

You may have been wearing flares the last time you tried carob. It ranked up there with wheat germ as a product of choice during the alternative health movement of the seventies, and it's still widely thought of as a chocolate alternative.

However, Michael Jolley, founder of The Australian Carob Company, says carob offers consumers and food and beverage manufacturers so much more. As the largest producer of carob products in the southern hemisphere, he has made it his mission to re-educate the market on the benefits of this high fibre product.



The Australian Carob Company makes a range of products for the retail health food market.

"We are the first ones in Australia to put a full range of natural carob products on the market and as part of that, we hope to teach people that carob is much more than chocolate," Jolley says.

"Raw carob powder is delicious, and we also make a kibble which can be used like dried fruit for snacking on or in breakfast cereal, and a versatile syrup."

Jolley's company makes its carob products by crushing the pods that grow on carob trees. The resulting kibble-style product can then be milled into fine powder form.

The company currently makes a range of natural carob retail products. These span raw and roasted carob powder, which can be used in baking instead of cocoa powder, kibble nibbles for snacks and adding to breakfast cereals, and carob syrup, which can be used for marinading, as a dessert topping or in dressings. It also makes some carob-based chocolate buttons for old times' sake.

Though the company sells these products via the retail health food channel, Jolley says carob's real value lies in its potential as a healthy ingredient for food and beverage manufacturers.

That's because carob is a naturally sweet, high fibre ingredient with great flavour. According to Jolley, one local manufacturer already uses carob to flavour its tea bags, while another uses it as an ingredient in its healthy slices and snacks.

The Australian Carob Company also sells its kibble to Woolworths, which uses it in its Macro healthy nibble mix.

"We are also getting a lot of inquiries from other manufacturers, such as those that make gourmet treats for pets," Jolley says.

"It's great to see the demand growing after so many years of hard work."

Jolley began the South Australian venture back in 2000. He and his wife bought a block of land and planted 6000 carob trees.

Then they imported a carob kibbler from Spain to remove the seed and break up the carob pod. They also installed a large roasting oven to make their roasted carob powder, as well as milling equipment and a packaging line, all located on the farm.

Jolley says sales have more than tripled over the past year, and given that the company is now selling its products to manufacturers, he is predicting even more growth over the next year.

His orchard can produce 600 tonnes of carob pods a year, he says, which gives him ample capacity to accommodate all of this growth.

According to Jolley, the company also has an edge over other producers in the flavour stakes. Many producers select the carob for its seed, which is a carob by-product that's used as a food, pharmaceuticals and cosmetics thickener.

Jolley, who is a gardener, says his carob trees were selected specifically for the flavour of the pods. "Even people who have eaten carob all their lives can't believe the taste," he says.

"If you use quality ingredients, you end up with a quality product. My wife and I did all this ourselves. We didn't have a big cheque book, and it's been a struggle, but now we have companies overseas wanting our products.