

THE NUTRITIONAL COMPOSITION OF AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL BUSHFOODS.
CORMS, ROOTS, TUBERS AND YAMS

V. CHERIKOFF, J.C. BRAND and A.S. TRUSWELL

Underground vegetables were of considerable dietary importance to possibly every Aboriginal group in pre-colonial Australia. For coastal, grassland, riverine, highland and desert people there were particular rootstocks which varied from being multi-seasonal staples to dependable accompaniments to the meals of successful hunters.

Four samples of corms, including the bush onion (*Cyperus bulbosus*) and prepared taro (*Colocasia* sp.) were analysed. While lower in moisture the samples were comparable to their cultivated counterparts on a dry weight basis (Chan 1983). The preparation of taro elevated the levels of K, Ca and Fe even after adjustment for water content.

Although higher in fibre, the constituent proportions of five samples of roots and rhizomes were similar to turnip and parsnip (Thomas and Corden 1977). Many roots were first steamed and peeled by the Aborigines before being chewed to extract the carbohydrates. Much of the lignified material was discarded. The root of a Victorian species of *Geranium* was high in Ca (433mg/100g) and Fe (11.1mg/100g).

Tubers are commonly considered to be starchy vegetables such as cassava (*Manihot* sp.) and sweet potato (*Ipomoea* sp.). However, tubers from species of the Liliacea, Compositacea and Fabacea were more closely akin to carrots and potatoes in nutrient composition. *Microseris scapigera* (yam daisy) was assayed for inulin and the high level of this polysaccharide contributed to the fibre content of the tubers.

The 13 native yam samples analysed were similar in composition to the tropical starchy staples common to African and Pacific subsistence economies. The moisture content of the yams, as with the corms and roots, was generally lower than agricultured equivalent rootstocks.

Accessibility and availability of processed products from settlement stores have largely removed indigenous root vegetables from the diet of urbanised and semi-urbanised Aborigines. The nutritional significance is a change in the type and proportion of carbohydrate intake.

CHAN, H.T.(ed) (1983). Handbook of tropical foods. (Marcel Dekker: Basel).
THOMAS, S. and CORDEN, M. (1977). Metric tables of composition of Australian foods. (Australian Government Publishing Service: Canberra).

Human Nutrition Unit and School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine,
University of Sydney, New South Wales 2006