

A TASTE OF ANTIQUITY

THE CAROB KITCHEN, PORT ELLIOT



IT'S THE PERFECT CROP FOR SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S dry, temperate climate but it has taken until now for the first locally grown carob products to be made widely available. The Carob Kitchen is one of two growers taking the leap to manufacture a range of commercial carob products, and brand manager Sophie Richards says interest has been immediate.

"Carob has been around us for so many years – it's a street tree in some places of South Australia, and it has been a staple crop of the Mediterranean for about 4000 years – yet so few people here know much about it as a cooking ingredient," says Sophie (pictured). "The curious thing is that once people try it, they're immediately interested."

Local farmers were being encouraged from the late 1980s to plant carob and olives as alternative crops, and it was hoped that both had the same commercial potential – though it was only olives that found favour among farmers.

However, for the adventure of trying something a few, carob was embraced by a few growers, including Burra pastoralist Andrew Gebhardt, who planted 5000 trees and encouraged his sister and brother-in-law, Carol and David Solomon, to supplement his crop. They went about it the hard way, planting more than 3000 trees on their 30-hectare Port Elliot property from seed. "We gathered seeds that had been dropped from

trees lining the streets of Burra and Colonel Light Gardens," says Carol. "It was extremely difficult to nurture them – a bit of a hit-and-miss affair, with some plants being grafted four to five times before they took."

Those trees are now 15 years old, bearing a crop of about 40 tonnes of carob pods each harvest during March and April. They represent seven different varieties of carob trees from the 17 available in Australia – the female species Irlam, Sfax, Waite, Tylliria and Badan, with the hermaphrodite Clifford and Santa Fe ensuring the adequate pollination of all female trees.

After harvesting, carob pods need to dry for about six months in sheds before being processed, otherwise excess moisture from the pods will clog the hammer mill machinery designed to remove seeds from pods that are then chopped into coarse and fine grain kibble. The Solomons' pods are processed by Michael and Jam Jolley, who own a 6000-carob tree orchard, mill, carob roaster and processing plant at Booborowie, in South Australia's mid-north.

Originally, the Solomons' crop was processed for seed, which at one stage fetched \$25 a kilogram on the international market, but now attracts only \$5 a kilo. Such fluctuations have seen them now focus on selling a more diverse range of carob products on the domestic market under The Carob Kitchen brand – which has become the task for the youngest of the Solomons' four daughters, Sophie, who also works in wine marketing. "Some people look for carob automatically in health food shops, but I want to start marketing it as a gourmet cooking ingredient," she explains. "It has fantastic potential – much of it untapped at the moment."

The key product in the range is carob syrup, an extract produced from seeping pods in water, resulting in a rich, caramel-like sauce with a slight tannic tang. A gluten-free product, it has many healthy properties: it's high in protein and fibre, is a good antioxidant, contains vitamins A, B, B2, B3, and D, helps digestion and aids the treatment of osteoporosis, diabetes, colds, flu and asthma.

Beyond the syrup, The Carob Kitchen has more products that use every component from the pod production process. Coarse-cut kibble is packaged in 250-gram bags as carob nibbles, a surprisingly more-ish snack food. The latest addition to the range is muesli, designed at home by Sophie – almost by accident. "I make my own muesli blend, and one day I just threw in some of the leftover fine-ground kibble, which usually goes to waste. The result was so good that other people suggested we should start making it as a commercial product."

The Carob Kitchen muesli mix contains about 40 per cent carob with oats and fruit, and an initial 150-kilogram batch was cooked in pizza ovens at Adelaide Hills Gourmet Foods in Woodside. It's now being sold in 700-gram bags with The Carob Kitchen range at the Willunga Farmers' Market on the second and fourth Saturday of each month, in gourmet shops and at Romeo's IGA supermarkets. Along with the other products, it struck an immediate chord with market shoppers. "The key is to get more people trying it," says Sophie, and this is where her imagination takes hold. "We serve carob syrup in milk, as a topping for ice-cream, as a chicken marinade and a glaze for hams, or serve the kibble nibbles with a cheese platter. We're getting chefs to work with us on more ideas. The possibilities for just how far we can go with carob seem endless."

