***Too sweet, and …pineapple!.* A brief history *of* Sweet and Sour Pork in Australia.**

I came across someone the other day who has never eaten sweet and sour pork. The more I tried to explain what it was the more she looked bewildered then disgusted. I rose to its defence as she asked me more and more about the dish: was it really Chinese, what was the sauce made of, what was pineapple doing in a supposedly Chinese dish, when and where was it created? But I was floundering. Time to do some researching I thought.

First step I thought was to see what I could find of its origins. It’s one of those dishes where this is not clear. The consensus is that it originated in Guandong (Canton). ‘Multiple regions in China claim to have the first recipe including Henan in central China, Jiangsu in northeastern China, and Canton in the south. In all cases, these provinces do have a sweet-sour dipping sauce made of vinegar and sugar. However, it is the Cantonese origins that most closely resemble what we know of as sweet and sour pork.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

Next question - how did it get to Australia? While there were Chinese in the colonies from their earliest years , the biggest influx occurred in response to the discovery of gold in Victoria and New South Wales beginning in 1851. The majority of those who came were from Canton/Guandong. ‘On the goldfields some of them opened cookshops serving not only the Chinese miners but those looking for an alternative to mutton and damper.’[[2]](#footnote-2) ‘When the gold rush years ended,; writes Cecilia Leong-Salobir, ‘Chinese miners flocked to the cities to start restaurants … Most of Australia’s Chinese population before the White Australia policy[[3]](#footnote-3) were from Guangdong and served Cantonese fare. It was this food which took a foothold. .. The Australian public started eating at Chinese restaurants from the 1930s, or brought saucepans from home for takeaway meals.[[4]](#footnote-4) Chicken chow mein, chop suey and sweet and sour pork were the mainstays.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The first published English language recipe for sweet and sour pork in Australia I found was this one in the 21 April 1938 *Australian Women’s Weekly* from Mrs Lee Soong ‘an ardent feminist and peace worker, (who) came to Sydney as a delegate to the recent International Women's Conference, she is as much at home in the kitchen as she is on a public speaking platform’.

Sweet and Sour Pork

Take l lb pork chops, 1 cup vinegar, 1 cup Chinese mixed pickles, 1 cup stock (any kind).

Cut the pork up in little cubes about one square Inch. Fry In fat or peanut oil until brown.

Drain, then put on dish. Put the cup of vinegar in a frying pan, bring to the boil, add stock and pickles, and a little corn starch. Add the cooked, pork mix well, and serve.

A little sugar may be added to sweeten if desired.[[6]](#footnote-6)[[7]](#footnote-7)

This looks little like what most Australians would understand as sweet and sour pork. The pork is not covered in cornflour before frying, the sauce is simple.

This is closer from 1949.

Tin Suin Pai Kwe

Pork with sour-sweet sauce

Ingredients: 1 ¼ lbs of pork cutlets, ½ lb mixed pickles, 2cups flour, 2 eggs, 2 cloves of

garlic, 2 teacups of vinegar, 1 cup sugar, Chinese sauce (Marmite), cornflour, water (cornflour and water for thickening), salt and pepper.

Sour sweet sauce. Sprinkle salt into oiled frying pan and cook cloves of garlic crushed

with a knife for a few seconds. Add vinegar, sugar, a little Chinese sauce, cornflour water and pepper.

Prepare pork as follows, cut cutlets into l inch lengths, salt and pepper coat with flour and dup into beaten eggs. Cook in large saucepan of boiling oil or fat for 15 minutes, drain

thoroughly. Heat  sour-sweet sauce and when boiling add pork and pickles, stir for half

a minute and then serve, preferably with plain rice.[[8]](#footnote-8)

I wondered what Chinese sauce was, but later recipes call for soy sauce so perhaps Chinese sauce is soy sauce. Which then makes sense - sort of – of the suggested substitute Marmite as a flavour equivalent . Based on current-day recipes, the ‘mixed pickles’, in other recipes specified as ‘*Chinese* mixed pickles’, were likely to have been a mix of turnip, radish, carrots, cucumber and bruised slices of ginger in rice vinegar with salt and sugar.[[9]](#footnote-9)

But while this is closer to what Australians would recognise as sweet and sour pork (sweet and sour anything for that matter) there is a defining element missing. It turns up first in the recipe for Wong Mun Gai (Chicken with Pineapple, sweet and sour) in Roy Geechoun’s 1948 *Cooking the Chinese Way.* Geechoun’s book was the first ‘the first Australian cookery book that set out to bring Chinese food into the Australian home.’[[10]](#footnote-10) [[11]](#footnote-11) There it is, the missing ingredient - pineapple.

Geechoun didn’t give a recipe for sweet and sour pork. Yep Yung Hee did in his 1951 *Chinese Recipes for Home Cooking*. In his *Author’s Preface*, Hee said that the book was written in answer to the ‘queries of many Australia friends who ask me from time to time he age-old question: ‘How do you cook Chinese food?’[[12]](#footnote-12) [[13]](#footnote-13)

Sweet and Sour Pork

¾ lb Pork Flank (lean and fat)

1 Egg

½ cup of Cornflour

Remove the rind from the pork and cut the pork into pieces 1 in. cube and salt. Beat one egg and spread cornflour on paper or in a mixing bowl. Dip the pork into the egg and then cover well with cornflour and drop into boiling lard or oil. It is essential to cook this in deep oil or lard. When the pork is cooked, it will rise to the surface and browning can be done to suit one’s own taste.

Sauce

This sauce can be made with pineapple or mixed Chinese pickles.

2 slices Pineapple or ½ cup Chinese Mixed Pickles

2 tablespoons Vinegar

1 ¼ tablespoons Sugar

½ tablespoon Tomato Sauce

1 dessertspoon Cornflour

1 teaspoon Soy Sauce

1 teaspoon Brandy or Dry Sherry

¼ cup of finely chopped Eschallots

½ teaspoon finely minced Green Ginger

The pineapple is cut into triangles ½ in. wide at the base, or the pickles finely chopped.

Fry the ginger together with the pineapple or pickles in a pan with just the slightest touch of oil. Mix the rest of the ingredients together in a bowl until a smooth mixture is obtained, then add one and a half cups of water. Add mixture to the pan and stir continually until cooked. Water can be added to the sauce should it be too thick. Finally the eschallots can be added to the piping hot sauce, just prior to serving.’[[14]](#footnote-14)

Whence came the pineapple? It again is one of those ingredients the origin of which is open to speculation. Some say it originated In Guandong and Hong Kong, both major ports which ‘welcomed in foreign products, such as the tomatoes, pineapples, and bell peppers used in sweet and sour pork’.[[15]](#footnote-15) It then travelled with migrants from there to the goldfields of America and Australia

Others say it was developed in America in the early 20th century: ‘Knowing Americans had a taste for sweet and acidic tomato-based sauces, they created sweet and sour sauce, which consisted of sugar, rice vinegar, pineapple, and a dash of ketchup or tomato paste, giving sweet and sour sauce its characteristic red hue’[[16]](#footnote-16). Leong- Salobir similarly points to the commercial reasoning behind the creation of the dish: ‘This fondness (for sweetness among Westerners) was aided and abetted by Chinese cooks who thought this sweetness was what Westerners thought of — and wanted from — Chinese food. … Sweet and sour — together with other dishes smothered in sweet sticky sauces — became the lurid-orange epitome of Chinese cuisine for many Anglo Australians.’[[17]](#footnote-17)

But whenever or why ever it fitted Australian tastes perfectly. Pineapples were on sale in Sydney from at least 1820.[[18]](#footnote-18) In 1826 plants from Rio de Janeiro were received into the Government Garden (now the Royal Botanic Gardens).[[19]](#footnote-19) ‘The first pineapples in Australia were a small, rough-leaf variety and were being grown commercially by the early 1840s at Nundah, now a suburb of Brisbane. The first large, smooth-leaf variety (known as Smooth Cayenne) was introduced to Australia from Kew Gardens in 1858. This variety became the most widely grown in Australia.’[[20]](#footnote-20) I 1884 ‘Agricola’ surveying ‘Marketable Fruits’ said ‘The pineapple and the banana are both very marketable, and can hardly be grown in too large quantities. The markets of the world are open to them’.[[21]](#footnote-21)

But there was no need to turn to export: they proved to be very marketable locally. The earliest recipe for pineapple I found was in 1878 for Pineapple Jam.[[22]](#footnote-22) Since then pineapples have been a favourite fruit in the settler kitchen. Pineapple has been used for tarts, fritters, marmalade, cream, salad, pudding, mould, jelly, syrup, pickle, shortcake, beignets, sponge, jam (with melon), preserves, omelette, water even pineapple brandy. Then there is pineapple along with beetroot on a hamburger ‘with the lot’.

More pertinently for this article, there were precedents for combining pineapple and meat - Bacon and Pineapple Rounds and Corned Beef and Pineapple Pudding[[23]](#footnote-23), Brains with Pineapple[[24]](#footnote-24), Stuffed Lamb with Pineapple[[25]](#footnote-25), Veal or Chicken Salad,[[26]](#footnote-26) Savory Chops and Pineapple.[[27]](#footnote-27) This one puts pork and pineapple together.

Pork and Pineapple Slices

Mix together 2 cups finely-chopped cooked lean pork, 1 tablespoon grated onion, 1 cup flue while breadcrumbs, salt, pepper to taste, 1 teaspoon of chopped parsley, 1 egg or enough to

form meat, etc, into shapes. Divide mixture into 6 portions, flatten out lo fit a slice of tinned pineapple Place the prepared slices in a well greased baking tin. Melt 3 level tablespoons butler, add 2 level tablespoons brown sugar, 1 tablespoon of pineapple, juice, a pinch of ground cloves, and a pinch of ground cinnamon. Pour this over prepared slices and cover well with greased paper. Bake in a moderate oven for about 40 minutes.- Baste about three times during the cooking.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Over the years variations were rung on sweet and sour pork. The pork is marinated before cooking.[[29]](#footnote-29) Pineapple chunks were either added to the cooked pork or to the sauce.[[30]](#footnote-30) Some recipes did without pineapple entirely.[[31]](#footnote-31) Green or red peppers (capsicum – or colour and texture) and onions were diced and added to the cooked pork before the sauce was poured over the lot.[[32]](#footnote-32) Carrots sliced or grated similarly were added to the pork.[[33]](#footnote-33) Red chillies were sliced and added to the pork.[[34]](#footnote-34) Worcestershire sauce is sometimes added.[[35]](#footnote-35) Some marinate the pork for anywhere from 30 minutes to 2-3 hours in combinations of soy sauce, Shaoxing rice wine, ginger and spices.[[36]](#footnote-36) Only one called for monosodium glutamate.[[37]](#footnote-37) There is now a version for diabetics that omits deep frying the pork but retains the pineapple and sugar in the sauce.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Pork wasn’t the only thing to be doused in sweet and sour sauce., though not always with pineapple. Sweet and sour fish had the second biggest number of recipes.[[39]](#footnote-39) There are recipes for sweet and sour spareribs[[40]](#footnote-40), crumbed veal cutlets[[41]](#footnote-41), chops[[42]](#footnote-42), meatballs,[[43]](#footnote-43) chicken[[44]](#footnote-44) and cabbage[[45]](#footnote-45). There is nothing in recipes for these that sets them apart from the basic sweet and sour sauce.

Australians have something of a love hate relationship with sweet and sour pork. I posted this on Facebook: ‘Okay folk – sweet and sour pork – memories – taste look reactions to etc. I recall being wild about it – still would eat it except diabetes’. The responses I got reflect this duality.

*My mother used to make it. Tinned pineapple, lots of corn flour and over cooked, over battered pork. Possibly one of my worst food memories.*

*I just love it and when in country NSW on road trips will always order as most often dining at the Chinese restaurant is the only decent option in town.*

*Frist time bewildered now fave must balance (the sweet and sour) perfectly.*

*Was one of my least favourite dishes when eating at Chinese restaurants. I tried to make it a few times to see if my experience would be different – but no – still not a fan. Recognise however that it is highly popular by many.*

*My Chinese and Hong Kong friends are almost always amused when I order sweet and sour pork, but I shamelessly love it though the taste can be wildly different depending on the restaurant.*

*Loved it as a kid but never order it now. Too sweet, and …pineapple!*

1. ‘Sweet Sour Pork History and its Origins throughout China’, [Sweet Sour Pork History: From China to the World - FOODICLES](https://foodicles.com/sweet-sour-pork-history/); [Sweet and sour - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sweet_and_sour); [Sweet And Sour Pork | Traditional Pork Dish From Guangzhou, China | TasteAtlas](https://www.tasteatlas.com/sweet-and-sour-pork) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Van Reyk, *True to the Land. A history of food in Australia*, Reaktion, London 2021 p.70 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Three Acts in 1901 with the beginning of federation of existing colonies to form Australia together made up the White Australia Policy: the Immigration Act 1901, (he *Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901* and the *Post and Telegraph Act 1901*. Their intent was to stop the migration to Australia of non-whites, Chinese in particular. ‘ ‘The White Australia policy had an immediate impact, rapidly changing demographics. By 1947 only 2.7 per cent of the whole population was born outside of Australia, Ireland, or the United Kingdom. The effect was most obvious on the Asian population. Though only 1.25 per cent of the Australian population in 1901, it had shrunk to around 0.21 per cent by the late 1940s.’ White Australia Policy, National Museum of Australia’ [White Australia policy | National Museum of Australia (nma.gov.au)](https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/white-australia-policy) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This was in the years before plastic food containers. Usually one of the children in the family would walk down to the local Chinese Restaurant with a saucepan or two to be filled with one or other Chinese dish. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ‘From lurid orange sauces to refined, regional flavours: how politics helped shape Chinese food in Australia.’ Leong-Salobir, Cecilia, *The Conversation,* 9 February 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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7. Chinese recipes featured almost annually in the *Australian Women’s Weekly*. See for example Forbes, Mary, Here’s what they eat Out East The Australian Women’s 15 April 1939 p.9; ‘Goo Loo Jee Yuk’ Chinese Cookery for Three Courses, the *Australian Women’s Weekly* 9 September 1959 p.40 Accessed at Trove 23 March 2023 [09 Sep 1959 - FOR THREE-COURSE [?]INNERS... - Trove (nla.gov.au)](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/44023731/4827502); ‘Sweet and Sour Pork’, Wedding Reception at Home for 50 people, the *Australian Women’s Weekly* 24 February 1971 p.50 Accessed at Trove 24 March 2023 [24 Feb 1971 - Wedding reception at home for 50 people - Trove (nla.gov.au)](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/55468497/4889902); [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ‘Tin Suin Pai Kwe’, This Week’s Recipe, Diana’s Diary, *Northern Standard* (Darwin) 18 November 1949 p.5 Accessed at Trove 29 March 2023 [18 Nov 1949 - THIS WEEK'S RECIPE - Trove (nla.gov.au)](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/49991231?searchTerm=sweet%20and%20sour%20pork%20recipe) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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10. Van Reyk, Paul, *True to the Land. A History of food in Australia*, Reaktion, London 2021 p .181 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For biographical notes about Geechoun see Chinese cookery book for Australians - Australian food history timeline (australianfoodtimeline.com.au) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Yep Yung Hee, ‘Chinese Recipes for Home Cooking’, Associated General Publications, 1951 , Author’s Preface [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I can find no biographical information about Yep Yung Hee. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Yep Yung Hee, ‘Chinese Recipes for Home Cooking’, Associated General Publications, 1951 p. 96 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. ‘Sweet and Sour Pork History and Its Origins Throughout China’ [Sweet Sour Pork History: From China to the World - FOODICLES](https://foodicles.com/sweet-sour-pork-history/); [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. ‘A Brief History of Sweet and Sour Sauce’ [A Brief History of Sweet & Sour Sauce - Hong Wah Restaurant (connect2local.com)](https://connect2local.com/l/337953/c/5048168/a-brief-history-of-sweet---sour-sauce) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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22. ‘Pineapple Jam’, Rawson, Mrs. Lance, The Queensland Cookery and Poultry Book, Rockhampton, 1878, p.87 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
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26. ‘Veal or Chicken Salad’ Pineapple Recipes, Women’s Ways, *The Charleville Times* (Brisbane) 21 October 1938 p.2 Accessed at Trove 5 April 2023 [21 Oct 1938 - PINEAPPLE RECIPES - Trove (nla.gov.au)](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/76699556?searchTerm=pineapple%20recipes) There was also a recipe for Lamb Salad with pineapple on this page. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
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35. See for example Come Into the Kitchen Some Chinese Recipes *Chronicle* (Adelaide) 18 July 1940 p.44 Accessed at Trove 29 March 2023 [18 Jul 1940 - COME INTO the KITCHEN - Trove (nla.gov.au)](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/92392874?searchTerm=sweet%20and%20sour%20pork%20recipe) [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See for example ‘Tony Tan’s guide to making Sweet and Sour Pork’, *Gourmet Traveller*, 25 August 2021; Dobson, R. ‘Sweet and sour: how to recreate classic Australian Chinese restaurant recipes at home’ *The Guardian* 14 May 2021”: ‘Sweet and Sour Pork’ The Woks of Life [Sweet and Sour Pork: Restaurant Recipe - The Woks of Life](https://thewoksoflife.com/sweet-and-sour-pork/#recipe) [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
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38. ‘Sweet and Sour Pork (Low Sodium Gluten Free) [Sweet and Sour Pork (Lower Sodium, Gluten-free) - Diabetic Foodie](https://www.diabeticfoodie.com/sweet-and-sour-pork/?fbclid=IwAR3X6qqcNQGuW9FsM3RmcdVkefVBVs7ogyunVqdC9mcDWlVtQX8LHETnh_o) [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. ‘Steamed fish with sweet and sour sauce’, Test and Tell, *The Argus* (Melbourne) 1 August 1944 p. 90 Accessed at Trove 29 March 2023 [01 Aug 1944 - TEST AND TELL; LEAVES FROM MADAME CHENG'S BOOK OF CHINESE DISHES - Trove (nla.gov.au)](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/11354527?searchTerm=sweet%20and%20sour%20pork%20recipe) ; ‘Sweet and Sour Fish’, Home Menu a la Chop Suey, *Warwick Daily News* (Qld) [31 Mar 1952 - Recipes: Home Menu A La Chop Suey - Trove (nla.gov.au)](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/190408789?searchTerm=sweet%20and%20sour%20pork%20recipe);

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