

## **The Rabbit: Only fit for pies or curries? 2023**

Rabbits are a dry meat, only fit for pies or curries; and excellent served as the latter ...  
Abbott, Edward, *The English and Australian Cookery Book: Cookery for the Many, as well as the Upper Ten Thousand - by an Australian Aristologist*, Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, London, 1864 p.89

The history of eating rabbit in Australia seems almost to have been deliberately constructed to prove Abbott wrong. This article sets out to correct him but limits itself to the first 50 years of rabbit recipes, within which is ample evidence for the case against.

### **The Lost First Recipe**

On 30 December 1843 this advertisement was carried in the Parramatta Chronicle

To the Ladies.  
THE ONLY WORK OF THE KIND PUBLISHED IN THE COLONY.  
*THE Housewife's Guide; or an Economical and Domestic ART OF COOKERY, containing Directions for Marketing, Instructions for Dressing Butchers' Meat, Poultry, Game, Fish, Vegetables, &c; likewise for Preparing Soups, Broths, Gravies, and Sauces; also the Art of Potting, Collaring, Pickling, Preserving, and Making Wines: to which is added the different Branches of Modern Pastry and Confectionery, &c. &c. &c.*

The book is the first Australian cookery book. The book is also lost. However, it was a localised edition of a book published in England.<sup>1</sup> The contents list of both books list Rabbit. I think it is safe to say that the recipe would have been the same in both books. The recipe is for neither pie nor curry.

RABBITS Truss the rabbits close, with their heads straight up, the fore legs brought down, and the hind legs straight. Boil them three quarters of an hour, if large ones; fifteen minutes will do for very small ones; lay them on a dish, and smother the with onion sauce; or make sauce for them as follows: boil the liver, and bruise it very fine with a spoon, take out all the strings, put to it some good veal broth, a little parsley chopped fine, and some barberries picked clean from the stalks season it with mace and nutmeg; thicken it with a piece of butter rolled in flour; let the sauce be of good thickness, and pour it over the rabbits. Garnish with lemon and barberries; some like only the liver and parsley chopped fine and put into melted butter.<sup>2</sup>

### **Eating Rabbit in the 1860's**

Abbott did not give a recipe for rabbit, but there were recipes published in the 1860's. The earliest extant recipe just happens to be from 1864.

Fried Rabbit – After the rabbit has been emptied, thoroughly washed, and well soaked, put it into boiling water, and let it boil from five to seven minutes; drain it, and when cold,

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<sup>1</sup> The local edition was published by Edmund Mason, son of William Mason who published the British cookery book *The Housewife's Guide, or an economical and domestic art of cookery* by Mrs Deborah Irwin in 1830. For more on the books see Newling, Jacqueline and Vincent, Alison *Fern syrup, stewed eel and native currant jam: this 1843 recipe collection may be Australia's earliest cookbook* The Conversation April 27, 2022

<https://bit.ly/3KjUXVd>

<sup>2</sup> Irwin, Housewife's Guide p.15

cut it into joints, dip them into beaten egg, and then into fine bread-crumbs seasoned with salt and pepper, and when all are ready, fry them in butter over a moderate fire, fifteen minutes. Simmer two or three strips of lemon-rind in a little gravy, until it is well flavoured with it; boil the liver of the rabbit for five minutes, let it cool, then mince it; thicken the gravy with an ounce of butter, and a small teaspoonful, of flour, add the liver, give the sauce a minute's boil, stir in two table spoonfuls of flour, and, last of all, a small quantity of lemon-juice. Dish the rabbit, pour the sauce under it, and serve it quickly. If preferred, a gravy can be made in the pan, as for veal cutlets, and the rabbit may be simply fried.<sup>3</sup>

Other recipes in the 1860s were: Rabbit in Gibelotte a French stew that usually has mushrooms but this version doesn't have them (1866)<sup>4</sup>; Rabbit and Onions (1867)<sup>5</sup>; Roasted Rabbit (1868)<sup>6</sup>; Boiled Rabbits and Celery (1868)<sup>7</sup>; Rabbit Soup (1868)<sup>8</sup>; and an 1860's version of 'surf and turf' = Roasted Rabbit and Oysters<sup>9</sup>.

### Roasted Rabbit and Oysters

Make choice of a nice plump rabbit, take out the heart and lights, and wipe it quite dry. Make a stuffing with two sponge-cakes, twelve oysters bearded and drained, some cayenne pepper, and 2 oz of fresh- butter: chop , these things together, fill your rabbit with them, rub butter upon the outside, cover it with paper, and roast it slowly for an hour, just browning it before taking up. Make a sauce with the liquor and beards of the oysters, the juice of a whole lemon, 2 oz of fresh butter, a very little flour, some cinnamon and cayenne pepper; simmer these things for a few minutes, strain it into your dish, and serve the rabbit upon it.

And yes, there was –

A Currie of Rabbit. — The insipid nature of the flesh of the rabbit and the facility of obtaining it at any season, cause the rabbit currie to be most common. Cut up two rabbits into joints and fillets, and put into a stewpan, with three ounces of butter; turn and shake them till they are browned; take out the pieces, and put in six small onions, sliced; brown them; pour over them a pint of stock, and mix with it carefully a tablespoonful of currie-powder. Put in the rabbit, and stew gently for an hour; then dish the rabbit neatly, with the onions and sauce over it. Add a teaspoonful of lemon juice before you serve.<sup>10</sup>

### A culinary solution to the rabbit menace.

The first rabbits in Australia were five which arrived with the First Fleet in 1788. Their fate is not recorded. We do know that rabbits were being raised in the colony for their skins, as game and by surmise for the home table.

HAT MANUFACTORY, No. 78, Pitt street.-

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<sup>3</sup> Fried Rabbit, *Kapunda Herald and Northern Intelligencer* 31 December 1864 p.4 [31 Dec 1864 - THE HOUSEWIFE'S CORNER. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> Rabbit in Gibelotte, *The Australian* 16 June 1866 p.6 [16 Jun 1866 - Recipes. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> Rabbit and Onions, *Leader* 20 July 1867 p.27 [20 Jul 1867 - ON STEWING. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>6</sup>Roasted Rabbit, *Geelong Advertiser* 29 February 1868 p.2 [29 Feb 1868 - RECIPES. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> Boiled Rabbits and Celery, *Leader* 9 February p.27 [29 Feb 1868 - RECIPES. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>8</sup> Rabbit Soup, *The Australasian* 6 June 1868 p.7 [06 Jun 1868 - RECIPES. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> Roasted Rabbit and Oysters, *Leader* 9 February p.27 [29 Feb 1868 - RECIPES. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>10</sup> A Currie of Rabbit, *Leader* 14 March 1868 p.27 [14 Mar 1868 - RECIPES. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Now ready for SALE, a very choice Assortment of Men's, Boys, and Children's fine and coarse HATS of an undeniable Quality, and much cheaper than at any other Shop in Sydney.- A considerable Allowance made to Shopkeepers and Dealers purchasing to sell again.

N.B.- Rabbit Skins, Seal Skins, and good Lambs' Wool purchased, or taken in payment for Hats.<sup>11</sup>

To be Sold, a Quantity of fine young RABBITS fit to kill.<sup>12</sup>

Houses to let or for sale frequently made a point of promoting the presence of hutches and warrens.

TO LET.  
FOR IMMEDIATE POSSESSION,  
The Villa Residence and ornaments  
Pleasure Grounds, Orchard, Garden,  
Shrubbery, detached Offices, extensive Stabling,  
and Rabbit Warren, with a considerable number  
of Rabbits ...<sup>13</sup>

By 1864 when Abbott was writing, rabbits had spread throughout the country. The cause of this is usually ascribed to the release in 1859 of 24 wild rabbits by Thomas Austin on his property Barwon Park and their subsequent escape. 'However,' writes Eric Rolls, 'Austin's importations may have been the first European rabbits but there had been others brought in about the same time to Victoria, New South Wales, and South Australia. There seems to have been too many rabbits at different centres in too short a space of time for them all to have sprung from Austin's donations...'.<sup>14</sup> The rabbits proliferated and by 1863 had increased 'to a nuisance'.<sup>15</sup>

In 1867 a correspondent to the *Geelong Advertiser* sent a culinary solution to the menace, perhaps a little tongue in cheek:

As rabbits are now very plentiful, the following recipe for potted rabbit may be acceptable to some of our lady readers: - Take off the legs and shoulders of the rabbits, also the fleshy parts of the back. Cut off the leg bones at the first joint, and the shoulder bones at the blades, but without cutting off the meat. Take also the livers season these limbs and livers, put plenty of butter over them and bake them gently ; then stow them lightly into pots, covering them with clarified butter. The remainder of the rabbit may serve for any other purpose in the culinary arrangements of the day. <sup>16</sup>

### Eating rabbit 1870 – 1914

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<sup>11</sup> [20 Dec 1817 - Classified Advertising - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>12</sup> Colonial Times and Tasmanian Advertiser 26 October 1827 p.1 [26 Oct 1827 - Advertising - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> To Let, *The Sydney Herald* 1 February 1838 p.1 [01 Feb 1838 - Advertising - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>14</sup> Rolls, E., *They all ran wild : the animals and plants that plague Australia*, Angus & Robertson, 1984 p.20

<sup>15</sup> Newling, Jacqueline, *Eat your History* NewSouth and Sydney Living Museums 2015 citing *The Argus* 23 September 1865

<sup>16</sup> *Geelong Advertiser* 23.p [23 Jul 1867 - CURRENT TOPICS. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Three or four couples of rabbits a week assist greatly in housekeeping, and they can be cooked in so many ways that one scarcely gets tired of them.<sup>17</sup>

Rabbit was certainly cooked in many ways during the years 1870 – 1914. It was baked, broiled, curried, fricasseed, fried, jellied, pied, potted, roasted, stewed and souped. Here are some of the more interesting recipes one for each decade.

Fricandeau of rabbit makes a capital dish; and is not difficult to dress. This is how it should be done Take a young rabbit which has hung till tender: having duly prepared it lard it from one end to the other, cut it into medium-sized pieces; simmer, them in enough stock to cover them, adding a little white wine and one or two slices of bacon. When cooled take out the pieces, strain, and reduce- the stock to a jelly, and with it glaze the fricandeau, which serve with sauce according to taste. <sup>18</sup>(1874)

#### Rabbit a la Francaise

Take a young rabbit put it after it is well washed into a stewpan with a small bit of lean bacon, an onion stuck with three or four cloves, about ten peppercorns, a bunch of sweet herbs, a stick of celery and a carrot, cover with about a quart of cold water, or some thin stock if the latter is available. Put the lid on the pan, and let the whole stew together for an hour and a half, but it must do gently as the rabbit must not fall to pieces. Take it out, let it cool a little, then cut into neat joints, strain the gravy, removing all fat, put as much as you require to make a good sauce for the rabbit into a stewpan, thicken it with cornflower and milk. Put in the pieces of rabbit and serve when it is quite hot.<sup>19</sup> (1886)

#### Jugged Rabbit

The rabbit being properly, cleaned and cut into suitably-sized pieces, see that they are thoroughly dry. Roll (hem in flour and fry to a nice golden colour. Put the rabbit in a dish, Cut up two large onions, fry these also to a golden colour, and place over the rabbit. Now get a small raw onion, stick about half-a-dozen cloves around it, and put in centre of the dish. Add as seasoning, the following ingredients : — One teaspoonful of spice, one of salt, one of pepper, a little nutmeg, and a few peppercorns. Put a plate on the dish and steam in a cooker for two hours. Just before serving, thicken with flour and a wine glass of port wine. Garnish with sliced lemons.<sup>20</sup> (1900)

#### Rabbit with Macaroni

This recipe is usually very much liked, and there is but little trouble in its preparation. Joint the rabbit; fry the pieces a rich brown, and put them in a stewpan. In the same fat, brown a Spanish onion, sliced. Add to the rabbit with a sprig of parsley; a small sprig of -thyme or a pinch of the same herb (powdered); half a bay leaf and a few pepper corns. All these to be tied in a piece of muslin. Cover with hot water, and stew slowly for an hour. Boil in a separate saucepan as much macaroni, broken small, as will fill a breakfast cup ; drain off the water, and add the macaroni to the rabbit. Season with salt and a small teaspoonful of ground ginger, and just before serving, stir in a teacupful of grated, mild cheese. Remove the twig of herbs before serving.<sup>21</sup> (1908)

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<sup>17</sup> To Cook Rabbit 15 Leader February 1868 p.28 [15 Feb 1868 - RECIPES. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>18</sup> Breakfast, *Leader* 5 December 1874 p.5 [05 Dec 1874 - THE HOUSEHOLD. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>19</sup> Useful Recipes, *The Tasmanian* 18 September 1886 p.4 [18 Sep 1886 - USEFUL RECIPES - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>20</sup> Recipes, *Molong Express and Western District Advertiser* 29 September 1900 p.11 [29 Sep 1900 - RECIPES. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>21</sup> Recipes, *Illawarra Mercury* 18 December 1908 p.8 [18 Dec 1908 - RECIPES. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

### Rabbit Creams

Take about 10 oz of the whitest flesh from the back and legs of a rabbit. Pound the meat in a mortar with 2 oz of lean ham, and the same quantity of dried and grated tongue. Melt a good tablespoon of butter in a stewpan, and gradually stir in half an ounce of flour. When well mixed, add a gill of rabbit stock. Season with salt, cayenne, and a teaspoon of vinegar. Beat up one egg, add to the rabbit: and stir all into the sauce. Grease some fancy moulds, fill them with the rabbit panada press down firmly, cover each with greased paper, stand in a frying pan half full of boiling water, and steam for 20 minutes. Serve either hot or cold, arranged around a pile of boiled peas (if in season) nicely garnished and seasoned to taste.<sup>22</sup> (1913)

And to keep faith with Abbott here are recipes for curried rabbit – written by Miss Amy Monro, Principal, Cookery School, Technical Collee, Sydney - and rabbit pie.

### Curried Rabbit

Ingredients. — 1 rabbit, 1 apple, 1 onion, 1 tablespoonful each of curry powder and flour, half a teaspoonful of mustard, 1 teaspoonful of sugar, salt to taste, a few drops of lemon juice, 2 oz, of butter or dripping, 1 ½ pints of water.

Method. — Wash and dry the rabbit, cut it into neat joints; make the fat hot and fry them. Take them out and fry the apple and onion, which have been chopped finely; add to it the curry powder and all other dry ingredients, then add the water, stir till it boils and simmer 5 minutes; then add the rabbit and cook slowly for about one hour, or till the rabbit is tender; add the lemon juice, more salt if necessary. Serve hot with nicely boiled rice.<sup>23</sup>

### Rabbit Pie

Cut up rabbit and stew in one pint of water with onion, a few cloves, and seasoning, for about an hour. Put it in pie dish, garnish with slices of egg and pieces of fried bacon or ham. Cover with paste and bake. For paste, make a short crust of 1 lb flour, one cup butter or dripping, one teaspoon baking powder; sift flour, mix in baking powder and salt, rub in butter, make into stiff dough with water, using as little as possible. Knead for a few minutes. Roll out only once; bake in quick oven.<sup>24</sup>

### Concluding words

The end of the first fifty years saw rabbit in a contradictory culinary position While efforts continued to be made to check if not eradicate the rabbit nuisance – trapping, rabbit warren ripping, fumigation and bounty systems, and rabbit proof fences across great swathes of the country<sup>25</sup> – the rabbit continued to have a place at the Australian table.

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<sup>22</sup> Useful Recipes, *The Colac Herald* 24 September 1913 p.3 [24 Sep 1913 - USEFUL RECIPES. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>23</sup> Household Recipes, *The Wingham Chronical and Manning River Observer* 19 November 1904 p.7 [19 Nov 1904 - HOUSEHOLD RECIPES. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>24</sup> Rabbit Recipes, *The Peak Hill Express* 18 May 1906 p.19 [18 May 1906 - Rabbit Recipes. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>25</sup> Rabbits Introduced, National Museum of Australia [Rabbits introduced | National Museum of Australia \(nma.gov.au\)](#)