



# SWEET GREEN GOLD

EXPAT NEW ZEALANDERS ARE DRIVING UP TO 12 HOURS TO A QUEENSLAND ORCHARD FOR A TANGY, FRAGRANT, FRUITY TASTE OF HOME. KATE EVANS REPORTS.

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**E**very autumn, a pilgrimage begins on Queensland's Sunshine Coast. On weekends from February to May, devotees take the winding road through the white-barked eucalypts and the lush green hills of the hinterland to Sally Hookey and Peter Heiniger's farm.

They're here to buy fresh feijoas by the boxful, and they're almost all New Zealanders.

Most have driven more than two hours to collect their green treasure, booked months in advance and anticipated even longer. Five kilos, 10 kilos, 20 kilos to share with the whanau – a steady stream of expat Kiwis come looking for the taste of home.

Jo Williams left our shores nearly three decades ago when she was 13, but she's never forgotten the flavour of feijoas. "It was my favourite pastime after school, sitting under the feijoa tree with a

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knife and spoon,” she says. “We’d mow over them if they were on the grass, we had so many. But here, they’re like gold.”

It’s the first time she has made the trip from Brisbane to buy her five kilos from Hookey’s farm gate. She’s here with her young son, Cooper, and now plans to come back every year, hoping he too will have feijoa-infused childhood memories. “It’s the smell, it’s the taste, it’s the texture, it just takes you right back. It’s like a connection to home.”

Hookey says it’s the same story for almost all her customers. In fact, it’s the same story for me.

I was a Kiwi expat in Australia for eight years and, on the rare occasions

they showed up in the supermarket and I begrudgingly shelled out two dollars for a single fruit, I felt it, too: this transportation, this temporal shift, this feeling of home.

Slicing into the green skin, the first sniff summoned not so much images as sensations. The slight chill of early autumn air; a particular quality of Northland light on Easter afternoons; the way it felt to jump off the school bus and dawdle up the drive with no obligations and nothing to do but sit under a laden feijoa tree in the garden.

Science and literature have both explored this phenomenon – the sudden, involuntary triggering of memories by a

taste or smell. Psychologists call it “autobiographical odour memory”, but it’s more commonly known as the Proust Effect.

At the start of the French writer’s epic seven-volume novel *In Search of Lost Time*, Proust’s narrator dunks a madeleine cake in a cup of lime-blossom tea, and the flavour unleashes a flood of emotions and long-forgotten childhood memories that go on for 3000 pages.

Most people’s recollections aren’t quite as prolific as Proust’s, and science hasn’t definitively proven that the phenomenon exists. But recent studies have begun to shed light on what might be going on when a homesick Kiwi tastes a feijoa.

Flavour is largely determined by smell (our taste buds just tell us if something is sweet or salty) and it turns out our brains process odours quite differently than cues from our other senses. Messages pass from our nose to the olfactory bulb, which, unlike other sense centres, is closely connected to the hippocampus and amygdala – the parts of the brain responsible for memory and emotion.

Experiments have shown odours are much more effective at reminding us of the past than signals from other senses, such as sounds or sights, and the memories they summon are more emotional and vivid.

They’re also more likely to come from childhood. One study

found that memories triggered by visual and verbal cues tended to come from the teens and 20s, while odours brought back recollections from the first decade of life, peaking at age five. Even if people had smelled the scent on later occasions, they thought of their earliest experiences of it.

Strongly scented, highly seasonal, with a short shelf life, feijoas seem perfectly designed to set off a Proust Effect, especially in those who haven’t tasted one in years. Sally Hookey has witnessed it over and over. When her customers first bite into a feijoa, some hug her, while others are so overcome with emotion they burst into tears.

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**“WHEN YOU’RE FEELING LIKE YOU DON’T BELONG AND YOU’VE GOT NO SECURITY, SOMETIMES IT’S THOSE LITTLE THINGS – LIKE FEIJOAS – THAT MAKE YOU FEEL AT HOME.”**

**W**hen Hookey and her husband started Hinterland Feijoas in 2007, they weren’t thinking about the olfactory bulb or the Proust Effect. They’d finally managed to buy some land, and just wanted to be farmers.

Their 4.5ha property near Eumundi was too small for a commercial crop, so they needed to find something niche and organic they could manage alongside their day jobs.

“My parents had a self-sufficient farm near Canberra,” Hookey says. “I grew up with 20 different kinds of kale – we kids hated it!” Unusually in Australia, they also had feijoas – and those, Hookey loved.

After a scoping trip to New Zealand, she convinced Heineger, who’d never tasted them before, that this was their product. “It was carefully planned – we considered all those Kiwis on the Gold Coast – but we knew we would have to create our own market,” Hookey says. They rang fruit agents, but none were interested in such an unknown and exotic fruit.

Instead, when their first crop ripened a year earlier than expected, Hookey posted about it on Facebook. Word spread – and now their customers come to them.

Last season, the couple sold their entire crop from the farm gate on weekends – six tonnes to 3000 visitors, 500kg a day. One regular customer drives 12 hours from Townsville every year, making a holiday of it.

The day I visit, Benjamin Tan and his mum, Sharon, are there carrying out a special family ritual. They grew up in New Zealand and now live on the Sunshine Coast.

“My grandmother passed away this time four years ago. So when the feijoas ripen, it reminds us of

her,” says Tan. “So we always get them for the whole family and take them out to eat at the grave. That’s where we’re going today.”

Later in the afternoon, I find Margaret Hobbs relaxing in the shade, looking out over the rows of feijoa bushes swathed in netting against the Queensland fruit fly. “I’ve been really excited, I’ve had ‘feijoa day’ on the calendar for ages,” she says.

Like many Kiwis who’ve moved across the ditch, Hobbs is frustrated by how hard it is to obtain Australian citizenship. “This has left me feeling pretty unwelcome in the country where I’ve chosen to live, work and contribute to,” she says. “When you’re feeling like you don’t belong and you’ve got no security, sometimes it’s those little things – like feijoas – that make you feel at home.”

On these open days, Hookey is everywhere – welcoming each person who arrives, serving feijoa ice cream to the kids, selling jams and preserves made from the seconds, sharing a cup of tea and a chat with her regulars.

Forging this link between farmer and consumer is what motivates Hookey and Heineger. They want people to know where their food comes from, to value the work farmers do, and feel connected to the land that nourishes them. “We created a community around this quite deliberately. It’s a special thing to get the feijoas, play on the tractor, pet the ponies – now people make it an annual event.”

Customers often ask why the season is so short, Hookey says. “I tell them a season is only ever three months long.”

We’ve become accustomed to having fruits and vegetables on



supermarket shelves from January to December – but for Hookey, that convenience has a price. “There’s none of that anticipation, then the joy of getting it, and then the feeling of, ‘It’s finished, but oh, it was good,’” she says. “I think we’ve lost that completely by having food available year round. We’ve lost the excitement of the first zucchini, the first apple.”

But the first feijoa in a country where they’re hard to come by? Where each spoonful tastes of childhood, of home, of simpler times? Whether science can explain it or not, there’s still a magic in that. +



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