

Building the Fellowship of the Feijoa:

Towards a biography
of New Zealand's favourite fruit

Kate Evans
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The Winston Churchill Fellowship grant, along with a Creative NZ grant I also received, allowed me to complete the overseas research for my creative non-fiction ‘biography’ of the feijoa. Without these travels there would be no book, and my experiences overseas surpassed my expectations – the stories I discovered were even more fascinating than I’d expected. I’m also incredibly thankful I was able to make the trips in 2019 – had it been this year, they would have been cancelled, and I may have been forced to abandon the whole project.

My idea was to use narrative storytelling focussed on just one plant – NZ’s beloved feijoa – to tell a broader story about human relationships with plants, how food becomes part of our identity – and show just what a melting pot of global influences many aspects of ‘national’ identity really are.

Feijoas originate in the highlands of southern Brazil and Uruguay, where there is some evidence they were eaten by indigenous peoples. In the 1820s, a German explorer-naturalist, Friedrich Sellow, was the first European to ‘discover’ the feijoa in and send herbaria – samples of the leaves and flowers - back to Berlin. In 1890, a French landscape gardener first brought back a living plant from Uruguay to his home on the French Riviera, and then wrote an article introducing the plant to the world. It first arrived in NZ around 1910 – and somehow became an unofficial symbol of the country and a prime source of homesickness for expats. I wanted to get to the bottom of all these stories and connect with people around the world who are as nuts about the feijoa as I am.

I went first – in March 2019 -- to southern Brazil, the feijoa’s ancestral home, where I travelled through its native ecosystem with a group of feijoa scientists from the Federal University of Santa Catarina. They took me to a wild feijoa forest, an archeological site that was inhabited 1000 years ago by the first feijoa-eaters, to a ‘germplasm bank’ protecting feijoa genetic diversity, and, most interestingly for me, a traditional Afro-Brazilian quilombo (the name given to communities descended from escaped slaves) where the people revere the feijoa’s healing properties and have used feijoa leaves medicinally for five generations.

I could give you a whole lot more detail about what I saw and learned... but you’ll just have to read the book, as it will all be in there!

Rubens Nodari, the Professor and leader of the program, hosted a Sunday barbecue and invited all his PhD and Masters students working on different aspects of the fruit, and they each presented their work to me – a kind of personalised TED talk. (As a side-note, some of the things I found out about in Brazil, and then subsequently researched -- about tropical archaeology and ethnobotany -- led me to a whole new journalistic ‘beat’ for me: the archaeology of the Amazon. I’ve since published articles on that topic in [National Geographic](#) and [Ensia](#). I continue to have contact with half a dozen archeologists in the field and anticipate doing more stories.)

In June 2019, I went to the Colombian Andes, the only other place apart from New Zealand where the feijoa is widely known (all my Uber drivers loved it.) With Colombian feijoa guru Omar Camilo Quintero, I saw commercial plantations where, because of the equatorial lack of seasons, the plant flowers and fruits simultaneously.

At one of the misty orchards we visited, he told me the landowner, an American, had left the country after being kidnapped by the FARC for a year.

The next weekend, I was a guest of honour at the Festival de la Feijoa in the tiny, Macondo-esque village of Tibasosa, three hours drive from Bogotá. Not only is it known as the ‘land of the feijoa’, it’s also famous for being the ‘town of the matriarchy’ due to a string of female mayors. I visited an 80-year-old feijoa breeder, a factory making a milky feijoa liqueur called ‘sabajon’, helped make feijoa dishes with a flamboyant gay chef in the bustling kitchen of his ‘Tierra de Feijoa’ restaurant. During the festival itself, I got to judge the feijoa desserts competition and walk the ‘green carpet’ to receive a wooden trophy in the shape of a feijoa.

I then went to the French Riviera where I teamed up with Florence André to search for the 19th Century personal garden and villa of her great-grandfather, the landscape gardener Edouard André. He was the first person to bring a live feijoa to Europe, plant it in his garden, and introduce it to the world. The location of his garden - where that first tamed feijoa grew - was lost to history, presumed to have been turned into luxury apartments. But Florence and I pieced the mystery together in the Cannes archives, traipsed around the streets of Golfe-Juan, were assailed by squatters and scary dogs, and eventually discovered Andre’s original garden — intact.

I also visited Berlin, where I traced the wartime travails of the feijoa type specimen and the story of the man who collected them: Friedrich Sellow, a German explorer who travelled through the wilds of Brazil from 1815-1831, and is honoured in the plant’s Latin name. At the Berlin Museum of Natural History, Sabine Hackenthal showed me Sellow’s original diaries and sketches, as well as some of the birds he collected (some were a little scruffy, having been thrown out of their cabinets and the second-floor windows of the museum by the shockwaves of World War Two bombs.)

At the Berlin Herbarium I met botanist Peter Hein, who showed me one of the original type specimens of the feijoa. It had been sent back from France after the war, as the Herbarium and all its specimens were completely destroyed by an Allied bomb in 1943.

I’ve also been working on building a following. During my travels I shared photos and stories on my Feijoa Fellowship [Instagram](#) (295 followers) and [Facebook](#) page (754 followers), which saw considerable interest and engagement. Incredibly, my most-viewed post – with a reach of almost 20,000 – was about taxonomy: the feijoa being reclassified and its Latin name changing from *Acca sellowiana* to *Feijoa sellowiana*.

Please refer to my Instagram page for real-time photographs and stories posted during my travels.

I also set up two interviews on Jesse Mulligan’s RNZ radio show, one in the studio in his ‘expert’ slot, and one calling in from the feijoa festival in Colombia - both of which generated a lot of discussion and messages into the show.

Two articles were also written about the book project:

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/food-wine/108241460/first-pav-then-kiwifruit--now-kiwiana-feijoas-reclaimed-as-south-american-icons>

<https://thisnzlife.co.nz/feijoa-loving-journalist-kate-evans-gains-die-hard-feijoa-following-as-she-explores-the-origins-of-feijoas/>

My book is something that's never been done before – no-one has told the feijoa's story – it is completely original research and storytelling, incorporating material in Spanish, Portuguese, German and French.

The labour-intensiveness of transcribing and translating material, plus the additional research required – and the demands of two young kids and being the family's main breadwinner – mean that I haven't completed the manuscript yet. I've written 6 chapters so far, around 20,000 words – about a third of the book.

To enable me to complete it, I recently launched a [Patreon](#) crowdfunding site - and have 30 patrons supporting me with around NZ\$500 every month in donations to help me spend the time required to finish the book. The more patrons I get, the faster I'll be able to complete it.

I pitched it to Penguin Randomhouse and HarperCollins who didn't believe it would sell enough copies. Allen and Unwin asked for some sample chapters and I am waiting to hear back. I plan to work on the manuscript more and then send to some of the University publishers. If I can't secure a mainstream publisher I will investigate crowdfunding. One way or another, the book will be published.

I will keep you updated on how this progresses. Ideas or assistance welcome!

Reference URL's

<https://www.instagram.com/feijoafellowship/>

<https://www.facebook.com/FeijoaFellowship/>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/09/ancient-humans-burned-amazon-fires-today-entirely-different/>

<https://ensia.com/features/ancient-amazonian-societies-managed-the-forest-intensively-but-sustainably-heres-what-we-can-learn-from-them/>

<https://www.patreon.com/feijoafellowship>

<https://thisnzlife.co.nz/feijoa-loving-journalist-kate-evans-gains-die-hard-feijoa-following-as-she-explores-the-origins-of-feijoas/>

<https://www.nzgeo.com/stories/the-peoples-fruit/>

www.feijoabook.com