

WEEKEND

# PLUS

FOOD

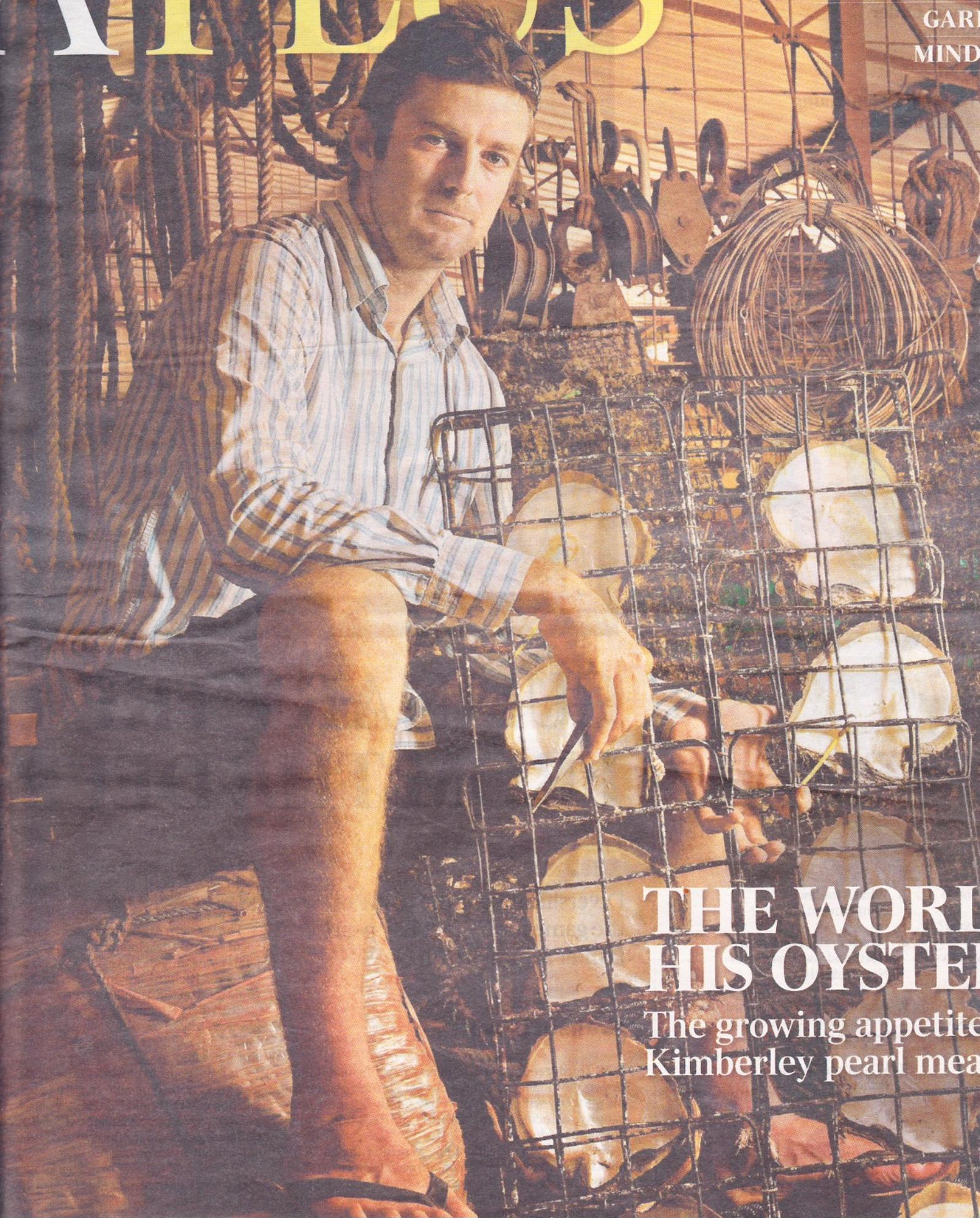
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WEEKEND PRO

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## THE WORLD HIS OYSTER

The growing appetite  
Kimberley pearl mea



# CULINARY TREAT FROM THE DEEP

Diversification is the name of the game for Cygnet Bay pearl farmer James Brown

## Graham Lloyd

FOR third-generation Kimberley pearl farmer James Brown, developing a national market for fresh pearl meat fits perfectly with the Cygnet Bay family business philosophy of focusing on carefully crafted, high-value premium product.

Translucent in appearance, pearl meat is the adductor muscle that attaches the hand-sized pearl oyster to its shell. On rock oysters it is the stub left on the shell when the oyster is removed, and too small to be considered worth eating. But when taken from the monster *Pinctada maxima* pearl oysters the meat can be flash-fried or sliced sashimi-style and drizzled with lemon and chilli for an epicurean delicacy. The taste is best described as a cross between abalone and scallop.

Although pearl meat is not new to the Australian restaurant scene, most has traditionally been sold dried or frozen. Brown says his company hopes to develop a niche market for the fresh product among high-end restaurants. The company's advantage is its location: unlike some competitors that can only be reached by boat, Cygnet Bay has road access, enabling rapid transport across the country.

"We had celebrity chef Iain Lawless (of Kitsch in Perth) and the Loose Box chef Alain Fabregues demonstrate the product at the Mundaring Truffle Festival and they loved it," Brown says. "Both chefs had only used frozen pearl meat before and said the raw product was just so much better."

Lawless says there is a huge difference between frozen

and fresh pearl meat: "You can just cut it really thinly and eat it, it is that good. The best way is to not cook it at all, to just cut it really thin and cure it with a little bit of salt for three or four minutes and then wash it and pat it dry."

The Western Australian Fisheries Industry Council has spent six years developing a food safety program for fresh pearl oyster meat. WAFIC research and development manager Richard Stevens says Australian production could total up to 20 tonnes a year.

Pearl meat is generally harvested after the second pearl has been produced, with each pearl oyster yielding about 150g of flesh. Cygnet Bay is aiming to harvest about 20,000 shells a year.

"It is not going to be worth millions of dollars, but I see it as a great way to be able to get more exposure for the location and the brand," Brown says.

However, if price estimates of \$250 a kilogram can be realised, pearl meat may well provide a new business opportunity in its own right.

"If you could sell raw for \$250 a kilogram of meat and if shell prices continue to rise to \$US20 a kilo, you may find a

**'You can just cut it really thinly and eat it, it is that good'**

business case exists to pick up the big old shell just for the pearl meat and the shell," Brown says. "The industry hasn't operated that way for more than 50 years."

Pearl meat is part of a much bigger diversification program being implemented at Cygnet Bay by Brown, who returned to the Kimberley in 2000 after studying marine biology in Queensland. After completing a pearling apprenticeship, he took over the running of the business about seven years ago.

To diversify, he has established a domestic retail brand for Cygnet Bay Pearls which helps underpin a thriving tourism business.

The company is responsible for producing the world's



clockwise from left  
Cygnet Bay pearling operation  
in full swing; a look inside the  
shell; a fine quality pearl from  
Cygnet Bay; a dish prepared with  
fresh pearl meat

PICTURES: VANESSA HUNTER



**CHECK IT OUT**

**Cygnet Bay Pearl Farm**  
Cape Leveque Road, Dampier Peninsula, WA  
Phone: (08) 9192 4283; fax: (08) 9192 4810

**Broome Gallery**  
Shop 2, 21 Dampier Terrace, Broome, WA  
(08) 9192 5402

finest quality large pearl, a 22.23mm-diameter monster that's on display in Brown's shop and gallery in Broome.

When Brown's parents opened the first cultured pearl shop in Broome in 1971, there were few tourists. "They quickly stopped messing around with that and sold directly to the wholesale market for the past 25 years," he says.

Brown discovered only recently that his family held the first cultured pearl licence in Western Australia and that his uncle was the first non-Japanese person to work out how to culture pearls.

"My father and his brother built the first non-wooden lugger in the pearling industry and they brought the first non hard-hat divers into the field," he says.

"I had no idea.

"Our tourism business shows it's a story that obviously appeals to the sense of Australian spirit."

Tourism, in turn, has allowed Brown to build his real passion — a marine research centre, opened in 2010, that provides accommodation and access for marine scientists to unlock the secrets of the surrounding waters.

Brown says preliminary research has established that the Kimberley hard corals are going to outstrip the better-known Ningaloo Reef in terms of biodiversity.

"They will possibly even give the Great Barrier Reef a crack," he says.

The research station follows the pioneering spirit that led Brown's grandfather, Dean Murdoch Brown, to first establish the pearling business on Sunday Island in 1946. He lived there for 15 years collecting mother of pearl until plastics started to take over.

Other pursuits kept him busy, crocodile shooting and canning wild oysters among them.

"And then in the mid-1950s an American and Japanese company called Pearls Pty Ltd started operating out of Kuri Bay," says Brown.

"After their supply ship sank he won a contract to supply that base, and this is really where he would have seen there was much more to be had from the pearling industry."

The breakthrough for Cygnet Bay Pearls came when Dean's son Lyndon (James's uncle) miraculously discovered how to culture pearls unassisted, on a beach, becoming the first non-Japanese person to do so.

After honing his skills for 10 years, Lyndon moved the business from Sunday Island to nearby Cygnet Bay, on the Dampier Peninsula 200km north of Broome, and about 1800km northwest of Perth.

Today, Cygnet Bay Pearls employs a pearling crew of about 40 to produce about 60,000 pearls a year.

Brown says the notoriously boom-and-bust pearling industry is coming off a 15-year high as new operations in Indonesia and elsewhere start to catch up with the quality of Australian producers.

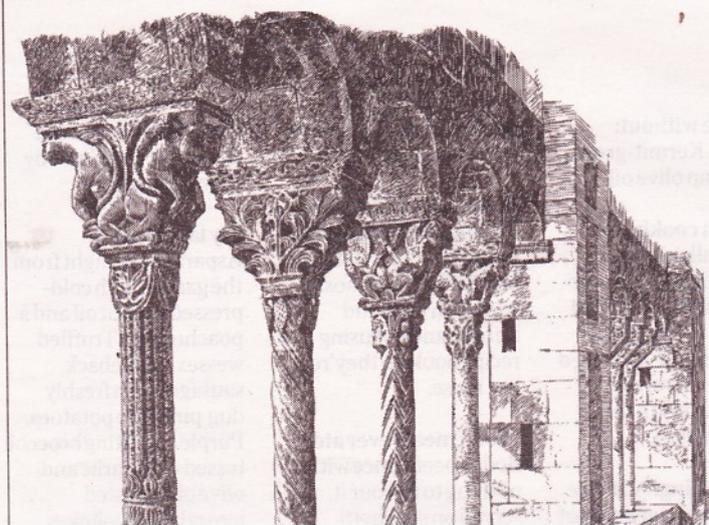
"The Australian crop has been operating in a niche of its own because we are able to grow bigger product than anywhere else in the world," he says.

The global financial crisis had a huge impact on the pearling business but, unlike mining, cutting back supply swiftly is not an option. "Pearling is very labour-intensive and the two-year cycle — from the first operation to seed the pearl, to harvest — really means you can't stop," he says.



**NECIA WILDEN**

**Do I have to cut down on butter, triple-cream cheese and pork fat?**



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