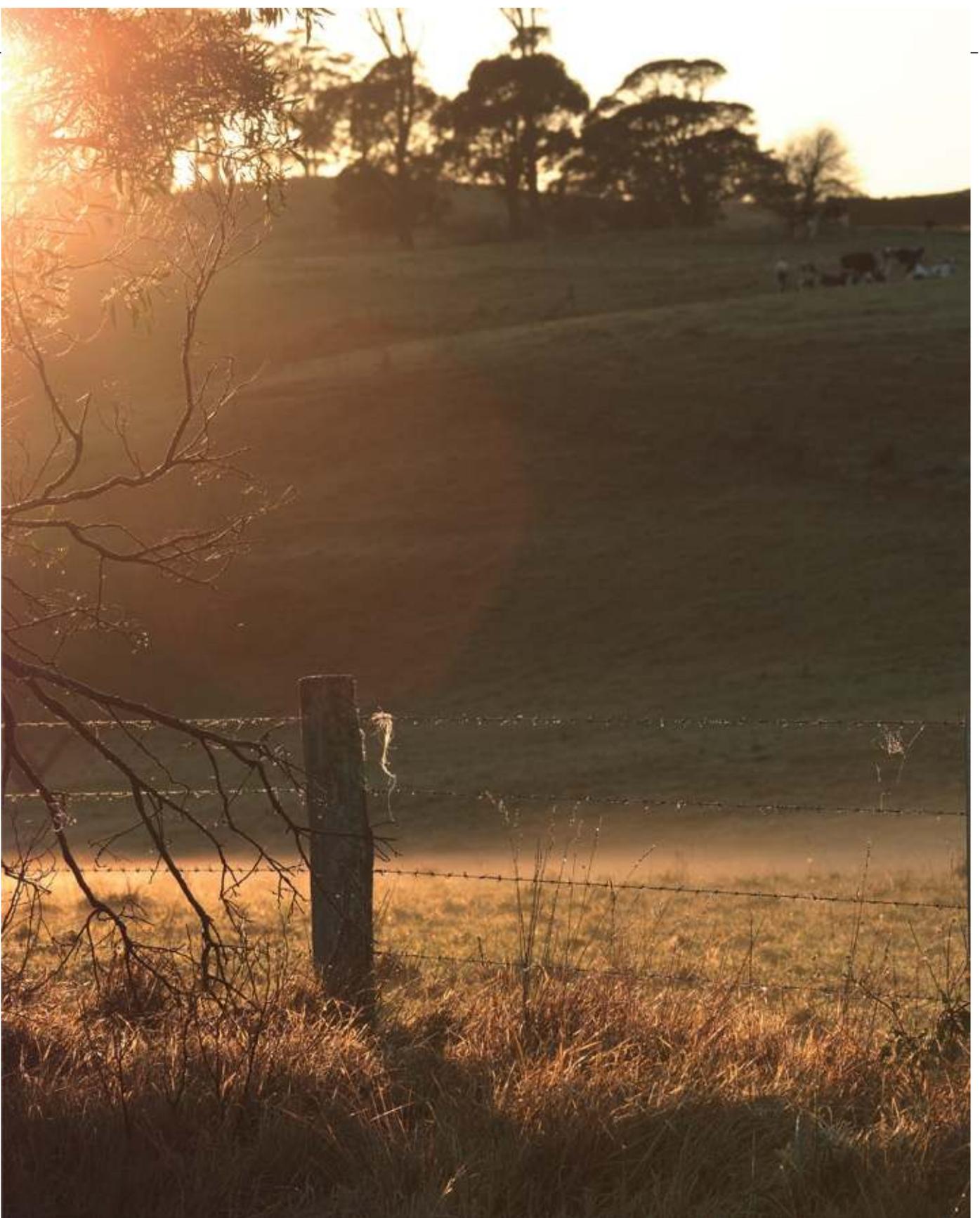
James is cooking for a civilisation that has lost its connection to nature, wants to regain it and does not quite know how. Biota Dining is one vision of how this reconnection looks and tastes. And it is as compelling and broad-minded as it is delicious.

I got to know James by cooking with him at one of the First Fruit Dinners at the Adelaide Festival in 2014. We sat 150 guests at long tables on the banks of the Torrens, a magical late-summer place. I will try to share what I think is remarkable about James and Biota through what we cooked that day.

We began by washing our hands. The day before we had been up in the Basket Range in the Adelaide Hills, collecting final produce from our go-to farm and seeing what might be available in the wild. The land was quite dry so there was little in the way of greens, but we did come across a wild lemon tree with flourishing healthy boughs. We cut off a couple and kept them cool in the fridge overnight. When guests arrived the next evening, we invited them to 'wash their hands' in the fragrant boughs, rubbing their hands and faces with the aromatic leaves. We wanted to give them the same heady joy we had felt when we found this tree in the Hills. Then we mixed cocktails of Australian gin with native botanicals, local Vermouth from Victoria, and homemade fig leaf tincture, seasoned with the lemon oil hanging in the air.

It was autumn and the wine harvest was well underway. Grapes were being pressed, leaves were beginning to yellow and dry, and vines being trimmed back after the harvest. We got our hands on some spent fruit from one of the wine producers. Already with many active yeasts, the grapes started a vigorous levain for the bread. The butter started as cream cultured with lactic acid bacteria that had been living on the vine leaves; the vines themselves were dried and used to lightly smoke the butter; the leaves then used to wrap the finished butter. And the spent grapes themselves, with their tannic skins and fresh crunchy pips, became compote alongside the butter and bread. From one plant came the three components of this first course, a humble offering already on the table as guests sat down. Fresh grapes are also beautiful - but acknowledging the potential of something otherwise discarded leads us to consider other parts of the same organism, and different methods for tying them into our cooking.





'To learn more about a land, wherever it may be, we must endeavour to learn from those who have been its stewards longest and who know it most deeply.'

The first plated dish came from the beach and sea. Soft orange tarama of lightly smoked John Dory roe and sea urchin is the ocean's nourishing sweet fat. We tempered this with sourness and bitter: lettuce, charred and brined; enormous fresh clams quickly pickled in rice vinegar, a sour punch with fleshy heft; sea blight, beach mustard and dune spinach - wild plants from the sand, succulent and surprising. We covered the lot with activated charcoal, crisp and porous. While the bread and butter expresses what is possible with a single plant, this dish starts to illustrate James' inclusiveness towards many different parts of an ecosystem: benthic coastal fish, tidal molluscs, beach weeds, even something like volcanic rock. This is one such 'story of the land', bringing together the species within an ecosystem.

For the main course we cooked whole kangaroo tails in the coals with the fur and skin on, learning from the Aboriginal way of preparing tail in many regions of the country. We scraped off the charred fur and finished the dish in the oven with a jus of chicken feet and blackberries. It was portioned on the bone and served family-style in hollow trunks, with roasted red carrots, wild blackberries, and purslane and mallow leaves collected on the river site. A tail is rarely the most prized part of an animal in European gastronomies, with kangaroo, however, it is arguably the most delicious - thick with gelatine and connective tissue and interspersed with rich fat and meat. To learn more about a land, wherever it may be, we must endeavour to learn from those who have been its stewards longest and who know it most deeply. This is especially true in Australia, where both the pain and rupture of colonisation remains so stark and the potential to rebuild diversified food systems in such an ecologically unique continent is so great.

We then served something of a cheese course: fresh sheep's milk curd, soft and wobbly, with a supple gel of mead infused with lavender leaves. We kept the milk and honey within the savoury realm, with charred onions and a broth of onions and grains, garnished with bitter aromatics such as multicoloured wild flower bee pollen, wild fennel flowers, yarrow flowers and leaves. The crisp milk skin finished the dish as an ode to mother nature and maternal nourishment. Many of James' dishes show his great appreciation of dairy, from different animals and brought into different forms, celebrating its versatility and its longstanding value in many traditional societies around the world.

We found dessert where the field and forest meet. A purple carrot, alternately cooked in molasses and dried for three days until it became thick, black, chewy candy, came to resemble a warped stone or a forgotten piece of carbonised wood. Molasses sponge, torn and dried slightly to make a crisp crumb on its broken surface, reminded me of a bolete, long since gone to spore and dashed to pieces on the forest floor. Pear skins, rolled and dried, looked like twigs or curled leaves. Fried pine needles fell from above and a leaf of fat hen was strewn from the field's edge. Served with bowls of buttermilk from the butter, salted and sweetened with local honey, chilled and foamed. The seasoning for this dish was already at hand stuck to the branches strung above the tables. Green tree ants have a strong burst

of acidity from the formic acid they produce for defense, and a powerful lime flavour from the pheromones they use for communication. We brushed the wood with the leftover carrot molasses and stuck the ants all along the tangled branches running the length of the table. When the dessert was served, we brought the guests' attention to these tiny but powerfully tasty animals just overhead to be plucked and savoured. Where two ecosystems meet, often the biota is particularly diverse, flourishing on the margins.

'He is one of a growing number of chefs around the world sketching the blueprints for a broader way of eating, one that not only emerges from the landscape but acknowledges its role in shaping it.'

Such cuisine will and should look different in different hands, and in different areas around the world. And it can take a variety of names. For James, in Bowral, it could be 'biota cooking'. He is cooking his locality in its totality, not just the plants and animals and fungi and microbes themselves, but their interactions, their systems of symbiosis and mutual reliance. His cooking attempts to appreciate all organisms and all their parts, both those we eat and savour and those we do not but that are, in the larger system, equally as important. He is one of a growing number of chefs around the world sketching the blueprints for a broader way of eating, one that not only emerges from the landscape but acknowledges its role in shaping it. He and his team and his wider community of producers, farmers and other stewards are trying to build a future where all organisms are able to eat and eat well, to live and live well, and live well together.

What does this type of cooking look and smell and taste like? What is it trying to spark in us? What does it want to enact in the world? This book is James' answer to these questions - and it is, like everything James and his team make, a deeply worthwhile proposal.

Nordic Food Lab is a unique, non-profit organisation that investigates food diversity. Established in 2008 in Copenhagen, it combines scientific and humanistic approaches with culinary techniques from around the world to explore the edible potential of a region and the flavours that imbue foods with a connection to place and time.







# How to use this book

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Cooking for me is not about what's written on a piece of paper. A recipe can only ever be a guideline; a platform from which to create. Cooking should be a sensory experience that evokes curiosity; a place where we can let loose and discover. If you are cooking to the season, that means adapting on the go. No recipe can ever be cooked exactly; our seasons change every year and our ingredients change every year. A season is simply a time during the year when some things are usually ready to eat and others aren't.

Spend some time reading through this book. You will see the recipes are built of several different components on the plate. I don't include specific instructions on how to combine, plate or present these components: you might be from another part of the world, living in another biota that inspires you as a cook, or have different ingredients to hand. It would make me happy if you used these recipes as a starting point to discover your own dishes and flavour combinations. You might choose to make the [burnt pears](#) with the ingredients from the [roadside apples recipe](#) because you have nice apples in your part of the world at that time.

We don't 'garnish', but we do add wild plants and flowers from our gardens to the plate: they are visually pleasing, add different textures and flavours and, most importantly, are always chosen in the context of the story of that dish. They might be the fat hen buds that flourish in the fields where Norm grows his [potatoes](#) or the elderflowers from our gardens that are also fermented into vinegar and elderflower water. There is a [glossary](#) to help you reference these plants and any unusual ingredients; where possible, we've listed alternatives that you could use in their place.

Please follow the advice on the types of plants that we use - they need to be properly identified, edible, organically grown and free from pesticide sprays. If you are in any doubt about varieties of plants, especially mushrooms, please don't take any chances with them.

The salt we use is flake salt from the Murray river. You can use any similar salt that is not iodised - I always use single origin, natural salt rather than a mixture containing iodine.

The oils we use in the restaurant are all produced here in Australia, rather than being imported. We use free-range eggs and birds in all our cooking. The flours we use are organic and unbleached. We also mill our own single origin grains in the kitchen.

Sugar in the recipes is unrefined cane sugar, unless stated. Cane sugar contains a higher proportion of natural molasses for great flavour and colour. It's important to think about where your milk has been produced and buy the best quality you can. We use organic, lightly pasteurised dairy products whenever possible and

also cook with sheep's and goat's milk - it's local to us and, depending on the recipe, has more fat and flavour. When the recipe requires sheep's milk, if it's not available use best-quality, full-fat cow's milk. Similarly, sheep's cheese can be replaced by good-quality ricotta.

In our dishes we use a variety of different thickening and gelling agents, such as iota carrageenan, gellan gum, xanthan gum and kuzu. These are all widely available in supermarkets.

Some of our restaurant dishes make use of equipment that might not be in every household kitchen. We have adapted these to make them suitable for cooking at home.

We dehydrate ingredients by drying them for many hours at a very low temperature in a dehydrator. This maintains the structural integrity, flavour and texture. You could use your oven set to its lowest temperature instead of a dehydrator, but these machines are useful and are now widely available and inexpensive, so you might find it worthwhile investing in one.

Another technique we use is to vacuum seal ingredients inside vacuum bags and then cook in a water bath which is held at a set temperature. This type of cooking is very gentle and helps maintain the flavour and structure of the ingredient, giving a precise and consistent result. It might sound very technical for the home kitchen, but you can buy cryovac machines in kitchen and department stores and they aren't overly expensive. If you don't own a machine, you can usually take your ingredients to a local butcher who will vacuum seal them for you. (Don't be tempted to use an ordinary household ziplock bag or water will seep in during the cooking.) You will need a good digital thermometer to maintain the temperature of the water bath (and for many other aspects of cooking). After cooking, plunge the vacuum bag into a sink of ice to chill.

We smoke many ingredients at [Biota Dining](#), using an offset smoker that I built from an old stainless steel refrigerator when the restaurant opened. To build a smoker fairly easily at home, take a deep oven tray and make a small fire of twigs or cuttings in it. Smother the fire by putting a flat tray on top of the deep tray, locking in all the smoke. Put the ingredients for smoking on a wire rack (in a bowl if necessary), lift off the flat tray and put the wire rack on the smothered fire. Replace the flat tray to lock in the smoke. Leave for about an hour (or however long is specified). Remove the rack and ingredients and build another small fire in your deep tray. Repeat the process twice more, until the ingredient is smoked to your taste.

We also enjoy cooking on the firepit. Sometimes there is no alternative that will give the same results, but, when specified in the recipe, you can use a chargrill pan to create the same flavour of timber and black charring on the food.

So, cook from your heart and from your biota, use these recipes as you wish and combine them with whatever you have. Present the dishes on whatever plates you

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sample content of Biota: Grow. Gather. Cook.

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