



INNOVATION CONNECTIONS

## Karen Sheldon Catering – serving up innovation

### Customer Story

#### *Bush tucker has bright future in Northern Territory catering*

Karen Sheldon Catering (KSC) has teamed up with researchers from The University of Queensland (UQ) on a project to extend the shelf life of food by using native foods.

Based in Darwin, KSC started in 2006 and evolved from Karen Sheldon's 30-year-old restaurant business. KSC employs 80 staff and is a Registered Training Organisation Vocational Training and Employment Centre and Transition to Work provider.

KSC and UQ sought to improve the shelf life and nutritional value of frozen food products by using natural additives and plant extracts to replace artificial preservatives and other chemical additives used to prevent the oxidation of frozen food. The project was made possible by Innovation Connections, an element of the [Entrepreneurs' Programme](#) (the Programme).

*“We have gained invaluable knowledge of the nutritional, antimicrobial and antioxidant qualities of Kakadu plum and other native bush foods, and how best to use these amazing ingredients in the cooking process. Without the support of Innovation Connections, and left to our own devices, this is the type of food science and knowledge we would not have gained.”*

SARAH HICKEY, DIRECTOR,  
KAREN SHELDON CATERING



*Kakadu plums and their powder have amazing properties that can extend the shelf life of food.*

The KSC project was equally as exciting for UQ staff, who determined the superior antimicrobial and antioxidant properties of native plant extracts would be suitable as a replacement for chemical preservatives and additives.

*“The commercial potential of Australian native plant foods is due to their potent bioactivity, which is a result of their phytochemical composition. The challenge is the retention of these bioactive properties during processing, packaging and storage, when used as functional ingredients.”*

YASMINA SULTANBAWA, SENIOR RESEARCH  
FELLOW, THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND.

Kakadu plums, in particular, were found to be excellent functional ingredients in frozen food preparations and extended the shelf life by up to 18-24 months, at frozen storage temperatures. Davidson plums have similar qualities. The properties of the Kakadu plum has also been used to improve the shelf life and colour retention of prawns.

David Martin, Innovation Connections Facilitator, said KSC and UQ were a delight to work with. “They had a clear understanding from the start on what they wanted to achieve. As such, my role focused on working behind the scenes to make sure that KSC and UQ could focus on what was really important - the research, and how it could be effectively used in the business.”

KSC's frozen foods meals are available through independent grocers in Darwin and Alice Springs, as well as KSC's café at Parliament House in Darwin.

At the moment, raw Kakadu plums need to be sent interstate to be made into a puree and freeze dried. The potential of bush foods as unearthed by the project has KSC directors excited about further opportunities for Northern Territory businesses and communities.

"Processing one ingredient wouldn't be enough to justify the expense of a processing plant and the equipment required for this, so we need to investigate other native foods and plants for value-adding locally," Sarah Hickey said.

"We support ethically-harvested or caught wild bush foods and believe that the processing of these foods locally is the next step to communities being able to maximise their return for such products."

KSC, indigenous businesses, other likeminded local businesses and social enterprise groups, will continue to discuss the possibility of setting up a processing plant in Darwin for Australian bush food.

### *Entrepreneurs' Programme*

The Entrepreneurs' Programme is the Australian Government's flagship initiative driving growth and competitiveness for small and medium businesses.

The Innovation Connections service offered by the Programme, supports businesses to collaborate with the research sector to develop new ideas and address knowledge and technology gaps that prevent business growth.

Following the facilitated service your Innovation Facilitator can also help your business access up to 12 months of financial assistance with a matched grant of up to \$50,000 to undertake an identified research project.

Check your eligibility by visiting the [Entrepreneurs' Programme](#) or call **13 28 46**.