Sweet tree dreaming

Is it last drinks for Tasmania's cider gums?

WHEN TASMANIA-BORN Mary Donaldson wed Crown Prince Frederik of Denmark, the Australian Government's gift to the couple was a collection of Tasmanian native trees that included cider gums. The trees should have the best chance of surviving the cooler Danish climate, being among the most frost-resistant of all Australian trees.

Back home in Tasmania, one of these tree species is in peril and efforts are being made to save it from extinction in the wild. On a bleak Tasmanian winter morning I was at Miena, on the Central Plateau, 110 km north of Hobart, with Tasmanian cider-gum expert, Associate Professor Brad Potts of the University of Tasmania's School of Plant Science. All around were dead, twisted, grey trunks of the Miena cider gum. "I've been studying this population for over 20 years and in the early '80s, 70 per cent of these trees were alive," Brad said. The Miena cider gum is among the most endangered trees in Tasmania. It's highly specialised, adapted to life on the edge of natural clearings and frost hollows, where winter temperatures can fall well below zero.

The cider gum gets its name from its habit of exuding sweet sap that ferments in contact with natural yeasts in the air to produce an alcoholic drink. This was highly prized by Tasmanian Aboriginals, who drank the 'cider' at corroborees. The sap attracts insects, marsupials and birds. Large, drunken flocks of parakeets have been seen drinking from pools of sap in the most bountiful years.

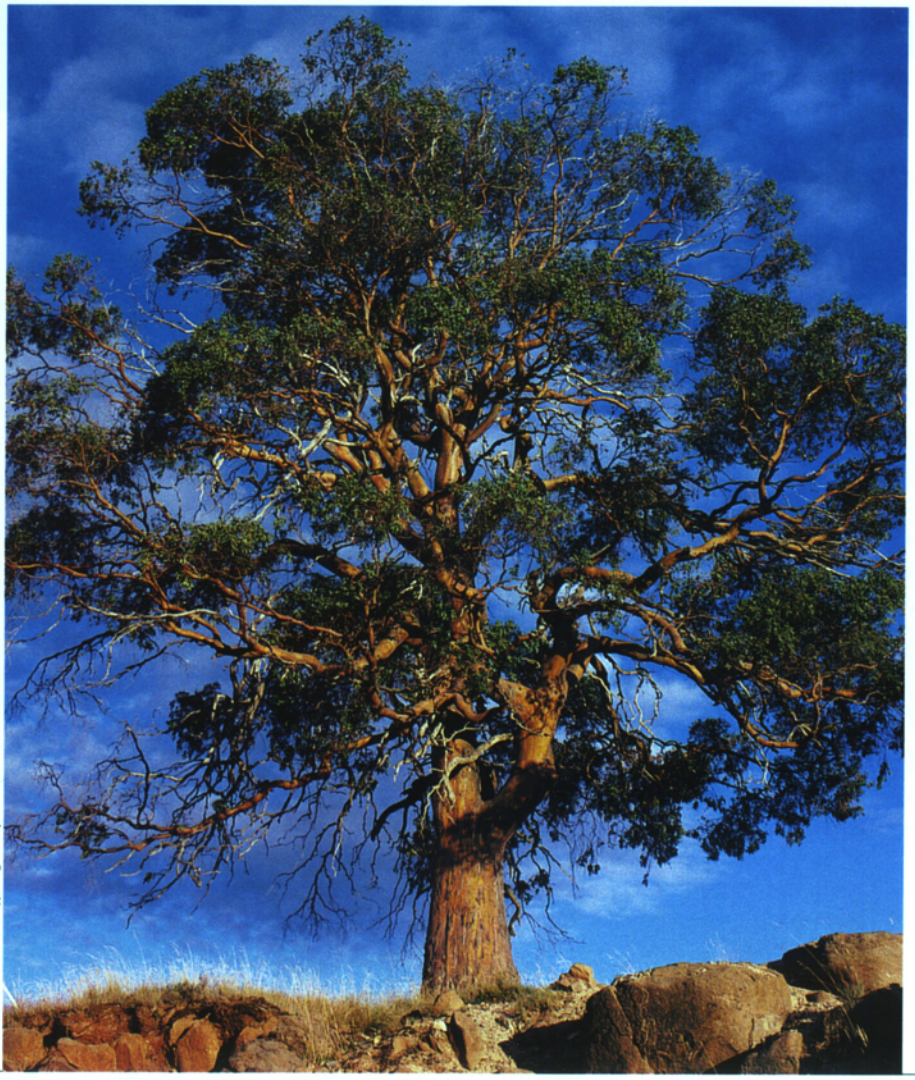
Here at Miena we had come to study the most hardy of all cider gums, *Eucalyptus gunnii ssp. divaricata* – a subspecies adapted to the longest, coldest winters of anywhere in Tasmania. We would pinpoint by GPS the remaining living trees in the area, so that each tree can be mapped and its progress followed as part of a species recovery project.

"There are several reasons for the trees' decline," Brad told me as we scouted for the round, grey-green leaves of *divaricata* seedlings. "First, there's been quite a drop in rainfall in this part of Tasmania in the past 20 years, and along with that a rise in temperature of around 1.5°C."

This may be due to global warming and it means that slightly less cold-adapted trees are able to out-compete *divaricata* in its preferred habitats.

"Then there's the summer sheep grazing, which means that saplings are continually cut back, and there's more

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GRANT DIXON / *Eucalyptus gunnii* sp.



GABI MOCATTA

Cider-gum expert Brad Potts (above) has been studying the Miena cider gum for more than 20 years and says that 70 per cent have succumbed, probably to warmer temperatures. Cider gums grow robustly (left) in below-zero temperatures.

possum browsing since the highland fur trade ended," Brad said. "So, old mature trees are dying out and young ones aren't reaching maturity. All this adds up to a tree in rapid decline."

Though they may be disappearing from their natural habitat in Tasmania, cider gums are grown in Europe and North America, both as a plantation and garden tree. One thing that may promote the preservation of cider gums is the popularity of the trees' sugary sap among bush-food enthusiasts.

"The cider gum's sap is unique," said Stephen Harris, a botanist at Tasmania's Department of Primary Industries, Water and Environment (DPIWE). We were visiting an ancient stand of living gums on the Central Plateau at the start of spring and after tasting the sweet, musky sap dripping from the trees, I immediately understood why chefs and 'foodies' are so enthusiastic. Cider-gum sap could be used in a wide range of foods: from ice-creams to liqueurs, even as a eucalypt version of maple syrup.

However, Dr Wendy Potts, a botanist with DPIWE's Threatened Species Unit, sounds a word of caution: "Tapping for sap could add extra pressures on trees in the wild, as it can easily result in the death of trees," she said.

Nevertheless, some people think that the tree's survival may well lie in its commercial possibilities – in plantations. Otherwise, Australians may have to travel to northern Europe to taste the sap and admire these unique Tasmanian trees.

GABI MOCATTA



The cider gum leaf (above right) exudes a sweet sap that ferments in contact with natural yeasts in the air. Botanist Stephen Harris (below) reckons its food value is not only the tree's selling point, it's a great practical reason for saving it from extinction.



PHOTOS: GABI MOCATTA