

KIWI CHESTNUTS

FRUITS OF A LONG GARDEN

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It is unfortunate that [...] we will be unable to pass on to the next generation noble avenues such as our fathers planted for us in Grey Street, Hamilton East. Fortunately those trees have grown so tall or have been so placed that their branches do not seriously interfere with our modern innovations. Advantage should be taken wherever opportunity affords, and free space permits [...], to plant free-growing trees such as chestnuts, oaks, ashes, sequoias, etc.¹

Kiwi chestnuts, or katania as we may one day come to call them, are the fruits of a long garden, planted by Pākehā settlers to ‘beautify’ the streets of cities and towns all along the islands of Aotearoa with large, leafy European trees. One of those stately species, known as the sweet or Spanish chestnut at the time, just happens to be one of humanity’s bread trees.² It bears a floury nut that has nourished many northern hemisphere populations for millennia.

In March 2015 I had just moved to Kirikiriroa Hamilton, to an old state house by the Waikato river — always and deservedly referred to as ‘the mighty Waikato’. As the season of mists began, I spotted chestnut burrs littering the lawns by the riverside walkway: bright green just-fallen burrs, dried out sepia-toned ones, with plump, glossy red-brown nuts

¹ ‘Source of danger: Trees and power lines, remedial steps urged. Beautifying society’s position.’ *Waikato Times*, 27 July 1933, p. 9.

² Two commonly planted food-bearing trees were the walnut, and the oak, of course, which like the chestnut has nourished humans both directly and via the pig. Neither, however, have been as important human food sources as the chestnut.

peeping from spike-lined cracks. Now and then bare nuts, released up in the canopy, fell and bounced on the ground.

In my native Italy such an easily accessed bounty would be pounced upon the moment it appears. Italians are foragers at heart, witness the many yearly mushroom poisonings and deaths. Chestnut lovers only risk losing a few drops of blood. Even so, most of us buy them in shops, as flour, marrons glacés, dried white nuts to cook in milk, raw nuts to boil or roast. When I was a child I loved the obligatory All Soul’s Day (November 2) visit to family tombs — because a roast chestnut seller was always stationed at the doors of the cemetery, selling half-charred, half raw goodness, piping hot in a paper cone.

As the Aotearoa season progressed — in the North Island it usually goes from early March to late April — I became curious about how so many chestnut trees had come to the banks of the Waikato, and why an elderly Chinese man and I were the only people gathering the fallen nuts. We would nod to each other as we did the chestnut shuffle: feel for full burrs with solidly shod feet; squash them open to reveal the nuts; ease the plumpest ones out with careful fingers or a stick. He suggested a simple way to enjoy them: boil until soft, cut in half, eat with a teaspoon.

Chestnuts are a treasured seasonal treat and a food of the heart and soul in places such as Japan, Korea, China, and Europe. New Zealanders who hail from these areas have much to teach us about these little brown nuts, but so do past Pākehā cooks.

‘JUST A CHESTNUT’

Chestnut trees (*Castanea* spp.) are members of the beech family. About thirteen main species are native to a temperate northern hemisphere climactic band that stretches across Europe, Asia and North America. Pollen studies indicate that at least some of these species are ancient: