

Thick, smooth, sweet, pale yellow. A condensed milk story in Australia

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I grew up with condensed milk till my early adolescent years. In Sri Lanka, home for the first 10 years of my life, I got my hit mainly from condensed milk sweetened tea. There was also the condensed milk sandwich, two slices of well buttered white bread with condensed milk as the filling. Best of all though, was stealing a suck or two via the hole in the top of the can.

In Australia I continued my engagement with it in those three established ways and added a couple of new ones. First was swapping the bread for two SAO biscuits which gave the added pleasure of squeezing condensed milk worms through the tiny holes in the biscuit's surface.¹ The second came courtesy of the Australian Army in which my dad served all but one year of his pre-retirement work life. He would go off at times on 'bush' camp or other army business and return with some of his rations, usually tubes of raspberry or strawberry jam, vegemite, and condensed milk to be squeeze-sucked.² My mum also occasionally converted the milk into caramel sauce by submerging the unopened can in boiling water for a couple of hours.

We broke up, condensed milk and I, when I gave up sweetened milk tea in early adolescence. I recently encountered it anew as an ingredient in two salad dressings in the 1952 reprint of *The Commonsense Cookery Book* compiled by the New South Wales Public School Cookery Teachers Association.

Salad Dressing (No.1)

Ingredients:-

1 yolk hard-cooked egg.

¼ teaspoon mustard.

1 level teaspoon salt.

1 level dessertspoon sugar.

1 teaspoon lucca oil³ (if liked)

½ gill vinegar

½ gill milk or cream, or 1 dessertspoon condensed milk

Method:-

1. Pound the yolk of the egg with the back of a wooden spoon.

2. Place with it the mustard, sugar, and salt.

3. Work the oil in gradually add milk or cream, the vinegar last of all.

4. Serve in a small glass jug or poured over salad.

Note - When condensed milk is used instead of cream, omit sugar.⁴

Salad Dressing (No.2) leaves out the egg and makes the condensed milk not an option,

I was gustatorily challenged. Was this just an instance of invention gone mad or did Australians in the 50's really pour this over their salads? What about earlier generations? I took to *Trove*, the digital

¹ 'SAO biscuits are Australian savory biscuits or crackers which have been trademarked by Arnott's since 1904. According to the producer, these biscuits are made from seven layers of flaky pastry, and they have a distinctive light and bubbly texture. ['SAO Biscuits | Traditional Snack From Australia | TasteAtlas](#)

² I note that Nestlé now have tubes of condensed milk also.

³ Lucca oil is olive oil sometimes, as in this case, was named for the region in which it was made.

⁴ *The Commonsense Cookery Book* compiled by the New South Wales Public School Cookery Teachers Association, 1952 reprint, Halstead Press Pty. Ltd. p.137

depository managed by the National Library of Australia, to trawl through its newspaper and magazine holdings. I also looked in a small sample of early Australian cookery books I have that were published pre-1952.

A condensed history

Condensed milk is basically milk whose water content has been reduced, the original intent being to extend its shelf-life and provide a means to have milk when it is impractical or impossible to have it fresh. For example, on the front lines in a war as in this poignant account in a letter from Col. R. Tambling to his mother:

I have not been too healthy lately, but hope soon to be right. I keep just off colour. You would be surprised at the many dishes one concocts here with the few ingredients at our use. I daresay you would not tackle the pancake your "French cook" made yesterday. Here's the recipe. Mixing some bacon fat and sugar, I stirred in some flour and rubbed well. Then I put in some milk and sugar and a few currants, mixing to a paste (with salt). I dropped this into boiling fat in my mess tin lid and fried it, after sprinkling with sugar. It was A1. That morning we were issued a pint of flour and two desertspoonfuls each of condensed milk and currants.⁵

French confectioner Nicolas Appert is credited with first developing it in 1827 in the course of his experiments in preserving food. William Newton in 1835 suggested adding sugar to give the product a longer shelf life. Sugar is a preserving agent as well as a sweetener. By 1856, American Gail Borden had developed a system for manufacturing condensed milk at an industrial scale and established the New York Condensed Milk Company launching his Eagle Brand Sweetened Condensed Milk.

In Australia Newell and Co advertised imported condensed milk for sale in 1861 just five years after it began to be commercially made.⁶ Local manufacture of condensed milk began in the 1880s and 1890s. The October 1882 edition of *The Australasian* reported that the Melbourne Milk Supply Company was in the course finalising arrangements to a factory to produce milk, cheese and condensed milk from dairy farmers in the area.⁷ In December 1882 *The Australasian* reported on a meeting between the Heidelberg (Upper Yarra, Victoria) Cheese and Condensed Milk Company and dairy farmers to update the latter on the Company's progress in manufacturing condensed milk.⁸ The company had been doing this for just over three weeks at that stage but were already producing about 1,000 tins per day. In 1898 the McConnel and Munro families established their Cressbrook Condensed Milk Factory in Queensland.⁹ In 1907 the Cressbrook factory was sold to the Nestlé and Anglo-Swiss Condensed Milk Company of Australasia.^{10 11} Nestlé is the only one of these still in operation and is a leading brand in Australia.

⁵ 'Life in Gallipoli', Col. R. Tambling, *Warwick Examiner and Times* 27 September 1915 p.4 accessed at [27 Sep 1915 - LIFE IN GALLIPOLI. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

⁶ Newell and Co, *The Argus* 19 August 1861 p.3 accessed at [19 Aug 1861 - Advertising - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

⁷ 'Milk-Condensing at Romsey', *The Australasian* 7 October 1882 p.21 accessed at [07 Oct 1882 - MILK-CONDENSING AT ROMSEY. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

⁸ 'Heidelberg Cheese and Condensed Milk Company', *The Australasian* 9 December 1882 p.7 accessed at [09 Dec 1882 - HEIDELBERG CONDENSED MILK COMPANY. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

⁹ [History – The Condensery](#)

¹⁰ [History – The Condensery](#)

¹¹ 'Condensed Milk' *The Register* 26 November 1907 p.10 accessed at [26 Nov 1907 - CONDENSED MILK. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Fascinatingly, there were recipes published for making condensed milk in the home. This one won a prize:

Second prize is awarded to Miss M. Wilson for her recipe for
Condensed Milk

Take 1 ½ pints milk, 1 ½ lb sugar, and 2 tablespoonfuls cornflour. Boil the milk; while it is boiling add the sugar. It must be carefully watched so that there is no risk of burning. Now stir in the cornflour and boil for a few minutes. Pour into jars and leave to cool. This will keep for some time. This makes 4 lb. of condensed milk.¹²

The uses of condensed milk

Health uses

The earliest published recipe in Australia I found for condensed milk is this from 1883:

I send you a recipe for making blanc mange (sic) of condensed milk, which, perhaps, you will give to Mrs Browne. She will be sure to find it useful for her invalid husband on the long Australian voyage the physicians have recommended, for him. ... To 12 teaspoonfuls of condensed milk add a pint and a half of cold water. Stir until smooth. Dissolve over the fire in a little water an ounce of Nelson's gelatine. When thoroughly dissolved, pour gently into the stewpan the condensed milk, a wineglass full of brandy, and a teaspoonful of essence of vanilla, or of almonds, lemon, or any other flavouring. No sugar is required, as the condensed contains sufficient. Stir steadily till the whole thickens, and then turn the mixture into a basin, stirring it occasionally until nearly cold, when it may be poured into a china mould.¹³

Other recipes over the next years also promoted the health benefits of condensed milk. For example, in an emulsion together with cod liver oil, glycerine and lime-water as a remedy for the after-effects of flu.¹⁴

It was also promoted to mothers with infants.

Condensed milk is much used for baby feeding in our own State (Queensland), and doctors endorse the good brands as being most nutritious. Very often it is the only kind of milk a bottle fed baby, can digest, especially in summer.¹⁵

Uses of condensed milk

So condensed milk now had other uses than as a means of extending shelf life of milk. It's main function now was as a convenient sweetener.

¹² 'Condensed Milk' Second Prize, *Sunday Times* 6 May 1923 p.12 accessed at [06 May 1923 - Second Prize - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#). Also: 'Homemade Condensed Milk' On the Kitchen Front *The Daily Telegraph* 21 March 1843 p.30 accessed at [21 Mar 1943 - On The Kitchen Front - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#); 'Condensed Milk' Simple Recipe for Farm, *The Farmer and Settler*, 20 June 1931 p.11 accessed at [20 Jun 1931 - CONDENSED MILK - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#); Condensed Milk' Culinary Specials, *Truth* 25 January 1953 p.33 accessed at [25 Jan 1953 - Culinary Specials.... - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

¹³ Girls' Gossip, *The Ballarat Star* 10 March 1883 p.1 accessed at [10 Mar 1883 - GIRLS' GOSSIP. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

¹⁴ *The Fremantle Herald* 14 November 1919 p.7 accessed at [14 Nov 1919 - FREMANTLE ROADS. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

¹⁵ 'Sweetened Condensed Milk' *The Bundaberg Mail and Burnett Advertiser* 24 November 1914 p.3 accessed at [24 Nov 1914 - SWEETENED CONDENSED MILK. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

The contents of the condensed milk can are of more use to the housekeeper than is generally appreciated.

Condensed milk may be used in making custards with as good results as though the fresh product were used, says a writer in 'Modern Priscilla.'

It may be used in boiled salad dressing, in rice pudding, in muffins, and in making cake, all with equally good results.

A teaspoon added to canned corn, peas, or squash, just before taking from the stove, gives the sweet, rich flavour of the fresh vegetables.

In fact, condensed milk may be used as a substitution in almost every calling for. both sugar and milk.¹⁶

Salad dressing and Mayonnaise

Salad dressing with condensed milk first makes its appearance in Harriet Wicken's recipe for Lettuce Salad in Philip Musketts' 1893 *The Art of Living in Australia*.

Lettuce Salad

2 Lettuce

1 tablespoonful Condensed Milk

2 teaspoonful mustard

2 eggs

¼ gill vinegar

¼ gill Oil

Pepper and salt

Boil the eggs hard; take the yolk of one and put it into a basin and work it quite smooth with a soon. Then add the mustard made with vinegar instead of water, the condensed milk, pepper and salt, and then the oil slowly; last of all the vinegar. Mix it all very thoroughly. Cut off the outside leaves of the lettuce, and pull it all to pieces, wash in cold water and dry thoroughly in a cloth. Break into small pieces and put into a salas bowl, pour over the dressing. Garnish wit the other egg and the white that was not used I the dressing These should be cut into slices and placed around. A few of the best pieces of lettuce should be laid over the dressing.¹⁷

Variations of this were published regularly over the next 100 plus years, sometimes in the body of a recipe on its own at other times. Annie King in her 1918 "*Carry On*" *Cookery Book* calls it simply Condensed Milk Dressing.¹⁸

Before condensed milk in salad dressing there was cream or milk and sugar. For example, Mrs. Lance Rawson's Salad Dressing in her 1895 *The Antipodean Cookery Book and Kitchen Companion*.¹⁹ In Salad Dressing No 1 in the *Common-sense Household Cookery Book of the Cookery of the Teachers' Association of New South Wales* we see condensed milk mid-transition to replace milk, cream and sugar: 'Note: Condensed milk may be used as a substitute for cream: do not use so much sugar when

¹⁶ 'Condensed Milk in Cooking' *The Albury Banner and Wodonga Express* , 8 August 1913 p.15 accessed at [08 Aug 1913 - CONDENSED MILK IN COOKING. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

¹⁷ Muskett, Philip E. *The Art of Living in Australia*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, London.1893 p.247.

¹⁸ Condensed Milk Dressing. King, Annie "*Carry On*" *Cookery Book* 1918 p.37. Condensed milk is an ingredient in Plain Salad (1) in Presbyterian Church of N.S.W. Women's Missionary Association, *Cookery Book of Good and Tried Recipes*, James Steadman 20th edition 20 1931 (First edition 1896) p.7

¹⁹ Rawson, Mrs, Lance (Mina), *The Antipodean Cookery Book and Kitchen Companion*, George Robertson and Company, 1895 (facsimile edition Kangaroo Press 1892 p.86

it is used.²⁰ We see the transition completed in Salads in the *Daily Standard* March 1914: 'There are several simple ways of making good dressings, and I have found that a spoonful of condensed milk in place of ordinary milk or cream is decidedly preferable in all of the salad dressings.'²¹

The same ingredients are also often used to make Mayonnaise, the difference being that it calls for unboiled egg yolks.

Mayonnaise Dressing No 1

Yolks of two eggs	4 tablespoons oil
White of 1 egg	1 tablespoon tarragon vinegar
Teaspoonful raw mustard	Juice of 1 lemon
1 tablespoonful condensed milk	

Mode: - Mix the yolks of the eggs in a basin with a wooden spoon, together with the raw mustard and condensed milk; stir all until perfectly smooth, drop i the oil, until it is the thickness of rich cream then drop in the vinegar until all is used, stirring the one way all the time. Then add the juice of a lemon; beat up the white of the egg to a stiff froth, stir very briskly into the dressing; leave it to stand in a cool place until ready to use. It is always as well to make a few hours before sing.²²

Other culinary uses of condensed milk

Condensed milk is nothing if not versatile, even more so than is encompassed by the quote above. To illustrate its range I used the typology of dishes in the *Country Women's Association (C.W.A.) Cook Book* – Appetizers, Mains, Desserts and so on.²³ In Appendix 1 I give an example for each type, sometimes two, together with where the dish can be found in a printed source or via a hyperlink in Trove.

Of the 300 recipes I reviewed the overwhelming majority were for cakes, desserts, toffees and puddings. But as the typology list shows condensed milk has been used more widely: in alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, breads, soups, biscuits and slices, scones, ice creams, sandwiches, icing, and spreads. The only type condensed milk has not been used in is Meat dishes.

Among the recipes was a recipe for making caramel from condensed milk, standard practice in Australian households for decades.

Caramelized condensed milk is delicious, and if you are fond of the flavour of caramel it would be wise to have a few tins of this preparation on hand. To caramelize condensed milk submerge the tins of milk in sufficient cold water to cover them. Bring the water to boiling point and cook at this temperature for three hours. Then allow the tin to become cold and store in a cool place. This caramelised condensed milk makes delightful sweets and cakes.^{24 25}

²⁰ Cookery Teachers' Association of New South Wales *Common-sense Household Cookery Book* c 1914 Angus and Robertson p. 127

²¹ 'Salads', The *Daily Standard* 21 March 1914 p.12 accessed at [21 Mar 1914 - SALADS. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

²² Maclurcan, Hannah, *Mrs Maclurcan's Cookery Book. A collection of practical recipes specially suited for Australia*, George Robertson and Co, Melbourne, 1898, Recipe number 301

²³ *The Country Women's Association Cook Book. Seventy Years in the Kitchen* (2009). First published in 1937, Murdoch Books 2009

²⁴ 'Caramelised condensed milk' Toothsome Recipes, *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* 29 August 1933 p.12 accessed at [29 Aug 1933 - HOME SCIENCE - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

²⁵ Nestlé now (2023) sells Caramelised Sweetened Condensed Milk which takes all the fun out of making caramel the 'traditional way'. [Caramelized Sweetened Condensed Milk 397g | Nestlé Family ME \(nestle-family.com\)](#)

A 1935 recipe was the only one to use a native ingredient.

Quandong Pie

From Mrs. J. Maloney

Ingredients: 2 lb quandongs (or wild peaches), $\frac{3}{4}$ sugar, 1 cup sago, $\frac{1}{2}$ lb pastry.

Method: Wash and stone fruit, soak sago in water. Put fruit and sago into a saucepan and cook until tender, add sugar and put into a fireproof dish. Roll out pastry and cover fruit. Bake in a moderate oven for 1 hour, or until pastry browns. Serve hot with a sauce made with 1 cup sugar, 1 cup condensed milk. Sauce: Put sugar into a heavy pan and stir with a wooden spoon over low heat until melted. Add milk gradually. Stir until smooth. Serve hot with pie.²⁶

Condensed milk in 2023

The internet today is replete with websites offering recipes for its use. A look at some websites shows that its use generally hasn't changed since its earliest years. 'It might seem old-fashioned,' says Katie Bandurski on her *Taste of Home* site, 'but sweetened condensed milk recipes are the secret to creamy, sweet desserts. This pantry staple adds delicious flavor and texture to pies, fudge, bars and more.' Her site offers 33 such recipes.²⁷ BBC Food has 23 recipes for cakes and desserts, including adaptations of non-British dishes like one for the Indian sweet Coconut rose ladoos and a Pineapple tarte tatin with coconut rum ice cream.²⁸ Closer to home the supermarket chain Woolworth's has 28 recipes including again an adaptation of an Indian sweet this time Saffron Kulfi and Kit Kat Celebration Cheesecake featuring Nestlé's Kit Kat chocolate biscuits.²⁹ Gone, however, are the condensed milk salad dressing and mayonnaise.

Manufacturers have also adapted their product to meet customers' health and religious dietary needs: Willi Foods (a kosher product), Tropicana Slim (for diabetics so no sugar), Nestle Skim, Newa Nutrition (Sugar Free Gluten Free Non GMO). There are also brands of Condensed Coconut Milk on sale targeted at vegans (no milk) and other non-drinkers of milk – Nature's Charm, Coles.

Condensed milk's future is assured.

²⁶ 'Quandong Pie' Cheapest and Best Pies, *Barrier Miner* 5 October 1935 p.5 accessed at [05 Oct 1935 - Cheapest And Best Pies - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

²⁷ [33 Sweetened Condensed Milk Recipes to Satisfy Your Sweet Tooth \(tasteofhome.com\)](#)

²⁸ [Condensed milk recipes - BBC Food](#)

²⁹ [Easy Recipes With Condensed Milk - 28 recipes | Woolworths](#)

Appendix 1. Condensed milk recipes by C.W.A typology

Beverages

Coffee Soda Water *Chronicle* 6 July 1907 p.57 [06 Jul 1907 - SOME EASY RECIPES. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#) ;
Home Made Advocat *The Australian Women's Weekly* 21 June 1967 p.64 [21 Jun 1967 - Winter
casserole wins \\$10 prize - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Starters

Marvel Cheese Spread *The Maitland Daily Mercury* 6 September 1918 p.3 [06 Sep 1938 - Our Prize
Recipe competition - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#) ;
Sprat Toast – *Australian Town and Country Journal* 28 December 1895 p.33 [28 Dec 1895 - Household
Recipes. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Light Meals and Sides/Soups

Oyster Soup *Chronicle* 1 May 1909 p.57 [01 May 1909 - SOME EASY RECIPES. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Light Meals and Sides/Salads

Nuts – Celery Salad *The Albury Banner and Wodonga Express* 17 January 1950 p. 22 [17 Jan 1930 -
RECIPES - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Light Meals and Sides/Sandwiches

Sandwich Filling *Western Mail* 10 April 1947 p.18 [10 Apr 1947 - HANDY HINTS - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Mains/Fish and Seafood

Russian Salad *Truth* 28 September 1930 p.17 [28 Sep 1930 - Making Good Wives Better - Trove
\(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Mains/Poultry and Game

Chicken Mayonnaise *Mirror* 10 July 1926 p.6 [10 Jul 1926 - IN WOMAN'S WORLD - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Rice

Boy Scouts' Rice Custard *The Australian Women's Weekly* 23 July 1969 p.43 [23 Jul 1969 - CASSEROLE
WINS PRIZE - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Baking/Breads and Buns

Milk Loaf *Daily Telegraph* 2 November 1946 p.5 [02 Nov 1946 - MILK LOAF - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Baking/Scones, Pikelets and Tea Cakes

Condensed Milk Scones *The Queenslander* 4 July 1929 p.54 [04 Jul 1929 - COOKERY RECIPES - Trove
\(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Baking/Cakes and Sponges

Ginger Walnut Sponge *Weekly Times* 1957 October 1957 p.54 [18 Oct 1950 - Prize Recipes - Trove
\(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Baking/Biscuits and Slices

Custard Cream Biscuits *Truth* 16 November 1941 p.34 [16 Nov 1941 - making GOOD WIVES Better -
Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Icings and Fillings

Peanut Butter Icing *The Central Queensland Herald* 29 May 1941 p.5 [29 May 1941 - Kitchen Craft - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Pastries and Puddings/Pies and Tarts

Cottage Cheese Pie *The Maitland Daily Mercury* 18 May 1837 p.3 [18 May 1937 - Facts and Fancies for the HOMEMAKER - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Pastries and Puddings/Puddings/Steamed

Batter Pudding *Sydney Mail* 3 June 1914 p.[03 Jun 1914 - Condensed Milk. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Pastries and Puddings/Puddings/Milk Puddings

Bread and Butter Pudding *The Maitland Daily Mercury* 20 June 1914 p.5 [20 Jun 1914 - Recipes - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Pastries and Puddings/Puddings/Baked

Soldier's Plum Pudding *Sunday Times* 27 May 1917 p.7 [27 May 1917 - Second Prize - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Pastries and Puddings/Puddings/Cold

Caramel Pudding *Worker* 29 August 1934 p.4 [29 Aug 1934 - A PAGE for the HOUSEWIFE - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Desserts/Fruit Desserts

Hawaiian Whisk *Examiner* 29 January 1941 p.7 [29 Jan 1941 - SYDNEY READER AWARDED PRIZE - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Desserts/Ice Creams and Sorbets

Banana Chocolate Ice Cream *Cairns Post* 56 March 1953 p.6 [05 Mar 1953 - Recipe - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Desserts/Eclairs, Cream Puffs, and Meringues

Lemon Meringue Tart *Warwick Daily News* 16 July p.5 [16 Jul 1949 - Test and Tell: Prize Winning Pies - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Desserts/Fritters, Pancakes, Doughnuts and Waffles

Pancakes *Sydney Mail* 3 June 1914 p.5 [03 Jun 1914 - Condensed Milk. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Handmade Sweets

Cream Toffee *Labor Call* 1 June 1933 p.8 [01 Jun 1933 - RECIPE - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)