ISSUE 3 | DECEMBER 2024

The Indigenous Business Review

Steve Grace and Kirra Daley's story from start-up to success

Passion & sacrifice

TOP 10 GIFTS

Support Blak businesses this holiday season

BEN WYATT

The path forward after the referendum

DRIVING BUSINESS **SUCCESS**

together at Onslow Iron

ABOUT US

Irdiyamarnu Tyres Services is a 100% Thalanyji-owned and operated business that has been awarded a five-year contract to provide tyre fitting services for MinRes' fleet of 125 road trains supporting the Onslow Iron project.

Irdiyamarnu Tyres Services

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MINERAL RESOURCES

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Cover image: Beachtree Distilling Co. founders Steve Grace and Kirra Daley. Picture: Claudine Thornton

Welcome to Issue 3, your December-January edition of The Indigenous Business Review Magazine. Issue 4 available in The Australian and The West Australian newspapers on February 12, 2025, and in Qantas Business lounges nationally. Stay up to date with all the latest news at **theibr.com.au**

The Indigenous Business Review

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The Indigenous Business Review

As the vibrant orange blooms of the Nuytsia floribunda – or WA Christmas tree – illuminate the Western Australian landscape, it's a time to honour traditions and family connections. This tree, with its striking blossoms, holds deep cultural significance for Noongar people, marking a season of gathering, storytelling and reflection.

December and January are, of course, much more than time for holidays. For businesses, it's a period of both celebration and strategic thinking – a time to reflect on our shared achievements, take stock of the year's lessons and look ahead.

Indigenous enterprises, grounded in cultural values, operate with resilience and a sense of responsibility to community – a connection that's as foundational as the deep roots of the beloved Nuytsia itself.

This festive season brings opportunities for many Indigenous entrepreneurs, especially those in tourism, retail and cultural sectors, to showcase goods and services that embody and celebrate our heritage.

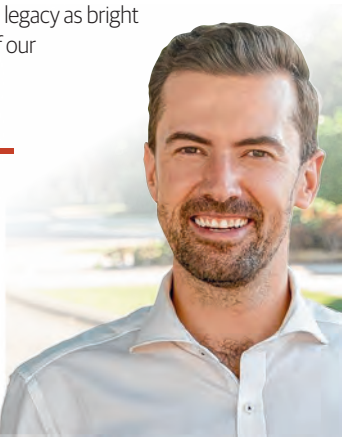
This edition of the magazine reflects that, highlighting analysis of the broader Indigenous economy, yet also spotlighting operators in the food and beverage industries. From bush-inspired condiments to Indigenous-owned cafes, we explore unique offerings from business owners dedicated to sharing our food culture with all Australians.

We've also pulled together a guide for those seeking meaningful gifts this season – products crafted by Indigenous artisans, whose work brings the richness of our stories and the beauty of our lands into everyday life. By supporting these businesses, readers can enjoy something truly special while contributing to the growth of our communities.

As we move into 2025, let's do so with the resilience and spirit of the Nuytsia, balancing cultural connection with business success. With each product, partnership and purchase, we not only support a business but sustain an ecosystem of community and tradition. This season, take a moment to celebrate, to connect and to contribute – both in spirit and in action.

Together, we are ensuring that Indigenous businesses continue to thrive, leaving a legacy as bright and lasting as the blooms of our WA Christmas tree.

Zak Kirkup
Managing Editor



The Indigenous Business Review

The only way is up

The Indigenous business sector continues to soar at a time of expansion challenges, writes David Prestipino

"If you build it, they will come ..." These famous words, adapted for the 1989 film Field of Dreams, now resonate within Australia's burgeoning Indigenous business sector, which is primed for unprecedented growth.

If the First Nations business sector were wholly listed on the Australian Stock Exchange, its upward trajectory would leave investors in awe. The only way seems to be up.

A recent report by Indigenous Business Australia (IBA) and the Australian National University's team of research experts lauded a growth of more than 50 per cent in five years across the Indigenous business landscape. The findings showed the economic contribution from First Nations businesses has increased remarkably over the past decade.

Approximately 30,000 Indigenous businesses operate nationwide, and the numbers are rising rapidly as demand for Aboriginal cultural experiences, products, workers, and land intensifies.

The report showcased evidence of growth in the sector through several key indicators:

- 2016–17: A sample of 770 Indigenous enterprises that received support from IBA generated roughly $1.2bn in turnover, contributing $430m to Australia's Gross Domestic Product.
- 2021–22: Supply Nation's registered and certified suppliers generated a record $3.8bn from member contracts, growing 65 per cent from the previous year. In 2023–24, this figure reached $4.6bn, with membership surpassing 5000 businesses.
- 2022–23: The Commonwealth's spend on Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP) contracts was $1.4bn, compared to just $6.2m in 2012–13.
- 2022: Dilin Duwa's third research snapshot reported that a sample of 13,693 businesses generated revenue of $16.1bn, paying $4.2bn in wages to 116,000 employees.

While The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Pathways Through Business report praised the sector's stronger economic contribution, it also highlighted significant challenges to expansion. The growth of First Nations businesses has outpaced non-Indigenous entities in the past five years, but capacity-building support has not kept pace.

The research illustrated that the sector's rapid expansion is hampered by limited capacity-building support, with First Nations start-ups and developed businesses challenged by access to suitable funding to meet demand.

As more businesses mature, gaps are emerging in supporting business ecosystems, reducing opportunities to access the capital, business support, and networks required to sustain and build growth.

Societal bias and prejudice remain impediments across the Indigenous business cycle, hitting those at earlier stages hardest. Negative perceptions still impact policy decisions, meaning support systems are not focused on capacity building, creating significant gaps and missed opportunities.

Preventing Aboriginal businesses and the communities they operate in from transitioning from welfare-dependent to wealth creators is a lack of capacity-building support to grow and make even greater contributions to the economy and, vitally, meaningful inroads to closing gaps that governments cannot.

IBA chairperson and Dagoman man from the Northern Territory, Eddie Fry, emphasises that IBA's priority over the past five years has been supporting Indigenous start-ups, as they present the greatest avenue for First Nations economic expansion, and still do.

"While we celebrate the incredible growth of First Nations

ABILITY OF THE ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM TO MEET SPECIFIC NEEDS OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER BUSINESSES ACROSS THE LIFECYCLE

DOMAIN	START-UP/ PRE-START-UP	GROWTH	STABILISATION	MATURITY
	PRIMARILY OPERATION AND BUSINESS CAPABILITY CHALLENGES		PRIMARILY CAPACITY CHALLENGES	
Access to finance	IBA is the primary source of early stage finance for many First Nations businesses	Availability of suitable lending products through IBA	Difficulty tapping into mainstream financial markets	Difficulties accessing larger capital to go from SME to big business. Equity risks, Indigenous identity
Countering negative biases, prejudices and stereotypes	Bias resulting in higher perceived risk, "trust" deficit	Stereotyping persists for growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses	Using business to bring about social change and counter stereotypes	Small but growing numbers of mature and larger First Nations businesses are challenging perceptions
Access to business support	Strong need for business fundamentals capability building	Difficulties achieving scale	Challenges achieving stability and longevity	Lack of support for mature businesses
Access to mentoring/networks	Growing access to First Nations networks	Two-way knowledge sharing	Trying to tap into non-First Nations networks and mentors	Further growth requires access to wider supply chains and non-First Nations networks

Good coverage of support | some coverage of support | limited coverage of support

INCREASE IN ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER BUSINESS OWNERSHIP BY ANZSIC CLASSIFICATION, 2016-21

INDUSTRY	2016	2021	% CHANGE
Health Care and Social Assistance	654	1588	142.8%
Mining	91	174	91.2%
Education and Training	379	671	77%
Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	825	1336	61.9%
Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste Services	60	97	61.7%
Rental, Hiring and Real Estate Services	152	244	60.5%
Wholesale Trade	119	188	58%
Manufacturing	404	636	57.4%
Arts and Recreation Services	411	647	57.4%
Construction	2987	4622	54.7%
Financial and Insurance Services	123	188	52.8%
Public Administration and Safety	153	233	52.3%
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	563	823	46.2%
Information Media and Telecommunications	111	161	45%
Other Services	1153	1671	44.9%
Administrative and Support Services	1002	1447	44.4%
Transport, Postal and Warehousing	618	866	40.1%
Accommodation and Food Services	405	528	30.4%
Retail Trade	611	760	24.4%

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing 2016, 2021

Nations businesses, work still lies ahead to expand our investment in business ideas to help make them real," Fry says.

He notes that challenges for businesses at the stabilisation and maturity phases are less about capabilities and more about expanding capacity to meet demand, with gaps in appropriate capacity-related support.

"We are building a future where Indigenous businesses thrive at every stage, exploring opportunities for sustainable growth that will create prosperity for people, communities, and the nation as a whole," he says.

"IBA stands committed to supporting First Nations people further their economic and business aspirations, with the freedom to choose how and when to access capital, knowledge, and networks," Fry says.

"I am confident that with continued support and collaboration, the best is yet to come."

Access to significant capital is a major hurdle for most of the 4 per cent of large First Nations businesses with more than 20 employees, with funding between $50m and $100m often unavailable through IBA or other institutions.

The report concluded that the challenges of starting a business are unique for First Nations people, with supporting policy architecture geared toward addressing capability.

Policymakers often assume Indigenous business owners will have more equal access to mainstream economic resources and systems after a few years of operation – a notion the report deems incorrect.

As the global race toward net-zero emissions by 2050 intensifies, there's a significant opportunity for Indigenous businesses in the clean energy sector. Recent Net Zero Australia modelling estimated that 43 per cent of all clean energy infrastructure required to meet this target would need to be on Indigenous lands and seas.

This generational transition should result in economic contributions from Indigenous businesses skyrocketing in associated industries and, crucially, create the intergenerational wealth that First Nations people and communities across the land need.

However, glaring inclusion gaps in Australia's strategies are impeding this low-emission approach. Enormous amounts of funding and capacity-building initiatives are needed to support First Nations involvement, with trained workforces and appropriate infrastructure required across communities and organisations that choose to take the step.

Transformative strategies will need to be implemented quickly to empower and engage First Nations people in renewables and other major sectors such as construction and health for a level playing field to exist across the entire business landscape. ●

Enough talking, we need action

Aboriginal Carbon Foundation calls for private investment in First Nations-led climate projects, **Cassandra Baldini** investigates

Aboriginal Carbon Foundation project manager Sean Appoo.

Aboriginal Carbon Foundation (AbCF) project manager Sean Appoo has called for increased private investment in carbon and biodiversity projects where First Nations people play a key role in safeguarding the land and mitigating future climate risks.

After participating in a panel at the Australian Sustainable Finance Summit, held on Gadigal land and focused on investing in nature for a resilient economy, Appoo, a descendant of the Kabi Kabi and Birra Gubba Nations, spoke about the urgent need for immediate investment in First Nations-led climate projects.

He highlighted that initiatives like cultural burning, which utilise traditional First Nations fire knowledge, are essential for reducing the risk of intense bushfires exacerbated by climate change.

However, Appoo points out that a lack of funding in this area, coupled with unstable political conditions, has led to minimal progress.

"Many corporations are still grappling with what it means to invest in nature. There's a lot of politics involved as well. I believe we need more courage from our corporate leaders to acknowledge that we could have conversations about nature investing indefinitely," Appoo says.

"This has been going on for a long time, yet we still lack concrete action plans for achieving a stable climate.

"We heard one of the keynote speakers say that we've already passed six of the nine planetary boundaries. At what point are we going to take this seriously and actually do something?"

Appoo explains that First Nations communities are eager to engage in the carbon industry and the nature-positive space but face challenges due to the upfront investment needed to launch their projects.

He says the opportunity to rightfully connect First Nations people with their country, along with the lack of financial support for communities, further widens the gap between First Nations people and government reconciliation efforts.

"Closing the gap has been going on since, what, 2008? And the government's not on track for many of those targets either," Appoo says.

"Funding these kinds of projects is a real way to meet many of those closing-the-gap targets.

"What we see with these projects is that there are significant social, cultural and environmental benefits. Therefore, it's crucial that government recognises and values the work of getting Indigenous people and traditional owners back on country, as it could solve many of these issues."

While investing in nature is still a nuanced concept, Appoo explains that most corporations purchase carbon credits from organisations like the AbCF and embed the strategy into their Reconciliation Action Plans.

Following the purchase, the foundation engages First Nations communities to run various projects, enabling traditional cultural land practises to be carried out, which in turn generates revenue for the community.

"We need to find a way to secure more private investment to get projects up and running," Appoo says.

"Perhaps the federal government could underwrite some of these efforts.

"We might also explore options like social impact bonds to fund these projects.

"But right now, we're just talking a lot about what could happen without taking enough action." ●

Reaping the rewards of perseverance

Leedal Group continues to deliver on it mission for a better future for Fitzroy Valley communities

> "I see the struggles of my members, and I know what those subsidies do to help them manage and live
>
> PATRICK GREEN

David Prestipino

The evolution of one of Western Australia's major Indigenous-owned operations, Leedal Group, showcases how a strong community vision and perseverance can create lasting impacts.

As trustee for the Fitzroy Crossing Trust, Leedal Group, led by chairman Patrick Green, drives economic development across six Indigenous communities in the Fitzroy Valley.

Every cent Leedal earns is reinvested into initiatives such as subsidising staple foods at the Tarunda IGA and providing administrative support for local businesses.

"Our vision is to support the Fitzroy region's economic development so members of the six beneficiary communities, and others, can look forward to a better quality of life," Green says.

Founded in 1989 with a loan from the Aboriginal Development Commission, Green's guiding principles remain increasing Indigenous employment, developing the region's economic base and introducing social initiatives for youth.

A Bunuba man from Fitzroy Crossing, Green has long been a respected figure, connecting industry, government and local communities.

Leedal operates five businesses in Fitzroy Crossing, including rental properties, and funds employment training, youth empowerment and welfare programs.

When devastating floods hit Fitzroy Valley in early 2023, Leedal worked with emergency services to distribute food and essentials, raising $600,000 in donations and leading efforts to support displaced residents.

The company's commitment to youth empowerment is evident in its establishment of a popular youth centre, which WA Police credited with a 43 per cent reduction in offending in Fitzroy Crossing during its first month of operation.

Reflecting on his roots, Green shares how his upbringing in Fitzroy Crossing and his journey shaped his vision for his people.

He grew up on Bunuba Country, sharing the region with the Wangkatjungka, Walmajarri, Gooniyandi and Nyikina people. After leaving home, he pursued an associate diploma in community development in Adelaide, driven by a desire to bring change to his community.

"I put in for a study grant, lived in Adelaide for two years, and thought I could take on the world after doing a little bit of study," Green says.

However, during a job interview in Alice Springs, he was told, "Your people need you."

That moment resonated deeply. "I hopped in my car with whatever little fuel I had and trundled back home to Fitzroy Valley," he recalls.

Upon returning, Green began to see the struggles his community faced, particularly at the local supermarket and Crossing Inn, where alcohol flowed freely from early morning until midnight, and the store operated out of a tin shed.

"I said, 'Maybe we need to take control so we can have control'," he explains.

Leedal's early days were marked by efforts to improve access to essential goods and reduce alcohol dependency.

"When we took on the supermarket, we said we'd sell goods that benefit our members and subsidise staple diets. I see the struggles of my members, and I know what those subsidies do to help them manage and live."

Leedal's resilience shone during crises. Despite setbacks during the Covid-19 pandemic, its Fitzroy River Lodge transformed into a hub for rescue workers, housing more than 100 volunteers and supporting emergency response efforts.

The floods of 2023 further tested the organisation, but Leedal emerged as a beacon of hope, rebuilding stronger for the future.

"In recognition of Leedal's role in the community we were thankful to get a donation from Woodside Energy to support the Fitzroy Valley which made an incredible difference," Green says.

"We're also very grateful that we've had the support of IBA (Indigenous Business Australia) in helping us grow to where we are today."

Indigenous Business Australia, which supported Leedal's growth, praised its sound management and the significant assets held for the six Indigenous communities it serves.

Former Kimberley MLA Carol Martin highlights Leedal's critical role in the region's prosperity, saying: "Leedal continues to drive economic development in Fitzroy Valley through tourism and investment in local people."

Reflecting on his journey, Green credits his commitment to his people and their welfare.

"At the end of the day, I live in the community. I know the struggles, and I feel for them," he says.

His story is one of perseverance, rooted in a deep connection to his people and a vision for a better future.

Fortescue Metals CEO Dino Otranto with Kingkira Group founder Tammy O'Connor.

Capitalising on Opportunities

KingKira Group is thriving thanks to Fortescue's dedication to support and elevate First Nations enterprises, writes Zak Kirkup

KingKira Group, a standout in First Nations business, is charging forward with a major new contract from Fortescue. The multi-year deal, which covers waste management services across Fortescue's Pilbara iron ore operations, represents a new level of growth and autonomy for KingKira – a 100 per cent Indigenous-owned enterprise rooted in the leadership of founder Tammy O'Connor.

O'Connor, a proud Palyku woman with deep Nyiyaparli and Kariyarra heritage, founded KingKira in 2014. Back then, the company's partnership with Fortescue began through its Billion Opportunities program, which was aimed at empowering Indigenous businesses.

Reflecting on this milestone, O'Connor says: "Fortescue, through their Billion Opportunities program, has been instrumental in helping us grow as a business. I'm incredibly proud of how much we have grown and can now stand on our own with these major contracts."

In a decade, KingKira has gone from an ambitious startup to a company with more than 119 employees, 103 mobile assets and a client base of 124 across four Pilbara locations. The numbers speak to a well-earned reputation for delivering top-tier service. But for O'Connor, they also represent much more: a success story that underscores the potential of Indigenous businesses to achieve independence in sectors where First Nations representation is still growing.

Fortescue's Warren Fish, director of approvals, communities, and environment, emphasises the wider impact of this partnership: "We've always been committed to initiatives that foster genuine economic and employment opportunities for First Nations Australians," he notes "Contracts like this not only help businesses like KingKira grow, but they also have a ripple effect, delivering long-lasting economic benefits to First Nations communities."

The $5bn-plus that Fortescue has funnelled into Indigenous businesses through its Billion Opportunities program highlights how deliberate, well-structured support can elevate First Nations enterprises into sustainable, impactful entities within Australia's economy.

For KingKira, this new contract is a testament to resilience and innovation – a company that's gone beyond simply holding its own to thriving alongside global players.

For KingKira, this latest contract isn't just another business win; it's a powerful symbol of Indigenous resilience and capability in Australia's economy.

The partnership shows that with the right opportunities, First Nations businesses can evolve from emerging players into industry leaders, standing toe-to-toe with some of the world's largest corporations.

Looking ahead, as Fortescue pursues ambitious goals for decarbonisation and sustainability, partnerships like this one with KingKira aren't just beneficial – they're essential.

Together, they're setting a new standard for collaboration, where economic growth aligns with community empowerment and cultural integrity.

This collaboration underscores a vision of the future where Indigenous enterprises play a central role in Australia's resources sector, building a legacy that empowers First Nations communities for generations to come. ●

OPINION | BEN WYATT

The future of Indigenous affairs lies in economic development

The failure of the referendum on Constitutional recognition to establish a "Voice" has highlighted that Indigenous policy has been tied to a successful referendum, and its failure has left national Indigenous policy becalmed.

The comprehensive rejection of the referendum and the Uluru Statement from the Heart has left the Commonwealth Government bureaucracy frozen. National Indigenous leadership is uncertain, angry, bitter and fragmented. How do we advance Indigenous affairs post-referendum? How do we find common ground with those who voted No?

Many cling to statements made by the Prime Minister on election night without recognising the raw politics of what the referendum did to those statements.

Australia voted to reject the Voice proposition, and the Prime Minister should be free to develop a new agenda and be bold in what that might look like. This is difficult for Indigenous Australia, as much was tied to the three elements of Uluru – Voice, Treaty, Truth. It would be naive and dangerous to continue to expect that these three words will be the core of the government's national Indigenous Affairs policy in the coming years. This is the politics of a failed referendum.

If Indigenous Australia cannot work with the Prime Minister and develop policy realistic about the referendum result, the danger is that Indigenous policy gets owned by the far left and far right, attaching it to fringe politics. I have spent three decades fighting this marginalisation and its drift into the far left, where Indigenous people are viewed as permanent victims.

Similarly, the far right have no interest in claiming the space. There is no intellectual energy in even thinking about the Indigenous question because Aboriginality itself is rejected. For the far right, Aboriginal history ended the moment the British flag arrived.

The future of Indigenous Affairs lies in economic development. While this is a familiar goal rhetorically, it is in policy implementation that prosperity has come undone. The failure of economic policy in regional and remote areas is where outcomes for Indigenous Australians are worst, where the Closing the Gap results are most distant from mainstream. This failure cannot be ignored, for its outcomes appear again and again in our larger regional towns.

The recent Northern Territory and Queensland elections were fought around juvenile crime, with both politicians and the electorate accepting these as code words for Indigenous crime.

We should not be shocked by crime – nor people's concerns to address crime – when economic development fails. When marginalised people in a wealthy land lack opportunities, they move into larger towns without integrating, leading to increased crime and fear.

What is often lost is that while Indigenous people may be visible among offenders, they are also often victims. Aboriginal people look to governments to provide healthy, crime-free communities as well.

Economic development is a key area of Aboriginal policy that stands in the centre and has broad support. The Prime Minister understands this point, as indicated by his speech at the Garma Festival this year. There must be genuine collaboration between governments, Indigenous communities and industry for Indigenous economic transformation.

While there is existing architecture for this collaboration, what is missing is a framework for connections. That can only happen through national government leadership that the Prime Minister embraced at Garma.

This is Australia's greatest unsolved challenge. The referendum has stalled Indigenous policy, but we must not remain stuck in this inertia. The issues we need to fix are well known.

With our resources, skills and expansive Indigenous lands, we have an opportunity to redress economic injustice. It is in the interests of every Australian that we get this right. ●

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Wyatt

is a former Western Australian Minister and Treasurer

The Indigenous Business Review

OPINION | ALEX SANDERSON

How to be a good ally to Indigenous communities

Thoughtful, intentional and respectful actions are key to any true allyship

Earlier this year, I was in New Zealand presenting at a conference about the platform I created to grow Indigenous business students and empower future Indigenous leaders. During my presentation, a non-Indigenous colleague who supports Indigenous students interrupted my time to discredit me and take credit for my work. For what felt like 30 minutes, I defended my years of hard work against someone seeking recognition for being a "good ally".

This experience forced me to reflect on what true allyship means. Being a good ally involves respectful, informed and intentional support that centres on humility and equity – not personal gain. Many non-Indigenous people ask how they can better support our communities, so I've outlined four key principles to guide meaningful allyship.

AVOID INSERTING YOURSELF IN INDIGENOUS ENVIRONMENTS

The first step is understanding the importance of culturally safe spaces. These spaces allow Indigenous communities to innovate and lead without outside interference. True allies respect the autonomy of these spaces and wait for an invitation before becoming involved. Entering uninvited can unintentionally reinforce historical power imbalances.

Instead, focus on supporting from afar by amplifying successes, offering resources when requested, or championing Indigenous initiatives within your networks. Respecting boundaries demonstrates awareness of cultural safety and builds trust. When invited, you'll know your presence is welcome and valued.

LEAD FROM BEHIND

When you are trusted to collaborate with an Indigenous-led business or initiative, let Indigenous people control their projects and take ownership of their ideas. As an ally, your role is to provide support when needed – whether through expertise, resources, or connections – without imposing your own agenda.

Leading from behind also means listening more than you speak. Indigenous people often have innovative solutions shaped by unique perspectives. Your role is to support these visions without redirecting or reshaping them. Ensure that Indigenous voices remain at the forefront and that all credit stays with them.

DON'T TAKE CREDIT FOR THEIR WORK

Humility is essential in allyship. Supporting an Indigenous project is about facilitating their success, not inserting yourself into their achievements. While being part of someone else's success is rewarding, remember that the credit belongs to Indigenous people and their vision.

It's critical to create an environment where Indigenous-led initiatives can thrive authentically. Indigenous people must be able to showcase their expertise without feeling their success is tied to others' involvement. Your role is to uplift, not overshadow.

DON'T STEAL IDEAS

One of the greatest challenges Indigenous business people face is the risk of cultural appropriation or idea theft. When inspired by Indigenous approaches, resist the temptation to use these ideas for your personal ventures. Indigenous perspectives are informed by cultural knowledge systems and deserve respect and protection.

Treat shared ideas as part of a cultural legacy, not opportunities for personal gain. Protecting these insights strengthens your commitment to genuine support and reinforces the value of Indigenous perspectives.

In summary, allyship requires thoughtful, intentional actions that respect the autonomy and leadership of Indigenous people. By amplifying achievements, fostering safe spaces and honouring intellectual property, allies can help build a more inclusive and equitable business landscape. True allyship means supporting, not leading; listening, not dictating; and celebrating, not claiming credit. ●

ABOUT THE AUTHOR **Alex Sanderson** is a business contributor of the Indigenous Business Review. He is the founder and president of UNSW First Nations Business Society, where he works with UNSW Business School and industry in recruitment and retention strategies of First Nations students and an executive education facilitator at the Australian Graduate School of Management.

OPINION | GNINGALA YARRAN-MARK

Time to recognise the contribution by all Australians

Indigenous businesses continue to make significant contributions to the economies of this nation

Historically Indigenous Australians have been engaged in commercial activities long before the arrival of the Colonisers. Australian Aboriginals were trading with our Macassan (from the Indonesian archipelago) neighbours as early as 1451. The Macassans who sailed to our shores to harvest trepang (sea cucumbers) from Northern Australia (Arnhem Land, Grooyte Island and Gulf of Carpenteria). Exchanges of cloth, axes, tobacco, rice and knives were made. The haul of trepang was processed on our shores and shipped to China.

Based on our long history of trading and enterprise I am still aghast by the deficit narrative that continues to be perpetuated by the broader populous here in Australia. I am irritated that those that control the popular media and influence the narrative are so blinded by their own sense of superiority that little attention is paid to the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons operating businesses, and in doing so making a significant contribution to the Australian economy as well as shifting the dial in terms of significant improvements to socio-economic outcomes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The University of Melbourne's latest Indigenous business Snapshot showed Indigenous businesses it surveyed contributed more than $16bn to the Australian economy, employed 116,795 people and paid $4.2bn in wages. "A large percentage of these businesses – 56 per cent of sole traders and 78 per cent of partnerships – are in rural and remote communities. This is important because it is evidence of Indigenous people using business to provide employment opportunities for themselves and their communities whilst remaining connected to Country," writes Dr Michelle Evans, Director of Dilin Duwa Centre for Indigenous Business Leadership.

It would not be far-fetched to suggest that Aboriginal businesses are punching above their weight in terms of the impact they are having to the Aboriginal community. I will focus on outcomes in employment. Lets compare 2023/24 Indigenous employment figures of some of Australia's largest employers

EMPLOYER	ABORIGINAL EMPLOYEE NUMBERS	% OF TOTAL EMPLOYEES
Woolworths Australia	**4500**	**2.6%** of 185,000
Rio Tinto Australia	**1150**	**5%** of 23,000
BHP Australia	**3247**	**8.1%** of 40,094
Wesfarmers	**4172**	**3.8%** of ~120,000

The 2016 Census states that the health care and social assistance industry is the largest employer of Aboriginal peoples, with a total workforce of 26,200, and yet the 2023 data on persons employed by Indigenous businesses across Australia is a staggering 116,765 peoples, that's nearly four and a half times (4456) greater than the largest employer in Australia of Aboriginal peoples.

Australia needs to confront its own biases as it relates to Aboriginal participation across all sectors in our society and appreciate that Aboriginal Australians, far from being a drain, (as is purported in most headlines) make significant contributions to the economies of this nation. ●

ABOUT THE AUTHOR Gningala Yarran-Mark *MBL LLB Bsc (Hon)* Gningala is an experienced board director. Following an early legal career, Gningala moved into commercial roles with BHP and large contracting firms, where she managed Aboriginal engagement. Her remit was inclusive of employment outcomes, diversity in the supply chain, internal and external stakeholder partnerships and commitments under company reconciliation action plans. After 15 years of building and growing Aboriginal engagement across a number of industry players, Gningala is now undertaking a PhD with a focus on social procurement and Aboriginal contracting entities. Gningala has in-depth working knowledge of the execution and implementation of reconciliation action plans and is adept to the intricacies of Native Title and Traditional Owner negotiations. Gningala has a deep understanding of diversity, cultural intelligence, change management, stakeholder relations and currently holds non-executive director roles with Water Corporation Board, is chairperson of the People and Safety Subcommittee as well as board director with the Australian Wildlife Conservancy.

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NSW Indigenous Chamber of Commerce (NSWICC) CEO Deborah Barwick.

Nurturing success and capability

One of the oldest chambers continues to help businesses reach their aspirations

Brendan Foster

If anyone knows the critical role an Indigenous chamber of commerce plays in empowering First Nations businesses, it's Deborah Barwick.

The proud Gamilaroi woman established the first Aboriginal chamber in Australia – the Mandurah Hunter Indigenous Business Chamber – in 2006.

Shortly after in 2009, she started the NSW Indigenous Chamber of Commerce (NSWICC) as the first state peak body for First Nations entrepreneurs, business owners and enterprising community organisations.

More than 15 years later, Barwick is still at the helm of the NSWICC which now has more than 550 members.

"At the time I noticed there were many barriers to Indigenous businesses winning work, so the feedback that I had been receiving through my work with the Business Enterprise Centre, was the need for an organisation for my people to come together and network with each other and share business successes," Barwick says.

"I was familiar with the importance of a chamber of commerce and found there had never been one independent of government, where it was about Indigenous entrepreneurs and business owners working together.

"So, we launched what was called the Mandurah Hunter Indigenous Business Chamber but within two years we were getting inquiries for membership from way outside the Hunter Region, so that's where the NSW Indigenous Chamber of Commerce was born."

Barwick says the NSWICC differs from mainstream ones because it is more about building the capacity and capability of First Nations businesses.

She says the chamber's primary goal is to help members achieve their business aspirations.

"I want to get a business in my local town that is delivering my services or products to become a big national company one day or even trade internationally. So, our chamber model is very much around building the resources, the tools and offering up support, advice and mentoring," she says.

"If it's a start-up we've got people that can step a business through how they can start up a business and how to do the right research to ensure there's a need for that business.

"So, our members have access to business advisers and business mentors to step them through their journey and we have a heavy focus for advice on how to be procurement ready."

The NSWICC chief executive, who received the NSW Premier's Award for Excellence for her work in supporting the establishment and growth of Indigenous-owned businesses, says many of the challenges faced by First Nations companies from 20 years ago are still relevant today, including access to finance.

> "... some of the Indigenous businesses I've seen are the best in the business

Unfortunately, several Indigenous businesses still must contend with racism.

"There's still a lot of racism – not among everybody – but there is still that perceived idea about Indigenous businesses and their capability and capacity," she says.

"But what I have found is that they haven't had that exposure to Indigenous revenues and businesses and the fantastic job that they do.

"I have been in this space for 20 years now and some of the Indigenous businesses I've seen are the best in the business."

Barwick says it is fantastic to see the massive growth of Indigenous businesses over the last two decades.

She also knows a thing or two about running a company, with her business Winya picking up a swag of national and international awards.

In 2018, Winya became the first Australian company to win a United Nations Sustainable Development Goals award.

"The First Nations economy has changed quite dramatically and it's one of the fastest growing sectors," Barwick says.

"We're seeing businesses that have been members that started as a little sole trader and are now national companies, so we're doing something right." ●

The Indigenous Business Review

Blending tradition with innovation

From Gubbi Gubbi country to world-class spirits, the story of Beachtree Distilling Co. is one of shared passion, writes Zak Kirkup

Beachtree Distilling Co. founders Kirra Daley and Steve Grace at their Caloundra distillery.

Nestled in the idyllic surrounds of Caloundra, on Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi Country, lies Beachtree Distilling Co., a business that is as deeply rooted in its heritage as it is innovative in its craft. Led by manager Kirra Daley and master distiller Steve Grace, this Indigenous-owned distillery has become one of Australia's most celebrated producers of organic spirits.

Their journey from concept to multi-award-winning success is one of resilience, passion, and an unwavering commitment to honouring the land and its traditions.

Origins: A heritage-fuelled vision

The story of Beachtree begins with its founders. Kirra, a Bundjalung woman, grew up with a strong connection to the land, surrounded by vineyards and sustainable farming practices. Her early experiences in winemaking, combined with lessons passed down from her mother and Nonna, fostered a lifelong appreciation for creating something beautiful from natural ingredients.

For Steve, a Kamilaroi man and an electrotechnology expert, the vision was about blending tradition with innovation. His background in engineering provided the technical backbone for developing unique distillation and filtration systems.

Together, their shared passion for native botanicals and organic methods laid the foundation for Beachtree Distilling Co. "Every bottle we craft tells a story of the land, our culture, and our dedication to blending tradition with science," Kirra explains.

Even the name "Beachtree" pays homage to this philosophy. Inspired by the Aboriginal origin of "Caloundra," meaning "place of beech trees," it represents their respect for the land and their commitment to creating spirits that celebrate both place and history.

Start-up: Passion and sacrifice

The path to launching Beachtree was anything but smooth. While the idea for the distillery took root in 2018, the actual journey began in earnest in 2020. However, their plans were immediately disrupted by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, forcing them to pivot and reapply for approvals across multiple councils.

After months of uncertainty, they found a home in Caloundra.

Even after securing a location, the challenges didn't end. Floods in 2022 destroyed essential equipment and lockdowns disrupted operations. To fund their dream, Kirra and Steve made personal sacrifices that underscored their commitment. "We sold our family homes, motorbikes – everything we owned – to keep the business afloat," Kirra shares. "We're all in, and that dedication is what drives us to overcome every challenge."

Living with family while running a growing business has been no small feat, especially with four children between them. Yet their resilience and belief in their mission kept them moving forward.

Challenges: Turning setbacks into strength

Launching during a global pandemic was one thing; building a brand that stood out in a competitive market was another.

Early on, Beachtree faced scepticism about its identity. "We were told our brand was 'too Australian for Australia'," Kirra recalls. "But we stayed true to ourselves. Our designs and labels reflect who we are, and we're incredibly proud of that."

Nature also tested their resolve. The floods in 2022 not only damaged equipment but also threatened their fledgling operations. Despite this, Kirra and Steve leaned on their connection to the community and their determination to rebuild. "The obstacles we faced led us to Caloundra – a place that embodies the spirit of our brand," Steve says.

Winning gold at the World Gin Awards in 2022 for their Organic Koala Gin and Quokka Gin was a turning point. "It validated our unique styles and flavours," Kirra says. "It proved that our dedication to authenticity and quality resonated globally."

Operational excellence: Heritage and sustainability at the core

What sets Beachtree apart is its meticulous approach to crafting spirits, blending heritage with modern innovation. Steve's engineering expertise has been instrumental in designing their unique distillation systems, while Kirra's background in nutrition drives their focus on quality ingredients.

> **"For us, distilling isn't just a business – it's in our DNA**

"Our Organic Koala Gin is crafted using only the finest organic botanicals, like sugar cane from Queensland and native ingredients like lemon myrtle and lime," Kirra says. Their commitment to organic farming ensures that every product is free from synthetic additives, offering a cleaner, more authentic taste.

Sustainability is woven into every aspect of their operations. Their "You Sip, We Plant" initiative, inspired by the bushfires that endangered koalas in 2019, has resulted in more than 20,000 trees being planted. "If you take from the land, you must give back," Kirra says. Their waste is also repurposed as feed and fertiliser for local farmers, further minimising their environmental footprint.

This dedication to ethical practices has earned them global acclaim, including the title of World's Best Craft Producer at the World Gin Icon Awards in 2024. "It's validation for doing things the right way," Steve adds. "We're one of the few distilleries in Australia making everything from scratch, and we take immense pride in that."

Beachtree also continues to grow their collaborations with Indigenous farmers, who play an integral role in the company's exploration of new flavours and spirits.

One of their most significant collaborations is with My Dilly Bag and the highly regarded Indigenous chef and native expert, Aunty Dale Chapman.

"Working with Aunty Dale has been an incredible experience," says Kirra. "She brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise in native ingredients and traditional cooking methods. Her passion for native cooking always inspires my love for pushing the boundaries of my own recipe creations."

This partnership exemplifies Beachtree's dedication to blending tradition with creativity, enriching their spirits with the essence Indigenous heritage.

Future aspirations: Growing with purpose

Looking ahead, Kirra and Steve have big plans for Beachtree. They aim to expand their distribution network both nationally and internationally, introducing more consumers to the unique flavours of their spirits. "We're also excited about launching new products, like an organic spiced rum and Australia's first organic whisky," Steve reveals.

Sustainability remains at the heart of their vision. They plan to scale initiatives like "You Sip, We Plant" and continue collaborating with Indigenous businesses and local growers. "Our journey is truly collaborative," Kirra says. "The more we achieve, the more we can support Australian farmers and contribute to the local economy."

For aspiring Indigenous entrepreneurs, their advice is simple: "Find something you love and do it well," Kirra emphasises. "Passion is what drives you through the challenges. For us, distilling isn't just a business — it's in our DNA."

As Beachtree Distilling Co. grows, it remains firmly rooted in the values that shaped its journey: respect for the land, a commitment to sustainability, and a love for sharing Australia's rich heritage with the world. ●

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In 1972, Akubra established its workshop on Dunghutti Country in Kempsey.

Crafted on Country

A family tradition with Akubra continues in Kempsey, writes **Cassandra Baldini**

Steven Kennedy preparing rabbit fur for Akubra.

With a practised hand, Dunghutti man Steven Kennedy selects and blends rabbit fur, carefully measuring and sorting it by colour. He separates black from grey, taupe and white. After placing the weighed mixture into a mixing machine, he watches the fibres blend, marking the first step in creating an Akubra hat.

In 1972, almost 100 years after it was founded, Akubra established its first and only workshop on Dunghutti Country in Kempsey and became a major employer for the surrounding region and communities that lived there.

In 2022, driven by a passion for unique handcrafted items, Kennedy began his journey at the workshop, following a family legacy that intertwines with the story of the Australian hatmaker.

"I've had a lot of family members working here, including my dad, Wayne Kennedy. He worked for Akubra in the '80s along with other family that were working here when Stephen Keir III was the owner, and I still have family working here now. So, for me, it's not just a workplace; it's a big family," Kennedy says.

"How it all began, I don't know. But I've got this photo of my grandfather, an Anzac veteran who was shot in the knee during WWII. He's marching on Anzac Day, and on his head is an Akubra hat."

Since joining the business, Kennedy has worked across nearly every stage of the production line. He says this has allowed him to gain a deeper understanding of the craftsmanship behind each iconic hat. "What interests me a lot is the different processes. It's good to know why we do what we do, and if some of the hats have issues down the line, you can understand where it went wrong.

"It's given me a good map in my head, and in each section, I tried to perfect it as best as I could."

An Akubra hat undergoes about 162 meticulous steps in its production, from blending and felting to blocking, trimming, and finishing, all ensuring the brand's quality and durability.

Kennedy describes the blocking process, where a formed and felted cone is shaped roughly into a hat. After selecting the size and style, steam is applied to gradually raise the crown and curve the brim. However, he notes sorting the fur is one of the most critical steps. "That's pretty much like the head of a snake; that's where the whole process starts, where everything begins," he says.

"When I mix the fur, it goes from me to the different processes in my department, then it's carried up to the top for further steps. So, the day and how every hat is made starts with me. I'm the first person."

During both world wars, Akubra supplied slouch hats to the Australian armed forces. The hat earned its name due to its wide brim and soft, slouchy crown, which made it ideal for sun protection and suitable for those in the field. By 2015, Akubra reached a significant milestone, having produced two million hats for the military.

Kennedy says being part of the production of hats that have endured for 150 years, worn by veterans like his grandfather, as well as movie stars and Olympians, gives him a deep sense of pride.

"Sometimes I see the name and it reminds me of how my grandfather wore one during the war."

"I feel proud every time I'm out and about and see people wearing the hats. I think to myself, 'I helped make that hat'. There's not a lot of workplaces where you can say that."

And his own choice of hat? He proudly wears the Riverina.

"It's got a big brim, and the front slouches down while the back does too. So when it rains, the water runs off the front and back of the brim," Kennedy says.

Since launching in 1874, Akubra has handcrafted more than 30 million hats. Reflecting on his own contribution to its production, Kennedy says he is glad he took the leap and hopes to inspire the next generation of First Nations Akubra hatmakers. ●

10 TOP TEN Gifts to support Blak businesses

As the holiday season approaches, we're on the lookout for gift ideas that not only bring joy but also support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses. From handmade jewellery and unique fashion pieces to delicious chocolate and unforgettable experiences, we've curated a list of our top 10 gift ideas that give back. By supporting these incredible businesses, you're helping to preserve traditions, promote cultural pride and uplift First Nations entrepreneurs. Let's make this season meaningful in every way.

In no particular order, **Cassandra Baldini** takes you through our top picks

KYKOE

● **Coconut Palm Binbi Scrunchie**
Price range: $15-$30

In recent years, scrunchies have come back in vogue, becoming an essential accessory for anyone looking to secure their locks. This Christmas, KYKOE has it covered with a selection of Walabai (skinny) and Binbi (standard) scrunchies, each featuring exclusive artwork that reflects the brand's mission to allow the wearer to carry culture wherever they go. Launched by Butchulla, Barada Barna and Saisarem (Erub/Darnley Island) woman Tishara Garrett in 2019, who expresses her artistic vision through her cultural heritage. The scrunchies make a perfect stocking filler, a thoughtful Secret Santa gift, or a treat for yourself to help you through the hotter months. For those who prefer headbands, be sure to check out the incredible range; we recommend Coconut Palm as a top choice this summer. **kykoe.com.au**

Amber Days

● **Yaraay bucket hat**
Price range: $50

Bubs need protection from the sun, and with activities moving outdoors, it's time to get sun smart. A perfect gift for the little ones in your life is this hand-sewn baby bucket hat, created in collaboration with Holla Clothes and Gamilaraay artist La Terre Press. Available in sizes small (12-24 months, 48cm), medium (3-5 years, 51cm) and large (6-8 years, 53.5cm). Proud Yorta Yorta and Boonwurrung woman Corina Muir launched Amber Days six years ago, combining creativity with culture and promoting sustainable fashion. As a single mother to her daughter Sapphire, Corina's brand employs Aboriginal women, single mothers, and women from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds who often face barriers to meaningful employment. We're swooning over the latest design of the Yaraay bucket hat, available for purchase from November 22. **amberdays.com.au**

Baagi Milaygiin

● **After Sun Spray & Dreamtime Oil Roller pack. Price range: $60**

It wouldn't be the festive season without a little after-sun and after-fun care, and Baagi Milaygiin has just what you need to recover from all the holiday cheer. Whether it's their Lemon Myrtle Moisturiser or Bush Rub Balm, it's hard to pick a favourite. But this summer we're all about the After Sun Spray & Dreamtime Oil Roller pack. Perfect for anyone in need of a little TLC – whether that's soothing sunburnt skin or shaking off the festivities. Packed with lush, natural ingredients, this combo will leave your skin feeling revived and refreshed. And let's not forget the Dreamtime Oil Roller, made from virgin macadamia oil, lemon myrtle, anise myrtle, blue mallee, Australian white cypress and peppermint gum. It's your go-to for those restless nights or a queasy stomach. Gomeroi and Dharug woman and founder of Baagi Milaygii, Deb Munson, says to roll it on your temples, the back of your neck and under your nose for instant relief. It's like a little festive season survival kit in a bottle. **baagimilaygiin.com.au**

Jibaanga silk scarf

Haus of Dizzy earings

Chocolate on Purpose

Saltwater Eco Tours

Tarni Jane Designs

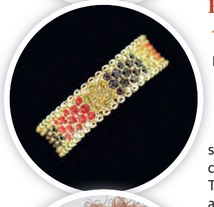
● **Mob Deep 3-in-1 Water Bottle**
Price range: $60

Emotional support water bottles are never far away, and thanks to Tarni Jane's diverse and unique designs, you won't want them to be. Crafted from premium stainless steel, the Mob Deep 3-in-1 Water Bottle comes in 27 different colours and includes three lids to suit all your needs. More than just a vessel for water, it represents unity, connection, and the strength that comes from being part of the Mob Deep family. The artist explains each element in the design symbolises the unique individuals who make up the First Nations community. Perfect for anyone, we can't get enough of the Sapphire Blue. **tarnijanedesigns.com.au**

Haus of Dizzy

● **Crystal Flame Heart Earrings – Large**
Price range: $69

Wiradjuri woman Kristy Dickinson began making jewellery at a young age as a form of art therapy to help her navigate a traumatic period. While wearing her pieces, she often attracted the attention of people wanting to know where they could buy her accessories. Motivated by this interest, she started selling at Bondi Beach markets while working full-time. After securing her first account with the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, her hobby transformed into a thriving business and we're oh so glad it did. Using mirrored acrylic, glitter and dynamic patterns, her vibrant statement jewellery delivers powerful messages that embody unwavering courage in demanding justice, truth and Blak sovereignty. With so much to choose from, it's easy to be captivated by her creations. For us, we can't get enough of the crystal flame heart this festive season. **hausofdizzy.com**



BROSISCUS

● **Colours Crystal Band Ring**
Price range: $60

Established with family at its heart in 2021, BROSISCUS' collection of rings, necklaces and earrings is the perfect gift. The brand seeks to celebrate and showcase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture through exquisite gold, silver and diamond jewellery. Committed to collaboration, it partners with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses, models and artists, fostering a sense of community and cultural pride. With more than 100 sparkling crystals masterfully embedded in a wide band of gold, the Colours Crystal Band Ring is one of our favourite pieces in this collection. **brosiscus.com.au**

Dollies Tribe & Co

● **Willow doll. Price range: $80**

Bundjalung, Gumbaynggirr and Dunghutti women and mother-daughter duo Maryanne Yesil and Savannah Jarrett launched their range of Aboriginal dolls in 2021, offering a selection suitable for boys and girls. Whether individually painted with First Nations art or left unpainted, these dolls are sure to light up your little ones on Christmas morning. Browsing the full range is a delightful experience, and we were particularly drawn to the Willow doll. **dolliestribe.com.au**

Chocolate On Purpose

● **Aussie Bushfood Christmas Chocolate Hamper Bag. Price range: $35**

The signature line of chocolate known as Bush Food Chocolate is made by blending rich, melt-in-the-mouth couverture chocolate with Australian native botanicals sourced from Country. This unique range offers a delicious taste experience and also aims to educate consumers about the superfood benefits of native botanicals and highlight the traditional wisdom of First Nations People regarding their use. There's always room for dessert, so we suggest the Aussie Bushfood Christmas Chocolate Hamper Bag as a perfect gift to enjoy. **chocolateonpurpose.com.au**

Saltwater Eco Tours

● **Bushtucker Cruise. Price range: $65-$99**

Fancy a cruise through Mooloolaba's canals aboard a heritage-listed vessel, or maybe you're more into exploring the sweeping river beyond the main channel on a cultural canoe adventure. Either way, Saltwater Eco Tours, launched by Simon Thornalley, a descendant of the Kaurareg people from Horn Island (Ngurupai), and his partner, showcase the rich culture and history of the Kabi Kabi people on their land. Whether you choose to sail on the restored Spray of the Coral Coast, a 115-year-old, 58ft Huon-pine ketch, or paddle in individually painted canoes, you'll be combining coast with culture. We're suckers for bush tucker, so we're opting for the 5-star Bushtucker Cruise, which offers a gourmet native-infused menu and live music experiences. Not only is this the perfect gift, but also a fun and immersive activity for the whole family. **saltwaterecotours.com.au**

Miimi & Jiinda

● **Jibaanga silk scarf. Price range: $89-$400**

As the weather heats up, we're all about sustainable, slow fashion pieces to keep us cool through scorching days and balmy nights. A little silk and linen can go a long way, which is why we're eyeing the Miimi & Jiinda collection. Fresh off the runway at Australian Fashion Week 2024, their Yuulgaar regular-fit men's button-up linen shirt paired with the matching relaxed-fit linen pants is a stylish go-to. Make sure to allow time for pre-orders. For something ready to wear, the Jaanymili Silk Slip Dress is perfect for effortless summer vibes and why not wrap up one of the new 100 per cent silk scarfs. We're opting for the Jibaanga. **miimiandjiinda.com**

Scan me
For more details on these great gift ideas from Indigenous-owned businesses around the country

The Indigenous Business Review

The true taste of Australia

The founder of Yaala Sparkling has turned her passion for native ingredients into a thriving business with customers nationwide. Brendan Foster finds out more

When Tara Croker discovered that less than 2 per cent of businesses in the native food sector were Indigenous owned, she was determined to take a bite out of the industry.

For the proud Wiradjuri woman, it wasn't about getting a slice of the $81m a year First Nations food industry pie, but about protecting her culture.

So, Croker started Yaala Sparkling in early 2023 to increase First Nations representation in the industry.

"I think it surprises people to learn that despite the knowledge of using these plants coming from our people, we actually only make up 2 per cent ownership of the entire native food supply chain," Croker says.

"And that just really didn't sit right with me because the knowledge of using these plants is coming from our people. But none of those economic benefits were returning to where that comes from.

"So that became my mission to increase that representation, so I worked closely with Indigenous wild harvesters, local farmers, and all the way down the supply chain and across the business with other mob where possible."

The 34-year-old, who has an extensive background in marketing, says she always had a passion for native plants but needed to work out the logistics of turning that into a thriving business.

She openly admits there were a few hurdles and hiccups trying to get the company off the ground. Shortly after setting up Yaala Sparkling, one of the manufacturers she was dealing with went belly up.

"There were so many challenges in entering the manufacturing space around logistics, supply chain management, and the complexities behind that supply chain management with native foods and that ownership I spoke about," she says.

"So, yeah, definitely some challenges along the way but I think there has been some exciting traction in those first couple of years."

So why did Croker decide to produce alcohol-free drinks infused with native ingredients?

After months of going through the research and development process and experimenting with loads of different plants, she landed on sparkling water.

But that was after spending hours in the lab testing a variety of different drinks,

Yaala Sparkling founder Tara Croker.

including kombuchas, ciders and ginger beers.

"I wanted an inclusive drink, so non-alcoholic felt right, and sparkling water felt right because I could highlight the plants that we were using," she says.

"I really wanted to sort of instigate that nostalgia that many people have because we've eaten these plants growing up.

"I wanted to be able to share that with people who haven't experienced that and didn't have that nostalgia also, to know what these plants taste like.

"So, it's all about bringing the ancient knowledge of our traditional plants to the present moment so people can enjoy that in a modern way."

Shortly after the business was launched, Croker used all her marketing skills to land a spot on the TV show Shark Tank.

The national company ended up getting a $125,000 investment from businesswoman and Shark Tank judge Dr Catriona Wallace.

Since the television exposure, the business has picked up a swag of gongs, including the First Nations Business of the Year award at the 2024 SHE-com awards.

"Getting to go on Shark Tank really helped to amplify the brand," Croker says.

"It was an enormous win being able to talk about Indigenous businesses and those issues in the native food industry on a mainstream platform."

> **"... it's all about bringing the ancient knowledge of our traditional plants to the present**

Despite the business' infancy, the company already has two of its products on the shelves of national retailer Dan Murphy – Lemon Myrtle and Native Blossom and Davidson Plum and Waratah – and has just launched two new products – Desert Lime & River Mint and Quandong & Native Ginger.

Croker says Yaala works with First Nations artists to tell the stories behind the ingredients in her drinks. "We want to tell the stories authentically of the plants that we're using in these bottles," she says.

"Because another thing I noticed was mainstream businesses using these plants were not respecting them with the meaning and everything behind them for our mob."

Croker hopes one day her sparkling waters become the "true drink of Australia".

But more importantly, she is passionate about giving back to her community and empowering First Nations people.

"The reason why I'm here today is that I'm constantly meeting mob who are out in the community or working in the native food space that are starting to think about growing these ingredients or are already starting to grow them," she says.

"It's a beautiful and positive way to share and celebrate culture and connect people which I think we need after the referendum in this country.

"And for me, it's all about that collective lifting of mob and the supply chain so we can all grow together." ●

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Making their mark on the national stage

Event celebrates the growth and impact of Indigenous businesses, writes **Rhiannon Clarke**

October's Indigenous Business Month, themed Making Our Mark, highlighted the achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses across Australia. In Perth/Boorloo, Christine Ross Consultancy and Reconciliation WA hosted a sundowner event led by Ross herself, celebrating the growth and impact of Indigenous businesses in Western Australia.

As the event's organiser for the past five years, Ross has passionately advocated for visibility and networking among Aboriginal businesses, especially through Black Coffee – a monthly Indigenous business networking event she established.

"It's about showcasing just how amazing our Aboriginal businesses are," Ross says, emphasising Black Coffee's role in helping businesses start and thrive.

"A lot of Aboriginal businesses have gone on to become so busy they can't even make it to Black Coffee anymore. It gives our mob a platform to showcase what they do."

One keynote speaker, Marisaa Verma, managing director of Bindi Bindi Dreaming, shared her inspiring journey. A business owner since 2000, Verma's work promotes Noongar culture through workshops and culinary tours.

Reflecting on her recent recovery from a serious illness, she says: "Our people have been known for resilience, and if we find ourselves in a tough situation, there's something inside us that just pushes for the end goal — that's life, really."

Verma also notes the sector's remarkable growth, estimating its current worth at $16bn.

The evening also featured Denise Edwards, a Wapaburra woman and founder of an Indigenous cryogenics company, and Ben Chambers, a Murray man who operates Australia's largest Indigenous-owned hydraulic hose supplier, Hose Right, as well as culturally safe daycare centres.

> **"It's about showcasing just how amazing our Aboriginal businesses are**

Another speaker, Bunbara co-founder Nikki Barney-Irvine, discussed her work in education and sponsorship for Indigenous students.

Ross closed the event by advocating for accessible funding to further support Indigenous businesses: "We could all do with seed funding, but to get a little bit of money from the big players, you've got to jump through a lot of bureaucratic hoops," she says.

Ross stressed the significance of Indigenous-led initiatives, sharing that the first sponsors of the event were Aboriginal businesses, underscoring the self-determination driving the sector.

As the evening concluded, the event stood as a powerful testament to the resilience, innovation, and impact of Indigenous businesses across Australia. ●

Christine Ross and guests at the event celebrating Indigenous businesses in WA.

A street paved with flavours of our own

Chef Nornie Bero wants a strip where First Nations businesses can share all they have to offer like the iconic Lygon St in Carlton

Dianne Bortoletto

After three decades in the food industry, CEO of Mabu Mabu, chef Nornie Bero, sounds as if she's just getting started.

"I want a strip," she says, "I want our own strip, like the Italians have Lygon St in Carlton, I want our own First Nations street, there are so many great Indigenous businesses out there, so why not?"

Originally the from the Komet Tribe of the Meriam people in the Torres Strait, Bero has her fingers in several pies.

Mabu Mabu, which is an expression used at the start of a meal meaning "help yourself", includes Big Esso (the biggest thank you) restaurant in Melbourne's Federation Square, Tuck Shop catering named in honour of her father, and Kara Meta (my home) range of pantry items.

The chef established Mabu Mabu in 2018 with a dream to make native ingredients the hero of the Australian kitchen and to support the Indigenous circular economy.

Wherever possible, local products are sourced from Indigenous owned businesses, something Bero is passionate about, supporting other mob businesses.

From humble beginnings selling homemade condiments and spices at South Melbourne Markets, to a growing empire of 80 employees across three departments – retail, catering and dining, as well as products stocked in major supermarkets across the country – Bero's enthusiasm for the hospitality industry is stronger than ever.

It began as a child on Moa Island when Bero's single father put up a makeshift bamboo wall to turn half of their living room into a "tuck shop".

Sent to Far North Queensland for high school, her father became ill and was unable to support her financially, so she started working in pub kitchens at night.

Keen to have "a trade to fall back on" Bero did an apprenticeship in house painting, still working in kitchens at night.

At 18, she decided to make cooking her full-time job and did a chef's apprenticeship. She has worked in Cairns, Townsville and further afield, including London, in modern and traditional Japanese restaurants.

Plans are under way for another restaurant in another city, and her own eight-part television series called Island Echoes, about eight different Torres Strait Islands, will air on SBS and NITV in January.

As she describes returning to the Torres Strait Islands, her voice softens. "Everyone there is just so happy and proud of me, returning to where it all began, it was really meaningful and emotional for me and the team to film there," the chef says.

"You know, I'm just looking for that street, just looking for a First Nations street and have it as ours to share with everyone." •

Scan me
For more details on Indigenous-owned venues around the country

Chef and CEO of Mabu Mabu Nornie Bero.

Dine out at these Indigenous-owned venues around the country

MIRRITYA MUNDYA, BERRY, NSW
Mirritya Mundya means "Hungry Blackfish" in the Ngarrigu language group of South Eastern Australia. It offers an "Indigenous twist" on culinary products and experiences including event catering, a food truck and Spirit Food dining experiences. The five-course Indigenous Twist food journey includes seasonal native ingredients like pepperberry, native ginger, smoked gum leaf, bush mint, lilli pilli, davidson plum and bush tomato as well as proteins including emu, kangaroo, local mussels and baby snapper. Throughout the evening Wandiwandian, Walbunja and Djirringanj descendant Dwayne Bannon-Harrison provides a cultural interpretation of each course and its native ingredients.
mmundya.com

ABORIGINAL BUSH TRADERS CAFE, DARWIN, NT
Located on the ground floor of the Charles Darwin Centre in Darwin's Smith Street Mall, not-for-profit Aboriginal Bush Traders showcases Indigenous bush foods with a modern twist. Basic dishes are transformed with unique characteristics and native flavours bursting with health benefits. Try the tasting plate to sample a variety of native ingredients and samples of bush spices. There's also a gallery with rotating exhibitions every six weeks.
aboriginalbushtraders.com/pages/cafe-new

PALAWA KIPLI, HOBART, TAS
Palawa Kipli started as an Indigenous catering company about five years ago and has evolved to include Indigenous food tours. In Palawa Kani, the Tasmanian Indigenous language, "palawa" means "Tasmanian Aborigine" and "kipli" means food. The Kipli Takara Tours are a 90-minute bush-food walk with a Palawa guide across the culturally rich Piyura Kitina (Risdon Cove). Taste seasonal native bush tucker, learn about Palawa history and culture, and discover ways to shape a sustainable future. The experience ends with a tasting of native finger food and drinks or ask about a private sit-down cultural dining experience featuring a six-plate set menu of native foods.
palawakipli.com

WARAKIRRI DINING EXPERIENCE, MUDGEE, NSW AND OTHER LOCATIONS ACROSS AUSTRALIA
Established in 1997 and owned by Ngemba Weilwan woman, Sharon Winsor, Warakirri Dining Experience is an immersive four-hour, five-course degustation dining experience that showcases Australian native foods, botanicals, culture and rituals. Food and drinks are prepared in a unique fusion of modern techniques with traditional methods. Along with dining, there is authentic cultural entertainment, musical and cultural storytelling, and the sharing of knowledge of Aboriginal culture and food.
indigiearth.com.au/warakirri-dining-experience

JALA JALA TREATS, VIC
Yamatji/Noongar woman Sharon Brindley made her mark on the Indigenous food scene when she opened the only Aboriginal-owned cafe on the Morning Peninsula – Cooee Café – with a menu featuring native ingredients and flavours, and upstairs showcasing other tasty delights such as jams, relishes, teas, herbs and spices.
Her most recent venture is Jala Jala Treats, a dream long in the making to develop stronger connections to her culture and community through the flavours of her Country. Visitors to Jala's independent distribution showroom on Bunurong/Boonwurrung Country in Victoria's Carrum Downs can taste native-infused chocolate bars and teas, or buy ingredients such as Davidson plum and wattleseed to cook at home.
jalajalatreats.com.au

SPINIFEX BREWING CO, WA
Spinifex has proven a transformative business in a very short time since entering the crowded craft beer market in 2020, earning a reputation for its promotion of Indigenous culture as well as its core and seasonal range of beers brewed using native botanicals. Now brewing and cultivating Indigenous ingredients at its new Spinifex Brewery Cable Beach, metres from WA's iconic stretch of coast in Broome, business co-founders Michael Little and Adam Barnyard – along with chief brewer John Gibbs – spent two years sourcing native botanicals from Indigenous farmers and producers before launching the brewery's core range in 2020. A variety of Indigenous ingredients are used that align with the Noongar six seasons for limited releases, often championing an environmental or important cause. Spinifex has a second venue overlooking the Indian Ocean along Perth's northern coast.
spinifexbrewery.com.au

A Warakirri Dining Experience in Mudgee

Chef Zach Green and his mackerel curry on the Pilbara cliffs.

The rocky road to cooking on cliffs

Dianne Bortoletto

Bullied at high school, intergenerational trauma, losing three babies in miscarriage and diagnosed with PTSD, emotional behaviour disorder and Autism as an adult, it's fair to say the path for chef Zach Green has been anything but smooth.

Under the moniker of "The Storyteller Chef", the 35-year-old has been a professional cook for 17 years, drifting in and out of kitchens, packing up when he was triggered with trauma, moving from place to place.

He tried his hand at other jobs including youth work, Aboriginal liaison in a hospital, and even started a transport business.

Born in Melbourne and a descendant of the Gunditjmara people in southwest Victoria and Palawa people in Tasmania, it's the healing power of food that has drawn Green back to the kitchen time and again.

"Being a chef has always been a place where I've been able to get away from certain things in my life," Green says.

After the miscarriage of his first son Elijah, he opened Darwin's first Indigenous pop-up restaurant, Elijah's Kitchen. More trauma followed with two further miscarriages and the breakdown of his relationship.

"It's not something you can get over, trauma is embedded in you, it took me a very long time, about 10 years, to understand those triggers and how they affected me," he says.

"When things got too difficult, I'd internally shutdown, and then move, always with the same idea of getting a fresh start."

Green says he's been working with a psychologist to recognise triggers and how to manage them.

He moved to Perth just before Covid, and then headed north to Port Hedland.

There, Green met a local girl, the now Mrs Green, falling head over heels in love with her and her four boys, whom he plans to adopt, simultaneously rekindling his love affair with food cooking for them.

Mining giant BHP had donated two shipping containers fitted with commercial kitchens to the Town of Port Hedland, which sat unused for two years.

"I had the idea of opening up Iluka's Kitchen and I was asking myself, 'am I ready to do this again?', and I spoke to my wife who supported me all the way."

The Town of Port Hedland agreed to a lease and Iluka's Kitchen launched in August 2023, serving 600 people in the six-week season, also training six Aboriginal employees in hospitality service.

This year, the format of Iluka's Kitchen was a smaller, more intimate dining experience freeing up Green to interact with guests.

"I used to dream of opening up a hatted restaurant, getting all the accolades, but not now," he says.

"My mission now is travelling Australia and doing small pop-up dinners and cultural food workshops with young mob, showing them how to cook kangaroo, hung barramundi, and more, merging traditional and modern food together.

"Our culture, our food, our stories – which means our culture is your culture, our food is your food, and our stories are still present today."

Green has been on television cooking on the Pilbara cliffs and next year plans to hold a pop-up dinner on the spectacular Kalbarri Skywalk, running cooking workshops in the Tiwi Islands and is finalising plans to appear at a number of food festivals around Australia. ●

The Indigenous Business Review

Planting the seeds of generosity

From supplying native foods to connecting people with Country, Bush to Bowl is a social enterprise on the rise

Bush to Bowl founders Adam Bynre and Clarence Bruinsma.

Dianne Bortoletto

A chance encounter at a Northern Beaches Aboriginal meet up has led to establishing a social enterprise that gives back to Country, creates a healing space and platform for Aboriginal people and supplies native foods around the country.

This is the story of Bush to Bowl, a 100 per cent Aboriginal-owned company by Clarence Bruinsma (Yaegl, mid-north coast NSW) and Adam Byrne (Garigal, Sydney).

A former physical education teacher, Bruinsma has always been interested in health and wellness. When he met Byrne in April 2019, a landscaper, they quickly bonded over a shared passion of native plants, food and caring for Country.

"We were discussing plants, people, connecting more to Country and getting people connected through plants, particularly Aboriginal bush foods, and it went from there," Bruinsma says.

Bush to Bowl not only grows native plants and sells fresh, frozen, dried and powdered bush foods, it also runs workshops, offers bush tucker landscaping services and teaches other Indigenous people how to do it, too.

"We've helped mob across the country – NSW, SA, Tassie – if they want to get into the industry, then I'll help them. I can teach them how to grow plants, what plants they should be growing depending on where they are, how to set up a business, how and where to sell products, packaging, document templates, everything and anything they need," he says.

"It's important to help our people get into the industry because only 2 per cent of native food businesses in Australia are owned by Aboriginal people, and we are stronger as a collective."

Remarkably, Bruinsma generously shares his wealth of knowledge without asking for anything in return. "If I can, I'll send them their first plants at cost to help them get started, we probably don't make the money that we could because of it, but it's important, because it can help the socio-economic development of Aboriginal people."

Bruinsma says CommBank gave them their big break two years ago. "It wasn't a loan or anything like that, it was an order, and the promise of consistent weekly orders," Bruinsma says.

"CommBank has its own internal catering for staff dining and client meetings. A friend of a friend knew someone there, then CommBank's executive chef, Lee Hardy, visited our nursery and we showed him what we were growing, he put in an order, and it went from there."

Hardy commented on the benefits of sustainably farmed bush foods.

"At CommBank, we've long used native ingredients in the kitchen and wanted to expand our culinary experiences to include more foraged and locally grown produce. Meeting Adam Byrne and witnessing the incredible work by Bush to Bowl has allowed us to adapt our menus to seasonal conditions and improve the quality of produce we serve every day in our internal cafes as well as part of our Client Services hospitality. This collaboration is about coming to the table as a country and embracing the multiculturalism of our land through traditional foods."

CommBank, Deloitte, Blackmores, Mirvac and other corporations have visited the Bush to Bowl nursery at times once a month as part of their staff wellness programs. ●

■ *For information, visit bushtobowl.com*

Beautiful water made to sparkle

Kepa Kwab, a new Indigenous soda, is helping fund programs for youth, as Dianne Bortoletto discovers

Kepa Kwab (Beautiful Water) is a new canned drink developed by 100 Indigenous youth as part of a Prepare Produce Provide program.

The Perth-based, not-for-profit organisation creates and delivers food and hospitality programs for Indigenous young people across Western Australia.

The non-alcoholic canned soda is flavoured with ethically sourced, native Australian traditional botanicals including wild rosella and finger lime, in consultation with leading Elder and edible native foods specialist Dale Tilbrook. With no added sugar and subtly sweetened with stevia, Kepa Kwab has a soft pink hue and refreshing taste.

Each step of the four-year development of Kepa Kwab has involved Indigenous youth that began with ideation and included flavour profiling, foraging for botanicals, the Swan River story, song, artwork and design, and the launch event.

The striking black can is adorned with red, pink, burgundy floralesque artwork, designed by artist and youth ambassador Molly West, 19, a Nyikina woman (West Kimberley, WA). "The design is telling the story of the ingredients, also the story of who helped create it and the waterways that come through," West says.

"These are the colours of the ingredients, they are so beautiful and bright."

Established in 2013, Prepare Produce Provide runs programs across WA with a vision to inspire vulnerable Indigenous youth to reach their potential through innovative food programs and hospitality. Founder and educator Cath MacDougall says developing Kepa Kwab has been a collaboration between many people.

"To have a beautiful drink that can help us navigate some of the spaces we work in with First Nations young people is really special," she says.

Kepa Kwab is designed to fund and grow Prepare Produce Provide's parent program Djinda Ngardak, which provides mentoring and employment pathways for vulnerable youth.

Djinda Ngardak, which means "coming alive under the stars" in Noongar, provides participants with real life hospitality experience preparing dinners and events that celebrate Indigenous ingredients and culture.

"Developing Kepa Kwab this way with young people gives them incredible real-world experience even if it presents many curve balls, it's worth it when you see the kids empowered," MacDougall says.

Through the Bilya Project, Kepa Kwab showcases the rich history and culture of the Derbyl Yerrigan (Swan River) through song, dance and storytelling.

Prepare Produce Provide partnered with the Bilya Project, a 15-week, artists-in-residence program at Bassendean Primary and Governor Stirling Senior High schools.

Maker of Kepa Kwab, Swan Valley-based Funk Drinks Co, uses reverse osmosis water, a water purification process that separates water molecules from other substances such as chlorine and minerals, resulting in pure water.

Prepare Produce Provide exhibited at the WA state government's food and beverage trade fair, Meet the Buyer, in the hope to find distributors and stockists for Kepa Kwab.

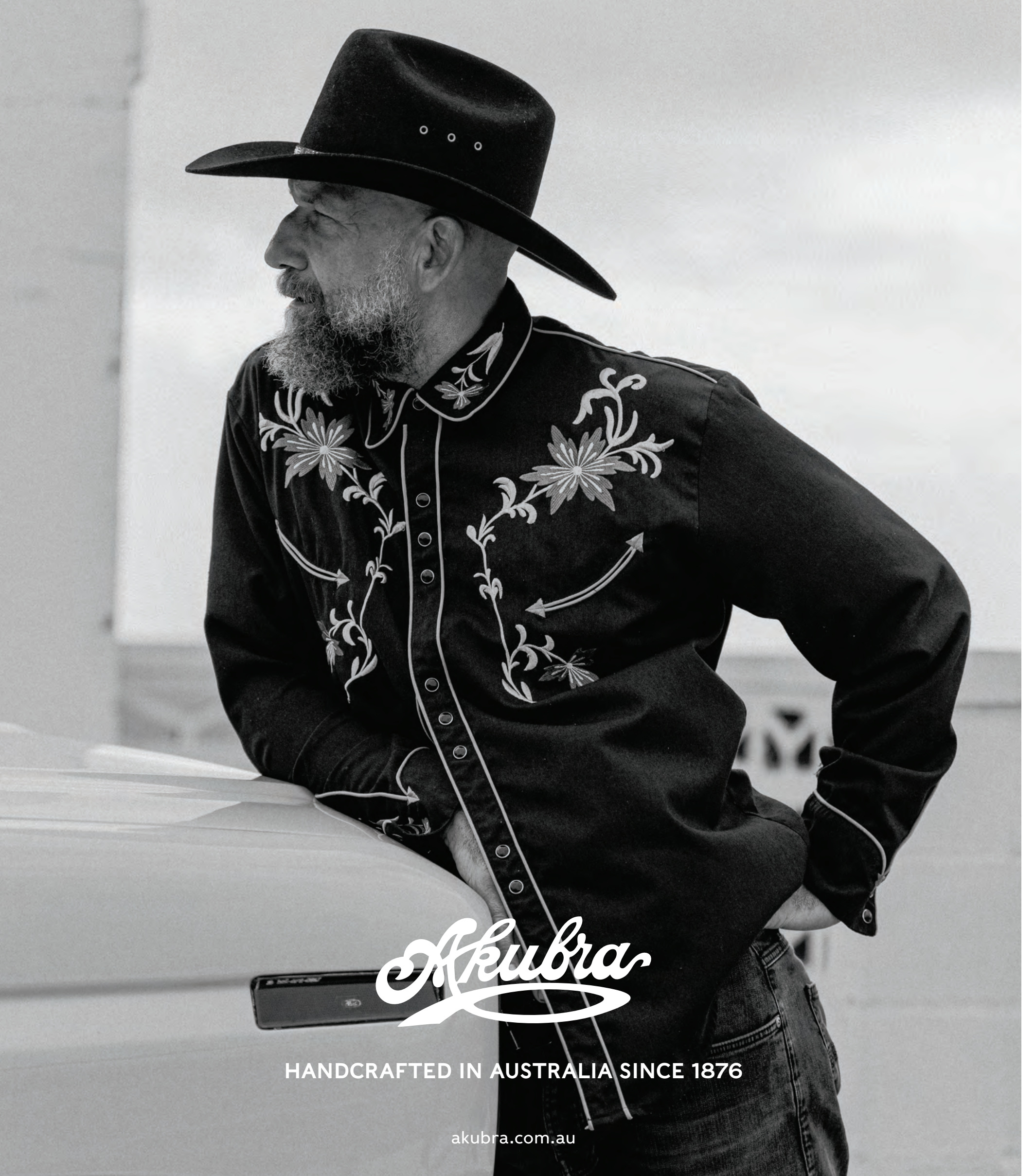
Kepa Kwab youth ambassador Rishaye Shaw, 19, says alcohol was prevalent growing up in the Kimberley. "It's not a good thing. We need to break that cycle. Having Kepa Kwab and the stories behind it will be very impactful," Shaw says.

"It's about connecting to culture and our country. For young people we really need to have a connection to country to show who we are."

Kepa Kwab is the first in a line of planned beverages that will showcase the stories of country across the regions of Western Australia. The next one is Kimberley water.

■ *Kepa Kwab is available online.*
prepareproduceprovide.org
funkdrinks.co/collections/kepa-kwab

Molly West, Cath MacDougall, AMP's Nicola Stokes and Rishaye Shaw.



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