

homegrown

A DESIRE TO SHARE THE HEALING POWER OF NATIVE BOTANICALS LED FIONA HARRISON TO THE BUSINESS OF CHOCOLATE-MAKING.

WORDS RACHEL WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY KIRSTEN CUNNINGHAM

WHEN ASKED TO DESCRIBE her business, Fiona Harrison, owner of Australia's first Indigenous chocolate company, takes a moment to answer. "It's a people-centric social enterprise, on a journey to Indigenous empowerment in the native botanical supply chain."

A proud Wiradjuri woman from Orange in New South Wales, Fiona, 62, now lives in tranquil Moss Vale, in the Southern Highlands. It's also the base for her company, Chocolate On Purpose.

"It's chocolate, but there's a purpose," Fiona explains. "My business is all about equity, it's about restoring people's rights and, more importantly, it's about women's empowerment and matriarchal knowledge – women are traditionally the holders of the plant lore."

It was a deeply personal journey for Fiona, who first discovered the power of plants when she was dealing with complex post-traumatic stress disorder and panic attacks. "I remember waking up in the middle of a panic attack one morning," she recalls. "I had just discovered aromatherapy, so I staggered into the bathroom and on the sink was a facial compress containing lavandin, which helped my breathing ease.

"I turned on the shower and sprinkled some lavandin in the shower and felt a bit better. Then, I put it in the bath, and after that bath I was able to get myself and the kids ready for the day – and I never had another panic attack."

Experiencing the therapeutic benefits of plants firsthand inspired Fiona to study aromatic medicine and reconnect with her culture and the traditional uses of plant-based formulations.

The second piece of the puzzle fell into place when Fiona and her close friend Jo signed up for a chocolate-making course in 2011. "It was Jo's birthday," says Fiona. "I bought her a chocolate-making course on the shores of Sydney Harbour, and we went together. When the teacher said we were going to make a raspberry



and peppercorn chocolate, I thought, 'Oh my God, that's a bush food!' and that's when I started brainstorming."

Fiona realised that chocolate was an easily accessible and relatively affordable vehicle for her to share the health-giving power of bush food with a larger audience.

"I was an aromatic therapist at that time, and had noticed that when money got tight, people would drop off their treatment," recalls Fiona. "The universal language of chocolate seemed like a way to make it part of everyone's lives."

One of her first creations, a White Chocolate and Ooray (Davidson's plum) Bar, was made to harness the native fruit's antioxidant-rich health benefits for a friend who was going through breast cancer.

"It's so interesting – as Australians, we always look outside, but when I say we've got this powerhouse of superfoods in our backyard, people don't even know the half of it," says Fiona.

"It turned out my friend just loved the white chocolate and ooray combination. Something magical happens when you blend the sharp, berry profile of the ooray with creamy white couverture chocolate that leaves a tingle on your tongue."

Going from strength to strength since that first chocolate bar in 2012, Fiona's side hustle is now her full-time job, bringing together her passion for native plant lore and Indigenous empowerment in one neat (and delicious!) package.

"I don't make huge net profits, but revenue alone doesn't dictate your success because I'm trying to support Indigenous growers, and I get self-determination from this business," Fiona says.

"At the end of the day, you've got to lie straight in bed and feel you've got a purpose, and I never wake up not wanting to do what I'm doing." *CF*

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