Jelly Crystals and Evaporated Milk: On the trail of the 'Australian flummery'

Paul van Reyk April 2022

It was the kind of observation on Australian history by a new chef that ever-so-slightly irks the food historian in me and sets me sleuthing for the evidence to back up it up. Phil Wood, chef-owner of up-scale restaurant *Ursula's*, in Paddington in an April 2022 article by journalist Max Brearley on a revival of 'old-school,1950s grandma food' is quoted as saying this of flummery:

While flummery's English cousin is centuries old, the Australian version of flummery was born out of post-war necessity, says Wood. The original recipe combines packet fruit jelly and evaporated milk. The evaporated milk must be "made really cold, and when you whip, it whips up like fake cream". The fruit jelly is left in the fridge until almost set. Then you "fold those two things together, ending up with this flavoured mousse".¹

Was the 'Australian version of flummery' actually 'born out of post-war necessity'? Did the 'original (Australian) recipe' in fact combine 'packets of fruit jelly and evaporated milk'?

Well, no on both counts. The history of the flummery in Australia is longer and more interesting than that.

The 'English cousin'

Wood is right when he says that the Australian flummery's 'English cousin is centuries old'. The Oxford Companion to Food gives the origin of the word as Welsh llymru for a dish made by 'soaking fine oatmeal in water for a long time and then boiling and stirring the liquid till it was almost solid'.2 By 1631, 'it gives the impression of a peasant dish beginning to climb up the social scale' and by the 17th century flummery now meant 'a sweet jelly made with almonds, set in moulds by means of calf's foot or isinglass or hartshorn resembling the earlier leach which was a kind of blancmange'.

Charlotte Mason in her 1773, *The Lady's Assistant*, gives a recipe for Jaune Manger that has the characteristics of a flummery without being called that, and without almonds.

Jaune Mange:

Boil one ounce of isinglass in three quarters of a pint of water; till melted, strain it; add the juice of two Seville oranges, a quarter of a pint of white wine, the yolks of four eggs, beaten and strained, sugar to the taste; stir it over a gentle fire till it just boils up; when cold put it into a mould or moulds; if there should be any sediment take care not to pour it in. ³

Jaune Mange translates as yellow food the colour coming from using egg yolks, as distinct from blancmange – white food which does not use eggs, being originally a dish of boiled and macerated capon and almonds. Eliza Acton gives a similar recipe in her 1845 *Modern Cookery, in all its Branches, Reduced to a System of Easy Practice, for the Use of Private Families* as Jaumange or Jaune Mange, Sometimes Called Dutch Flummery with lemons replacing the Seville oranges and adds brandy (at pleasure) in addition to wine.⁴

Flummery begins its Australian career

The first Australian recipe for flummery I have come across is in Edward Abbott's 1864 The English and Australian Cookery Book. Cookery for the Many, As Well As for the "Upper Ten Thousand', where

it looks like it has gone back to its oatmeal origins, here with rice flour instead and no isinglass, gelatine or other setting agent.

Spanish Flummery – Scale a quart of cream with a little cinnamon or mace, mix this gradually into half a pound of rice flour, and stir it over a gentle fire until it has the thickness of jelly., Sweeten it to taste, and pour into cups or shapes. Turn it out when cold, and serve up. Cream, wine, or preserves eat well with it, or it may be eaten alone, as preferred.⁵

Spanish flummery must have been popular in Australia in the years preceding Abbott's publication of this recipe. In 1855, G.W.C. placed an advertisement offering his services in the Sydney Morning Herald:

Wants a Situation as a Confectioner and Pastrycook, a steady man, who is well acquainted with making jams and jellies, Spanish flummery, blancmange, creams, ices, cakes, biscuits, savory and other kinds of pies. Would make himself useful in a respectable hotel; or as steward aboard a ship going home (presumably meaning Britain) with passengers.⁶

In late 1880's Australia, versions of Acton's flummery are reproduced as either Dutch Flummery or Yellow Flummery. This is an 1886 recipe for the latter:

Yellow Flummery. Boil 2oz. of isinglass in a pint and a half of water till it is dissolved, and then add a pint of white wine, the juice of two and the outside of three lemons, the yolks of seven eggs well beaten, and sugar to your taste. Mix the whole together and set it on the fire till it boils, stirring it continually strain it into a basin, and stir it till it is almost cold, then put it into the moulds.⁷

There were several recipes for Dutch Flummery in this period also. It was popular enough for Miss Ruby Purves to advertise in 1899 that at Cookery Classes at the Mechanics Institute that the 'Subjects treated [include] Caramel Walnut, Dutch Flummery, Potato Soup'.⁸

Rice flummeries also appear in newspapers in the late 1800's and into the 1920's. They dropped Abbott's Spanish appellation and often the cinnamon and mace and returned to almonds/and or almond essence. M.L.F.M apprised readers of The Australasian in 1893 of the original flummery, with instructions of how to make it, and had a bet-each way on the flavouring opting for both cinnamon and almonds.

M.L.F.M – Flummery in its original form was something between a refined kind of porridge and blanc-mange. Here is one recipe. Steep some very finely-ground oatmeal for three days; then pour off the water, add as much fresh water, stir it all together, strain, and boil it with a tiny pinch of salt till of the thickness desired. A little water may be added at the first if it seems to thicken too quickly. A piece of butter and a little castor sugar should be added. Rice flummery is made by rubbing two good spoonfuls of rice flour smooth with a little cold milk, then stirring it into a liberal pint of new milk, previously boiled with two or three strips of lemon-peel and a morsel of stick cinnamon. Add two or three drops of essence of almonds, and let it all boil together, stirring it frequently, lest it burn, till it is of the proper consistency, then remove the cinnamon and lemon-peel and pour it into a mould to set. Turn it out and serve, with either cream custard or wine sauce round it.⁹

This is the earliest Australian reference I came across for using milk in a flummery. Milk was frequently used in subsequent recipes for rice flummery. Cream was sometimes substituted for milk in other flummeries. This as in 1879 recipe:

Apple Flummery - Pare, core, and slice 2lb, of apples, and put them into a stewpan with 1lb of sugar, the finely-chopped rind of a lemon, and sufficient water to cover them. Let them stew gently until quite tender, then drain them from the juice, and beat them to a pulp. Soak 1oz. of gelatine in a little cold water for twenty minutes. Put it into a saucepan with the apple, juice, and stir until the gelatine is dissolved; add the apples and a cupful of cream. Stir for a few minutes over the fire, but do not let the mixture boil. Turn it into a mould that has been soaked in cold water, let it stand until stiff, then turn out, and pour a good custard over it. Time to stiffen, eight or ten hours.¹⁰

Custard and whipped cream were popular accompaniments to a flummery.

Pineapples, passionfruit, peaches, apricots, strawberries and rhubarb flummeries were popular and continued to be so well into the 20th century. Mrs E Brookman won £1 for her Custard Apple Flummery in the recipe contest of the Truth in 1934.¹¹ Mixed fruit flummeries were also popular. Almonds, however, virtually disappear.

Isinglass is a form of gelatine (the protein collagen) originally derived from the swimming ladder of sturgeon, but also from large catfish in South America, and some species of hake and cod.¹² I the 19th century it had a wide application including in glue, cement, and for clarifying wines and beers for which it continues to be used. Russian isinglass was being sold in Sydney at least by 1898 when Mr. John Reddington of ? was advertising it to brewers in the Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser.¹³ Flummery recipes using isinglass tapered off over the first decade of the 20th century in favour of gelatine possibly because it could not compete on price or convenience.

Gelatine is the term used for collagen obtained by boiling bones with water, usually from cows or pigs in a process first refined by Frenchman Denis Papan in 1682. Imported gelatine was being advertised for sale by at least 1841 when Geo. I. Robinson & Co. advertised Patent Gelatine for making blancmanges, soups, jellies &c.¹⁴ During the 1840s pastoralists, writes Jacqueline Newling, 'found ways to extract extra money from famine-affected beasts thanks 'to a modern invention ... the melting pot'. ¹⁵ Tallow, rendered fat, was used in soaps and candles, and bones and tendons when boiled produced gelatine. In 1844, V.S. Armstrong who was in the business of 'slaughtering, boiling down, rendering and packing tallow[' advertised his company's Gelatine or Portable Soup 'equal in clearness and consistency with the best English and German gelatine, specimens of which are on view at his establishment where their comparative merits may be examined' which was likely a solid block of gelatin.¹⁶ Two years previously, in 1842, J and G Company of Edinburgh Scotland began producing dried gelatine as a powder. In 1845 Peter Cooper patented a gelatin powder he also called 'portable gelatin'. dessert powder.¹⁷ In 1917 Davis Gelatine was established in Botany, a suburb of Sydney and became the leading brand in Australian households. It remains the only gelatine manufacturer in Australia.¹⁸ In the early 1940s Davis published a promotional recipe book which included a recipe for Passionfruit Flummery.

Passionfruit Flummery 6 Servings

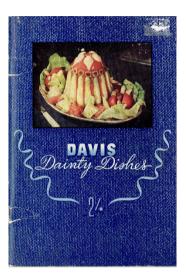
Ingredients. 2 dessertspoons (1/2 oz) Davis Gelatine 1 ¼ cups water ¾ cup sugar 1 tablespoon flour ½ cup orange or lemon juice

1/2 dozen passionfruit

Method:

Mix flour to a smooth paste with a little cold water. Add sugar to hot water. Carefully add flour. Boil for 5 minutes. Add gelatine dissolved in ¼ cup hot water, and fruit juice. Mix well. Leave until thickening slightly, then beat to a stiff cream. Stir in the passionfruit. Place in a bowl. Serve with cream or custard.

If setting in an ice-chest or refrigerator, use less gelatine – 1 ½ dessertspoons.





Front and back covers of Davis Dainty Delights c.1942

Enter jelly crystals

So, there is a recorded history of flummery in Australia for at least a hundred years prior to the end of World War Two using fruit juice, crushed fruit, gelatine and sometimes fresh milk or cream. Now, what about the use of 'fruit jelly'?

The earliest Australian recipe for using jelly crystals I have come across was published in February 1928:

Peaches in Jelly — Take four large peaches, pare them, cut into dice, add three cups of water, four tablespoons sugar, stew for three-quarters of an hour Take one packet of jelly crystals

two and a half cups of peach juice, and mix with crystals, then add peaches, stand aside till cool, and put into mould, and stand on ice till set. Serve with, custard.¹⁹

The year before, 1927, Sydney tram driver Bert Appleroth famously made his first batch of jelly crystals in his bathtub and began selling them along his tram routes.²⁰ Jelly crystals are simply gelatine flavoured with fruit juice and sugar and a colouring agent e.g cochineal, saffron, violets and spinach. Aeroplane Jelly went on to become a standard ingredient in every kitchen cupboard across Australia and the jingle that accompanied advertisements for it is very much part of Australian musical memory. But despite the proximity of this recipe to Appleroth's creation of the iconic jelly crystals we can't assume it was his jelly crystals called for in our recipe from 1928. There were several other brands on the market. Among the Seasonable Comestibles in Our Grocery Department, Foy and Gibson's in 1922 advertised Invicta, Pioneer, Parson's, White's, Hoopers, Poppy, Pioneer and Jellex.²¹ F Duball & Co. advertised Allen's Superior Jelly Crystals in 1926.²² Once in the market, packets of jelly crystals became a common ingredient of flummeries, but both the crystals and gelatine continued to be used in some recipes.

Six years later, in 1933, S. Richard & Co Ltd advertised 1 large tin of Melba peaches and 1 packet of Fruit Flummery at the two for one price of 1/- (one shilling). They also advertised 1 large packet jelly, 1 packet Bingo pudding, 1 packet junket crystals, 1 packet custard powder all for 1/3 (one shilling and threepence). ²³ Also in 1933, John Willis & Co, Ltd advertised Thistledown Dutch Flummery for sale at 3d (pence) the packet.²⁴ These were the first advertisements I came across for Fruit and Dutch flummeries sold in a packet and advertisements for them appeared regularly into the late 1940s. I was initially surprised that despite how extensively the product was advertised there were no recipes published using the packets. The likely reason for this became clear when I came across this 1951 recipe:

Sponge and Nut Flummery

One packet flummery, 1 packet jelly (same flavor), 5 cups whipped cream, 1 cup sponge cake cubes, I oz. blanched chopped almonds, 4 teaspoons salt. Prepare jelly in usual way. Chill until firm, cut into cubes. Prepare flummery as directed, when slightly thickened whip until thick. Add salt. Fold in cream, cubes of jelly and cake, and almonds. Fill into mould, chill until firm. Serve with cream, decorate with cubes of jelly.²⁵

So the method for making the flummery was on the packet itself, a practice still today when promoting a food product. (See images below) It would be redundant then to have a published recipe that set out the ingredients in the packet of flummery and the steps to take to make it up. This of course leads to the question of what was in the packet. That this recipe calls for the packet of flummery *and* jelly crystals is puzzling in the context of flummery recipes of this time where jelly crystals on their own often were the basis of the dish. There are, however, flummery recipes at this time that use both jelly crystals and gelatine, so perhaps the packet contained powdered flavoured gelatine, or powdered milk or eggs, some artificial colouring and sugar.²⁶ Sadly no amount of searching uncovered what was in the packets.





Turban Fruit Flummery made 1930-1940²⁷

And what of evaporated milk?

And speaking of milk, when did evaporated milk enter the world of the flummery? In January 1891, the Pioneer Dairy and Concentrated Milk Company Limited was advertising to Families, Caterers, Hotel Proprietors, Coffee Palace Companies &c a 'supply of Sweet and Pure Milk always available in any weather. It is only necessary to take delivery once a week instead of twice a day. No waste or loss and absolute immunity from all infection. Used without water being added, it not only equals cream but is superior to it, as it includes the sugar of milk and other solids in addition to the butter fat. To produce rich cow's milk add three parts water to one of concentrated milk; after being slightly stirred it is ready for use'.²⁸

I have found no recipe using concentrated milk called such as an ingredient. A recipe for Banana Soufle in 1940 asks for half a pint of 'tinned milk which is 'beaten till frothy', which is more likely to happen with evaporated milk than condensed milk.²⁹ Evaporated milk is specified in a 1940 recipe for Honey Chocolate Fudge.³⁰

The earliest recipe using evaporated milk in a flummery I have found was in 1951:

Flummery With Meringue Tops

Creamy light flummery flavoured with passionfruit and topped with meringues is an attractive dish for warmer weather, and really easy to concoct.

Ingredients: 1 large tin evaporated milk 1 cup sugar. 2 level dstspns. gelatine. 1 cup hot water. 4 to 6 passionfruit. Method: Chill milk a few hours before using. Place gelatine in hot water, stand in saucepan of boiling water until it dissolves. Beat milk until thick, add sugar gradually, beating well. Add dissolved gelatine, beating until mixture is thick and creamy, then add passionfruit. Turn into wet glass dish until set. Serve in individual dishes topped with a meringue.³¹

So, the stage looked set for the entrance of *evaporated* milk and fruit jelly crystals to appear together in an Australian flummery.

The birth of the 'old-school,1950s grandma food' Australian flummery

In the July 1940 issue of The Australian Woman's Mirror this recipe appeared.

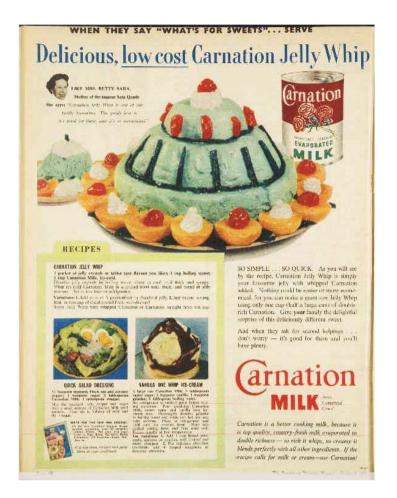
Orange and Passionfruit Flummery

One packet orange jelly crystals, 1 cup milk, 1 tablespoon sugar, 1 egg, 4 passions (sic). Dissolve jelly, and while still hot stir in egg yolks, milk, sugar and passion pulp while still hot. When set top with beaten egg whites and put in cool place to set. – 'J.S.', Young, NSW.³²

Recipes submitted by readers to newspapers and magazines had often been circulating in kitchens for some time, shared by women verbally and transcribed into household cookery books, without appearing formally in print. It's likely that this is the case here. What that suggests is that the combining milk and jelly crystals was a practice that preceded World War Two by some years.

Of the 60 recipes for flummery between 1950-1959 I found in Trove, the digitised library of newspapers and magazines of the National Library of Australia, not one turned up a flummery recipe which combined jelly crystals with evaporated milk. In fact, most flummeries made from scratch continued to use fruit juices and fruit pulp. Some recipes in the 1950s call for unsweetened condensed milk which I suspect was evaporated milk as most again call for the milk to be beaten till frothy. But most Australian recipes for flummery since the earliest I found in the late 1800s do not use milk at all.

There was one other source to which I turned: product advertising which included recipes for using the product. The 1951 recipe above doesn't name a particular brand of evaporated milk. Carnation Evaporated Milk, created in 1899 in the United States by Elbridge Amos Stuart, was first promoted in Australian in 1952 and soon become a popular brand.³³ In 1957 Carnation took out a full-page advertisement in the Australian Women's Weekly.



And there in pride of place across half the page is a photograph of a flummery to end all flummeries with the recipe below it:

Carnation Jelly Whip

1 packet jelly crystals or tablet (any flavour you like); I cp boiling water; 1 cup Carnation Milk, icy cold.

Dissolve jelly crystals in boiling water, allow to cool until thick and syrupy. Whisk icy-cold Carnation Milk in a chilled bowl until thick, and blend in jelly mixture. Set in ice-chest or refrigerator.

Variations: 1. Add pulp of three passionfruit to dissolved jelly. 2. Just before setting, fold in one cup of diced tinned fruit, well-drained.

Serve jelly whip with whipped Carnation or Carnation straight from the can.³⁴

Sure, it's not called a flummery, but all the elements are there, and the method is as for flummeries past. I feel confident that this is the origin of the 'old-school,1950s grandma food' flummery combination of jelly crystals and evaporated milk.

This leaves the question of why and where it originated still somewhat open. As to why, I think it's safe to say it was not 'born out of post-war necessity' but more likely out of a product test kitchen looking to capture the market of the 'time-poor' and household budget minded housewife looking to all-in-one solutions. It is not that big a step, after all, from packet flummery.

As to the where, there is a nagging doubt in my mind that it was an Australian innovation. Carnation was an American company after all. Does the inclusion of passionfruit, a long-standing fruit base in Australian recipes for flummery indicate that the recipe was of Australian origin or does its relegation to a 'variation' suggest an attempt to 'Australianise' an American recipe. And then there's the recipe title. Why Jelly Whip which has something of an American twang to it and not Flummery by which the same basic recipe had been known for so long?

I leave the resolution of these questions for other food historians.

¹⁰ Weekly Times 11 January 1879, p. 10 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

¹² Davidson, Alan (ed), 'Isinglass', The Oxford Companion to Food, Oxford University Press, 1999 p. 407

¹⁸ https://davisgelatine.com/why-davis-

new/#:~:text=DAVIS%20Gelatine%20was%20established%20in,gelatine%20manufacture%20plant%20in%20A ustralasia.

¹ Brearley, Max, 'Old-school, 1950s grandma food': Australian chefs on reviving retro recipes, *The Guardian*, 8 April 2022

² Davidson, Alan (ed), 'Flummery', *The Oxford Companion to Food*, Oxford University Press, 1999 p. 310 ³ http://foodhistorjottings.blogspot.com/2013/08/jaune-mange.html accessed 10 April 2022

⁴ Acton, Eliza, Modern Cookery, in all its Branches, Reduced to a System of Easy Practice, for the Use of Private

Families, 1845, p. 534 accessed at fiftywordsforsnow.com/ebooks/acton/acton3.html#chapXX 10 April 2022

⁵ Abbott, Edward, *The English and Australian Cookery Book. Cookery for the Many, As Well As for the "Upper Ten Thousand",* Sampson Low, Son and Marston, London, 1864, p.111

⁶ Sydney Morning Herald 16 February 1855, p.1 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

⁷ *The Australasian* 22 September 1886, p. 5 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

⁸ Williamstown Chronicle 11 August 1899, p.3 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

⁹ 'Notes and Queries', The Australasian 15 July 1893, p. 33 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

¹¹ Truth, 15 July 1934 p. 25 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

¹³ Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser 25 September 1808, p. 2 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

¹⁴ The Sydney Herald, 30 January 1841, p.3 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

¹⁵ Newling, Jacqui, *Eat Your History. Stories and Recipes from Australian Kitchens,* Sydney Living Museums, 2015, pp. 177-178

¹⁶ 'Gelatine or Portable Soup', *Sydney Morning Herald* 6 August 1844, p.3 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

¹⁷ https://cooper.edu/support/coopermade/jell-o

¹⁹ Sunday Mail (Brisbane) 19 February 1928, p. 23 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

²⁰ https://www.aeroplanejelly.com.au/en-au/history

²¹ The West Australian 20 December 1922, p. 11 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

²² The Eastern Recorder, 10 September 1923 p. 3 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

²³ The Murrumbidgee Irrigator 14 September 1933, p.4

²⁴ Kalgoorlie Miner 18 November 1933, p.10 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

²⁵ Australian Women's Weekly 19 May 1951, p. 37.page 28

²⁶ I am grateful to food historian Alison Vincent for this suggested list of ingredients

²⁷ 'Turban Fruit Flummery' https://collection.maas.museum/object/37764

²⁸ The Bacchus Marsh Express 3 January 1891, p. 2 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

²⁹ The Southern Mail 9 January 1940, p. 4 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

³⁰ The Advocate 4 January 1944, p.4 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

³¹ The Sydney Morning Herald 6 September 1951 p. 12 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

³² The Australian Woman's Mirror Vol 16 No 33 9 July 1940, p. 46 accessed at trove.nla.gov.au April 2022

³³ Carnation Evaporated Milk marketing display in a Victorian Crofts Store' (image), University of Melbourne

Library, https://gallery.its.unimelb.edu.au/imu/imu.php?request=multimedia&irn=101728

³⁴ 'Delicious low-cost Carnation Jelly Whip', the Australian Women's Weekly 2 October 1957 p.48