



Genius in a bottle

When Adam James was busted at boarding school for fermenting aniseed essence to make Sambuca under his bed, his teachers should have known they had happened upon a home grown Heston Blumenthal. Inspired by his discovery of the Japanese cooking paste kanzuri, the pickling guru now produces his own twist on exotic condiments which stretch back generations

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Adam James eats garlic like peanuts. The self-taught cook and alchemist lets the sugars and starches in whole heads of garlic ferment in big glass bottles with black pepper and lovely slithers of beetroot. After several months of what's called wild fermenting, what he ends up with are beautiful, fluorescent, pink and crunchy cloves loaded with an earthy taste and a good hit of probiotics.

"It's a punch of flavour," says the Hobart fermenter who ran the Tricycle Cafe in Hobart for 11 years. "The process means the garlic flavour isn't as harsh. I'll probably chop them up and roll them through a salad."

A lovely waft of garlic is one of the first things I notice as James opens the front door to let me into his Melville Street man cave. The cosy cottage is the home he shares with his 10-year-old son, Leo, but it's also his fermentation station.

It's a place where he creates and makes his sauces, condiments, salsas and other ferments like his super-hot sauce that many foodies pick up from his Rough Rice stall at Farm Gate Market on Sundays. Many of his creations end up in high-end restaurants like the Agrarian Kitchen and Dier Makr.

We walk over timber floors strewn with animal pelts and down a step into an inviting sunken lounge and past a fire with a sake cup laden mantle and straight into his office — a well organised and spotless kitchen.

There are 22 very sharp-looking knives hanging from the wall. Through the glass doors I can see glistening piles of bull kelp sun-drying on his weathered table. It will be used for a kind of rice porridge called congee.

What I can smell is black garlic. There's a stack of locally sourced organic bunches of it in his dehydrator sitting in a toasty 60C destined for dressings.

"They'll end up quite pasty," James explains. "I'll also dab things with it like roast potatoes."

There's a leg of ham curing and hanging from a hook near the main bench. Underneath that is a mix of different sized and

shaped biggish jars filled with interesting-looking things swimming around in a see-through liquid.

At the start of winter, James and a mate foraged around 15kg of wild-growing, slippery jack mushrooms in a pine forrest near Mt Field. It's been transformed into 60 litres of one of his newest products — "a different play on soy sauce" — that he'll be selling at Farm Gate this month. And he's got a balloon jar of that yellowy, lava-lamp like mixture sitting right in front of me.

"The kind of stuff I do sell are usually unique experiments that nobody else is doing," James tells me, as I raise one eyebrow to the slippery jack mushroom bottle before he's told me what's inside it. "There's an element of potion making to it."

James was sitting in a Japanese sake bar in Kyoto five years ago when he sampled kanzuri for the first time. He didn't know what the red paste sitting on top of his fresh tofu was, but the delicious chilli ferment ignited a spark in James that he says changed his life forever.

Back in Hobart, he started off concocting basic pickles and hot sauces. James uses two main fermentation techniques. One — like his pickles and hot sauce — is a type of wild ferment where he lets the vegetables ferment naturally using their in-built micro-organisms (bacteria, yeast and fungi) to turn sugars and starches into food acids.

That hot sauce is now his inoculator — he calls it "the mother" — which he adds to every other wild ferment he creates.

The second type of ferment he dabbles in is cultured ferment, which use a fungus called *aspergillus oryzae* to get the fermentation process kick-started. It's how he turned the foraged mushrooms into soy sauce.

In February, when Israeli-English chef Yotam Assaf Ottolenghi visited Hobart and sampled James's Rough Rice split-pea miso and hot sauce, Ottolenghi told his 900,000 Instagram followers James was the undisputed "king of pickles and ferments".

It's well deserved praise I'm sure, but James argues that it's a bit too much. "I think it's an exaggeration," James clarifies via text message after our interview. "But I do love a pickle".

James says he looks up to Hobart's Tom McHugo pub's chef Tom Westcott for his flair for fermenting. For the past seven years, the pair have regular pow-wows to exchange notes and keep tabs on what they're up to.

Lately, Westcott has been salvaging locally-caught fish trim. He mostly works with the fish frames and heads that are usually only good for stock or sauce or the bin.

After a heavy salting, the natural enzymes from the gut of the fish metabolise so they break down the fatty acids and convert them to flavoursome fish sauce. His team makes 30kg batches at a time. He also uses the slops of beer at the bottom of barrels and ferments that into vinegar.

Westcott and James have just started working on a secret project with their mate Ashley Huntington from Two Metre Tall Brewery, but they're not ready to discuss that in any detail just yet.

Westcott tells *TasWeekend* that nobody is doing the kind of stuff James is doing.

"He's really pushing the boundaries," Westcott says. "A lot of people don't have the knowledge or understanding or time, so he's been able to make a little niche for himself."

Back at his kitchen bench and James is reaching down to one of the many beautiful, and colourful ceramic urn looking containers. The containers that look like big pots are called crocks. Many of the dozens he owns have been custom-made by a Hungarian-born Zsolt Faludi.

James opens the lid of a big, green crock he bought back from Korea. Inside this onggi pot is a nuka doko bed filled up with rice bran.

"You can bury any veggie in there and pluck it out and it will be fully pickled and fermented and full of that beneficial bacteria," James says. "This starter is from Japan and is believed to be 200 years old."

He digs around with one hand in what looks like wet sand and plucks out a wrinkled looking carrot. "All the lactic acid bacteria draws out the moisture, and makes it salty and sour and earthy and crunchy. I will grate it up and mix it through with ginger and use it as a side for dinner or on a sandwich," he says.

It's delicious. So is his beetroot and turnip condiment with ni-



Clockwise from main: Adam James at his Hobart city home; Sauces, pickles and pastes inspired by generations of tradition; Tom McHugo's head chef Tom Westcott, with whom James has embarked on a "secret project".

gella and cumin that's been bubbling and burping in an outside crock for the past year. It's intensely earthy, sour and fragrant. He suggests it could be added with some chickpeas and turned into a luminous, pink hummus. But it's super tasty just on its own.

Fermentation not only preserves food but it enhances flavours, and research shows it's also great for gut health. Anxiety experts like Adelaide's Michael Grose also believe fermented foods are crucial in helping those struggling with that type of mental health issue.

James says he's no expert on that, but does say several friends have told him their anxiety has significantly reduced since they've started eating more fermented foods.

James turns mostly unwanted and always local and organic produce into often unique fermented sauces. Sometimes he's using the late-to-bloom produce farmers would be forced to plough back into their soil, or the lumpy, bumpy kind that's not pretty enough for fussy consumers.

He also pickles stone fruit using a Japanese technique called umeboshi, but mostly he plays with vegetables and legumes.

In summer he makes the trip to Tasmania's exclusive Satellite Island fortnightly to cook for the guests there. He loves to dive for fresh seafood and cook it over an open fire in front of the people who are lucky enough to be eating it.

If you bought something from Mona's Heavy Metal Kitchen

stall at this year's Winter Feast, chances are you sampled some of James's fermented sauce creations, kick-started with his four-year-old "mother" hot sauce.

Mona tasked him with the job of transforming around 300kg of leftover vegetables and herbs from the 2018 feast. The vegies that otherwise would have been binned had a year-long nap in a modified wine barrel and were reborn into 220 litres of a zingy and spicy fermented sauce.

James has had stalls at both the Winter Feast and the Taste of Tasmania, but says those kind of events are no longer his vibe. He's more into small, one-off dinner events.

At the time of our interview, he's getting ready to pack up some of his goodies into jars for his upcoming pop-up event series. First stop is London, and then Paris for dinner events, and then he'll finish his tour at his favourite restaurant — Monk in Kyoto, Japan.

In November, he will pair up with Tasmanian chef Luke Burgess for four days exploring Flinders Island. The pair will dive and forage and hunt, and then meet producers before setting up a restaurant for their newly-created dishes at The Flinders Wharf in Whitemark, from November 29 to December 1.

This world tour will be only the latest for James, who has been lucky enough to travel to the world's oldest fermentation cultures to build on his love of and appreciation for the amazing and complex flavours that fermentation can provide.

Two years ago he embarked on a fermentation world tour funded by a Churchill Fellowship. The trip took him to Denmark, Italy, China, Korea and Japan.

He spent months learning ancient and new fermentation techniques from some dead set fermentation gurus — people like sixth-generation miso makers, backyard pickle alchemists, Buddhist monks, big and small soy sauce makers, balsamic vinegar makers and several Michelin Star restaurants — as well as a Kyoto grandmother's pickling group. Then he spent a month picking up what he could from French and Georgian fermenters.

Being exposed to all these fermented flavours and techniques has shaped his approach to both cooking and fermenting: "I've taken a traditional technique and methodology and put that into a Tasmanian context, and made something quite unique and certainly different from the original," he says.

James has come a long way from his teenage boarding school days where he was busted fermenting aniseed essence with warm water and sugar in two-litre Coke bottles to make Sambuca under his bed.

"What I love about fermenting is the alchemy of it," James says. "It's all about making something out of something else. That's all I'm doing. I'm just experimenting which is what I enjoy the most."

"It's all just one big experiment. Some things work and some things don't. But what I'm most interested in is creating new and exciting flavours."

To book a table at The Flinders Wharf restaurant, email experience@theflinderswharf.com.au