

WORDS DAVID SLY

THE FRUITS of LABOUR

This unusual fruit is described as tart, with mandarin overtones and an aromatic perfume, and is on the menu in top Australian restaurants.

YUZU IS A fragrant Japanese citrus fruit that elite Sydney chef Martin Benn is craving. His degustation menu at Sepia Restaurant, *Good Food Guide's* 2015 Restaurant of the Year, features yuzu in a pair of Japanese-inspired dishes, but this rare fruit is not an import – it's the product of an experiment by Riverland citrus grower David Arnold, who only started propagating yuzu four years ago to alleviate desperately low prices for oranges.

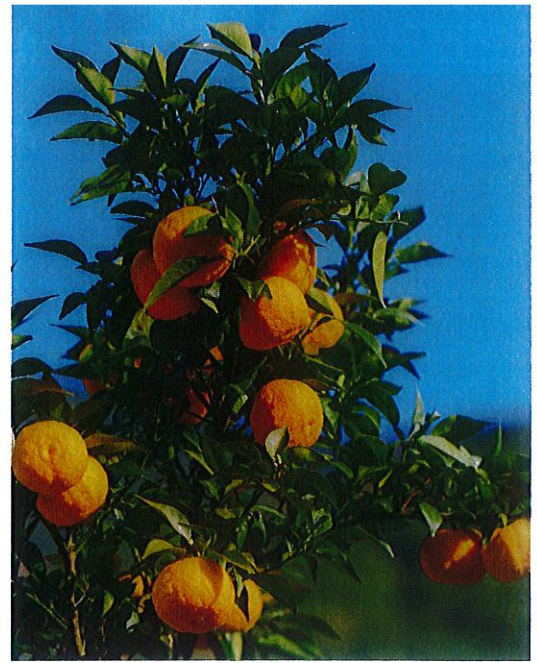
At his family's big citrus orchard in Waikerie, David chopped the tops off 40 Washington navel orange trees and grafted them with yuzu budwood. Now in their second season of commercial production, the Arnolds' yuzu trees are flourishing, and orders for the fruit from many of Australia's leading chefs are accelerating.

"We have the most ideal growing conditions," says David. "Our fruit hangs on the tree longer than other places to obtain optimal ripeness. It gives our yuzu more intense flavour and colour."

It's a success story that delights Margy Abbot of

Adelaide fruit and vegetable wholesaler AMJ Produce, who suggested yuzu as a viable specialist crop for David. It stemmed from her constant conversations with leading chefs about what rare ingredients they want, and dovetails with her determination to show the excellence that SA farmers are capable of producing.

"I want SA farmers to know that their best produce can win the highest respect and admiration from the leading chefs around the country," says Margy, who has worked tirelessly with her husband Chris at AMJ Produce to elevate SA crops onto the national



stage. "Mainstream citrus growers were only getting six cents a kilogram for their oranges a few years ago, so we suggested that the Arnolds plant some more exclusive fruits that could command top price. It's amazing to see how quickly the yuzu have come into production, and it's a credit to the ability of South Australian farmers to produce such crops of excellence."

Interest in yuzu is escalating because it is considered a superfood, being very high in vitamin C. Originating in East Asia, yuzu is believed to be a hybrid of sour mandarin and Ichang papada. The fruit looks like a small grapefruit with uneven skin, and its tart flavour also resembles grapefruit, but with mandarin overtones and a highly aromatic perfume. Rarely eaten as a fruit, yuzu's aromatic zest and juice are used to season dishes, and it is an integral ingredient of the citrus-based Japanese sauce ponzu.

Its properties were discussed in detail when AMJ Produce took 50 local chefs on a bus trip to the Arnolds' Waikerie orchard late last year for an interactive day with yuzu. The excursion helped stimulate interest in the rare fruit – evident by

recent appearances of yuzu in menus at Adelaide Oval, Windy Point and other leading Adelaide restaurants. The excursion also opened the lines of communication between restaurant chefs and farmers, to identify what desirable imported foods can be replaced by new crops that are grown locally.

"I've had yuzu in Japan and in Australia, and I think the Australian fruit is as close to the Japanese variety you will get. I have not tasted or smelt better anywhere else in the world," says Martin Benn, who is using yuzu on his degustation menu for chawanmushi (Japanese egg custard) with roasted katsuobushi butter and caviar, and for seared sea urchin with smoked bone marrow, cauliflower and toasted milk bread.

Such positive response from chefs should kickstart a wave of popularity and trigger mainstream use of yuzu fruit. "It's all about replacing imported produce and getting everyone to revert back to eating seasonal foods – firstly by chefs, but then also by consumers," says Margy. "It will help put some much needed money in our local farmers' pockets." 🍊