

Tucker shopping: recollections of school tuckshops and canteens, with recipes

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‘The thrill of the tuckshop was a rare treat, my go to order was a pie with sauce, a pineapple glazed donut and a Sunny Boy ... the day was even better if you scored a "free Sunny Boy " printed inside.’

‘Friday lunch in the old bike sheds - you could choose a pie, hot dog or a salad roll with vanilla slice, matchstick or cream bun. One and threepence.’

‘5 cents bag of mixed lollies was a feast of sugar for Queens and Kings.’

I read an article about tuckshops in Britain in an online food magazine recently and it set me remembering my tuckshop days at St. Joseph’s Primary School at Singleton in the Hunter Valley. It was at the back of the church hall, fronting the playground. In my mind it is small, a-bustle with volunteers from the school ‘Mothers’ Club’ buttering bread for sandwiches, filling out lunch orders from pupils, and serving behind a low counter on which are several kinds of lollies (sweets). My dad used to make me sandwiches for lunch and give me sixpence to buy a treat for ‘play lunch’, the morning break between lessons. Sometimes dad would take a break from making lunch and give me money to buy sandwiches for lunch.

I wondered what the tuckshop experience was for others. So, I put a call out to my Facebook friends, who are now very much a part of the research I do into Anglo Australian foodways and had a chat over coffees with my morning dog-walking group, also a regular go to for research. What follows is a collage of their stories and mine.

There was a septet of remembered pastries: finger buns, cream buns, rock cakes, jam doughnuts, pineapple doughnuts, custard tarts and vanilla slice. The finger bun was distinguished by a line of Barbie pink icing on top along the length of it. Cream buns had a dollop of mock cream on top, sometimes with a splodge of strawberry jam on top of the cream and was excellent for giving you a white moustache as you chomped your way through it. Rock cakes were ugly crumbly lumps of a biscuity mix studded with currants and thankfully not of a consistency the name suggests. Jam and pineapple doughnuts were notable for being massive sugar hits, leaving fingers coated with a sugary syrup to lick clean. Custard tarts came with in a foil container, a crumbly pastry, and a lurid yellow oversweet custard filling, sometimes with cinnamon or nutmeg sprinkled on top. Vanilla slices were flaky pastry all down your front and a wedge of custard that was determined to break out of its sandwich straitjacket and hit the ground.

The three top lunch buys were meat pies, sausage rolls, and salad sandwiches. Back then meat pies were full of mince and thick gravy and not chunks of overcooked meat: ‘Mince pies so hot if they dripped on your leg they’d leave a mark.’ An informant recalled: ‘We were allowed (by parents) to have a McKays meat pie every 2 weeks. I would take the lid off it, pour on tomato sauce and eat the meat with a spoon.’ I also ate the lid first but lacked the spoon to eat the mince so had to be cautious about how I held it as I ate it as per the opening comment here. Another informant recalled ‘Once a week you could order home-made pies from a woman who lived down the road. They were fantastic.’ Luxury, as they say.

Sausage rolls were flaky pastry wrapped around an unidentifiable tasteless greyish mince. But in their favour was that they were able to be held in a single hand, leaving the other to play handball/hand tennis or King Pin in the schoolyard (sort of a cross between ping pong, squash, and

tennis), and also that they had no gravy to drip down one's shirt. 'Sausage roll with tomato sauce every day for 'little lunch' (morning tea break in Queensland) for threepence.'

Occasionally there was something different. 'Biggest thrill was the day they made hot dogs. We lined up in high school canteen and bought them covered in tomato sauce.' One recalled that hot chips were 'a big thing for a few years.'

Salad sandwiches were mentioned often. The standard ingredients were shredded iceberg lettuce, tomato, grated carrot, a slice of tinned beetroot (sometimes not – they made the sandwiches soggy and risked staining your school uniform), cheese (often thin slices of Kraft processed cheese, sometimes grated off a block) and mayonnaise (sometimes only 'a smear') on white bread spread with butter or margarine. Optional extras were cucumber, onion, ham or other pressed meat, boiled egg or thin slices of roast lamb.

But there were other takes on the sandwich. 'Potato chips placed inside a buttered white roll or devon and tomato sauce on a buttered white roll - a Monday treat - 20cents'. My dad often made me devon sandwiches. Coming from Sri Lanka, where the only non-curry meat I ate was ham, manufactured and pressed meats like devon were part of developing an Australia identity. I never gave a thought to what devon was made of, only later finding out that it was made from trimmings of beef, chicken, and pork.

Usurpingly, vegemite was mentioned. 'Cheese and vegemite white bread.' 'The thing I enjoyed the most was the crust ends of bread with either peanut butter or Vegemite (we didn't have Vegemite at home at all) which were a really cheap lunch.' An informant other remembered 'a chicken burger with something vaguely resembling a chicken pattie, mayo and iceberg lettuce. Sometimes on a roll, sometimes plain white bread. Was topnotch at the time.'

One informant recalled: 'I wasn't really allowed to eat out (Don't waste money!). But one day my Mum swore me to secrecy and snuck me some coins. I ordered a cheese sandwich. Grated Kraft cheese on squishy white bread with butter. I thought that it was the best thing that I had ever eaten.' Said another, 'You could get toasted cheese for 20 cents and a slice of orange cake with icing for 15 cents.' Another said, 'The only thing I remember buying from the tuck shop was tinned spaghetti sandwiches, as disgusting as that sounds.'

Many recalled buying lollies: red and green jelly frogs,(there was often heated debate as to which tasted better); packets of sherbet with a spoon attached sometimes in the form of a ring as a trinket; jaw aching wine gums; black and thick licorice twists; Minties (cubes of sticky white toffee flavored with mint); Milky Bars (white chocolate - the advertisements for which featured a boy dressed like a cowboy known as the Milky Bar Kid whose tag line was 'The Milky Bars are on me'); musk sticks (star shaped tubes of thick fondant in different flavours coloured appropriately – lime, strawberry, banana, pineapple, the name coming from its aroma of mush) and Freddo Frogs (milk chocolate shaped like a flattened frog). An informant recalled, '1 cent carob buttons. We called them carob drops and (they) came in a little wrap of lunch paper twisted around them.' Another recalled 'Packets of Fizzers for 1c.'

Two biscuits were mentioned: the Wagon Wheel and '20c giant Anzac bickies in a paper bag with oil marks all over it.' The former are marshmallow sandwiched between two large round biscuits coated with chocolate. The latter is a mixture of oatmeal and golden syrup traditionally made to be eaten on Anzac day, the day of remembrance of Australia's first military engagement in World War One.

Paddle Pops were a popular milk ice cream on a stick, chocolate being the flavor favourite. Icy Poles were water ice also on a stick, my favorite flavour being lemonade. The Sunny Boy mentioned in the opening quote was an orange flavoured ice water in a tetrahedral pack (like a pyramid), best enjoyed by making a hole at a corner of the pack and sucking the flavored water as the ice melted. The Sunny Boy was challenged by two other tetrahedral packed water ices": Glug was a cola ice and Razz was raspberry flavoured. But it was no contest: it's the Sunny Boy that achieved icon status.

Lunches were sometimes pre-ordered. 'I remember writing your order with name and class on brown paper bags, having correct money in the bag and handing it in before classes.' 'We took a brown paper bag to school with the money in it and our name written on it (by our mother). We had to drop that into a basket which was taken to the tuckshop and filled out by the mothers.'

Two informants attended schools without a tuckshop. 'Lunch orders used to come from a nearby milk bar which used to do meat pies, sausage rolls etc. and was later prevailed upon by the mothers to provide the Oslo lunch, said to be healthy at the time. Brown bread, cheese, and salad from memory.' Similarly, another recalled 'Offspring's primary school didn't have a tuckshop at all – lunch orders came from a nearby cafe from a menu selected by the P&C (Parents' and Citizens' Association – a school voluntary body). Pairs of year 6 kids were selected to deliver and collect the orders.'

Four of my informants who grew up elsewhere recounted their tuckshop food:

'In Malta. We rushed the tuckshop to get pastizzi before they sold out.'

'1960s NZ: cream buns, pies, and filled rolls.'

'We had a bunroom (it was Scotland) where you could get drop scones with jam.'

'Milk toffee in Kandy.'

Tuckshops, particularly in primary school, were staffed by the school's 'Mothers' Club', parents of pupils at the school rostered to prepare lunches and serve at the counter. 'The primary school tuckshop was run by the Mothers' Club. There were two different teams – one did fruit boxes, nuts and seasonal berries/ apricots. The other did ice cream and chocolate. And lollies galore. The 'healthy' one was run by a woman whose husband ran the local health food store. The sweets one was run by someone from the posh side of town.' Said another, 'School mothers served at the canteen. They made hamburgers with far too much flour in the mixture (helped with the profits, never mind the nutrition).'

There were benefits to having mothers at the tuckshop: 'Always loved when my mother was on duty because there'd be an unexpected treat in the lunch when I got it'. 'Every so often one of your friend's mothers would be on duty and you'd get something extra when you bought your toastie or ice block.' An informant recalled a different experience: 'Occasionally my mother would be in there (I guess they signed up to a roster) and that would be strange as she would barely acknowledge us – too busy.'

So there you have it. As I said, a collage of memories that may not quite be the whole but are enough to convey something of the tuckshop life of my friends and me. I have no grand theories to attach to what was shared with me. Sometimes it's good just to have fun food stories. I hope this is one. Recipes for some of what is mentioned here follow.

I grew out of tuckshop days in my mid-teens when my food attention shifted to post-school socialising and what to eat while waiting for the bus home. But that's a story for another time.

Recipes

Finger Buns

They're just about the best buns you'll ever taste - golden glazed, studded with fruit, topped with icing. Delicious served warm, with butter. The recipe makes 16.

4 cups plain flour
½ teaspoon salt
30g (1oz) compressed yeast
1½ cups lukewarm milk
½ cup sultanas
¼ cup currants
60g (2oz) butter or substitute
¼ cup sugar

1 egg

GLAZE

1 tablespoon sugar
1 teaspoon gelatine
1 tablespoon hot water

ICING

1 cup icing sugar
2 teaspoons butter or substitute
1 tablespoon milk
few drops of red food colouring

GLAZE

Put sugar, gelatine and water in small saucepan, stir over low heat until sugar and gelatine have dissolved.

ICING

Sift icing sugar into bowl, add melted butter and milk, beat until smooth. Leave white or colour with red food colouring.

1 Cream yeast with 1 teaspoon each of the sugar and flour, add milk, mix well. Cover, stand in warm place 10 to 15 minutes or until frothy. Sift remaining flour, salt and sugar, rub in butter, add beaten egg, sultanas, currants, yeast mixture, beat well.

2 Cover bowl with clean cloth, stand in warm place 40 minutes or until dough doubles in bulk. Punch dough down, turn out onto floured surface, knead until dough is smooth and elastic, about 5 minutes.

3 Cut dough into 4 equal pieces; cut each piece into 4, making 16 pieces. Knead each piece lightly and roll into lengths approximately 12cm (5in) long.

4 Lightly grease two 28cm x 18cm (11 in x 7in) lamington tins. Place 8 buns in each tin, arranged in rows of four. Stand tins in warm place until buns rise to just reach edges of tins, approximately 10 minutes. Bake in hot oven 15 to 20 minutes. Remove from oven, brush with glaze. Cool on wire rack.

5. Put icing into one corner of small plastic bag, snip off corner and pipe down centre of buns.¹

¹"Finger Buns", Weekly Cooking Class, the *Australian Women's Weekly* 2 May 1979 p.101 [02 May 1979 - Finger Buns - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Rock Cakes

Half a pound of butter, half a pound of sugar, one pound of flour, three eggs, and a half pound of currants. Beat the butter to a cream, then beat up the eggs thoroughly and mix in with the butter and sugar, after which stir in the flour very gradually, and lastly the currants. Keep a little of the white of egg out to froth the top with. Drop the buttons on buttered paper, and bake quickly.²

Cream Bun

Put half a pint of water 2oz. of butter, and a little salt into a stewpan; as soon as these begin to boil draw the stewpan off the fire, and add 4oz. of flour; stir these well together over the fire with a wooden spoon until it becomes a soft paste. Next add a little essence of vanilla and one egg, beat well together, and add two more eggs, one at a time. Place this paste on a baking sheet in round balls, bake a light brown, and serve filled with whipped cream flavored with vanilla essence.³

Jam Doughnuts

These are the favourites at the present time, and are seen in the shops as round balls with jam in the middle. Some may wonder how it is possible for jam to get in the middle of a ball but it is easy enough when the right method is known.

Take half a pound of self-raising flour, and rub into it two ounces of butter; add two ounces of sugar, and make into a paste with a beaten egg and about a tablespoonful of milk. Divide this into eight pieces, roll each piece into a ball, make a hole in the top, put in a teaspoonful of stiff raspberry, jam, close the paste over it, and pinch well to prevent the oozing out. Fry till nicely browned.

Another way to enclose the jam is to roll out the paste to half an inch in thickness, and to cut rounds two inches and a half across, place jam on half of these, wet edges, lay another round on top, pinch edges together, and fry as before. As the cakes fry they rise and turn into balls. When these are done they should be dusted with fine sugar before they become quite cold.

[05 Aug 1916 - DOUGHNUTS. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

Pineapple Doughnut

This was the hardest to find. There is whole discussion about it on the internet which ended up sending me to what I have here. It has a recipe for two different approaches a glaze option and a glaze option.

Pineapple Doughnuts

If using the soaked in glaze option, it's important to make the glaze first and allow it to cool. For the icing it doesn't matter if it is left until a bit later to prepare. Relates to the plainer doughnuts.

For the Pineapple Glaze option

1 cup pineapple juice
2 cups sugar
1 tablespoon lemon juice

For the Pineapple Glaze Icing Option

2½ cups icing sugar
2 teaspoons melted butter
2 teaspoons lemon juice
1/3 (one third) to ½ cup pineapple juice, approximately

² Abbott, Edward, *The English and Australian Cookery Book. Cookery for the Many As Well the "Upper Ten Thousand"*, Sampson, Low, Son & Marston London 1864 p.152

³ 'Cream Buns', The Table, *The Burrowa News* 7 May 1926 p.6 [07 May 1926 - Cream Buns - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

For the dough

3 cups plain flour
3 teaspoons instant dried yeast
½ teaspoon baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons sugar
85g salted butter, melted and cooled to lukewarm
2 egg yolks
1 cup lukewarm milk, approximately

METHOD**To make the pineapple glaze**

Place all ingredients in a deep medium to large saucepan. Bring to the boil, stirring, then reduce heat and cook without stirring for 3 minutes more (Be careful that it doesn't boil over). Remove from heat and cool to room temperature.

To make the pineapple glaze icing

Mix all ingredients together to make a soft icing consistency, suitable for dipping. Set aside. Stir before using.

To make the dough

Mix the flour, yeast, baking powder, salt and sugar together in a large bowl. In a separate bowl, whisk together the melted butter, egg yolks and milk until just combined.

Make a well in the centre of the dry ingredients and pour in this liquid. Mix to a soft dough, adding only if necessary, just a little more milk.

Place a tea towel over the bowl and leave to rise for approximately one and a half hours until the dough is at least one and a half times to twice its original size.

Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface, sprinkle with flour and knead for approximately 3 minutes or until the dough is smooth and elastic. Leave to stand 5 minutes, then roll out on a lightly floured surface to 1cm thick.

Cut into 7cm rounds with a sharp cutter, and then cut a hole in the middle with a 2cm round cutter. Place on baking paper on a tray, allowing a little room for spreading, and leave to rest for 20 minutes.

Fill a large frying pan with canola oil (or similar) to a depth of 3 cm.

Towards the end of the dough's resting time, heat the oil to around 180 degrees C.

Place 3 or 4 (no more) of doughnuts in the pan and immediately reduce heat a little (to about 160 degrees C).

Cover the pan and cook for 3 minutes. Remove cover and turn the doughnuts and cook uncovered for a further 4 minutes. (I check to see if they are cooked through with the tip of a small sharp knife inserted into the side.)

Remove to a tray that is lined with paper towel.

For the Pineapple Glaze option

Place the HOT doughnuts two or three at a time in the pineapple glaze and leave to soak for 2 minutes. Turn and leave a further 2 minutes, then remove to a wire rack (that has a tray under it to catch drips).

Repeat with the remaining doughnuts.

For the Pineapple Glace Icing Option

Stir the icing until smooth again. Dip the tops of doughnuts, while they still warm, in the icing and then place on a wire rack, icing side up, with a tray underneath to catch the drips.⁴

This is a recipe from 1940 for pineapple doughnuts that has pineapple 'gems' within the dough, not just a glazing which I reckon you could instead use either crushed pineapple or pineapple pieces.

Pineapple Gem Doughnuts

3 ½ cups sifted oil purpose flour, 4 teaspoons baking powder, 1 teaspoon salt, ½ teaspoon nutmeg, ½ a teaspoon cinnamon, 1 cup sugar, 2 eggs well beaten, 2 tablespoons melted shortening, 1 cup milk, (1 lb. 14oz.) tin pineapple gems.

Sift dry ingredients. Gradually add sugar to eggs, beat until light, add shortening. Add sifted dry ingredients alternatively with the milk. Add more flour if necessary to make dough stiff enough to handle. Roll out on a floured board to about 1-3 inch thickness. Cut in rounds with a 2 ½ inch cutter. Place a well-drained gem in the centre of each round and roll dough around it. Fry in deep fat at 360 degrees (or hot enough to brown a cube of bread in 10 seconds), until golden brown. Do not fry too rapidly or doughnuts will not be done in the centre. Drain on absorbent paper and roll in sugar. These are good either hot or cold. Yield : Approximately 3 ½ dozen doughnuts.⁵

Custard Tarts

Make some tartlet cases of puff paste, or if you are not sure of your own powers as a puff pastrycook, order the cases from the baker. This is an excellent filling: Rub a well-beaten egg into an ounce of flour, and when thoroughly mixed add a pinch of salt, one ounce of castor sugar, and a quarter of a pint of milk. Stir the whole over the fire till it boils and then simmer gently for a quarter of an hour. Turn the mixture out, and stir into it the yolks of two eggs, a teaspoonful of pounded ratafias, and a few drops of vanilla essence. Meantime heat a piece of butter the size of an egg over the fire, and when just colored pour into the custard and let the whole cool before using.⁶

Vanilla Slices

To make vanilla slices – ½ lb short crust, custard made of 3 eggs, a large tablespoon cornflour, a pint of milk, sugar and vanilla, icing made of ½ lb icing sugar, a teaspoon hot water, vanilla. Make short crust and roll into a thin sheet. Place on oven tray and make little cuts all over to prevent rising, Cut into 2 even pieces and cook in quick oven. Mix boiled custard with above ingredients and when both are cool cover one half with custard and place the other half on top. Sift icing sugar and mix with water and vanilla and spread it on top of the pastry. Cut into small squares.⁷

⁴ 'Pineapple Doughnuts', [Pineapple Doughnuts – recipe \(sallywise.com.au\)](http://PineappleDoughnuts-recipe(sallywise.com.au))

⁵ 'Pineapple Gem Doughnuts' In the Kitchen, *Townsville Daily Bulletin* 3 September 1940 p.10 [03 Sep 1940 - IN THE KITCHEN - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](http://03Sep1940-IN-THE-KITCHEN-Trove(nla.gov.au))

⁶ 'Custard Tart' Handy Hints, *The Daily Telegraph* 28 December 1907 p.15 [28 Dec 1907 - CUSTARD TARTS. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](http://28Dec1907-CUSTARD-TARTS-Trove(nla.gov.au))

⁷ 'Vanilla Slice' Tasty Recipes, *The Canberra Times* 7 March 1928 p.7 [07 Mar 1928 - VANILLA SLICES - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](http://07Mar1928-VANILLA-SLICES-Trove(nla.gov.au))

Individual Meat Pies

Most recipes for mince meat pies are for making big pies in a pie-dish which is impractical for a tuck shop item. This one is the first I came across that makes individual pies.

Ingredients:

1 lb. minced steak	1 onion
1 tablespoon flour	1 stick celery
salt and pepper	1 cup stock or water
1 tablespoon chopped parsley	½ lb V& lb. flaky or rough puff pastry
1 grated carrot	

Method: Place the steak, peeled, diced onion and the stock in saucepan. Heat to boiling point, simmer for 16 minutes, add the grated carrot, diced celery, season with salt and pepper, and simmer till tender. Blend the flour smoothly with a little cold stock or water, stir into meat mixture, simmer for few minutes, add chopped parsley, and leave till cold. Roll prepared pastry to about ¼ in. thickness, cut circles to fit the tops of small pie pans, and the same number of circles cut with a cutter about two sizes larger to line the pans. Place larger circles in pans as lining. Fill with the cooked, cold meat mixture, moisten edges with milk or beaten egg, place tops in position, press together near the edges, and make a hole in centre of each to allow steam to escape, preventing pastry becoming sodden. Brush surface with egg glazing and bake in a hot oven for 15 to 20 minutes. Garnish with parsley sprigs and serve hot with hot gravy or sauce and suitable vegetables.⁸

Sausage Rolls

Half pound minced meat, one teaspoonful of chopped parsley, one dessertspoon of herbs, one dessertspoon of flour, half teaspoon of salt, quarter teaspoonful of pepper, one gill of water, half pound flaky pastry. Put all meat in a saucepan, with a gill of water and other ingredients, cook 12 minutes, stirring all the time, turn out on a plate to cool, cut pastry to any size, put in the mixture, and roll up, bake in a good oven.

FLAKY PASTRY for the above: Half pound fine flour on a board, and chop into it 6oz. butter with a knife, make a well in centre, add a pinch of salt, half teaspoonful of lemon juice, and one egg (egg may be omitted). Mix pastry lightly, adding water gradually sufficient to mix, flour hands and board well, roll three different times, between each rolling fold, pastry three times always keeping ends to the front; before baking sausages, glaze over each one with the yolk of a well beaten egg.⁹

Anzac Biscuits or Crispies

Two cups John Bull oats or flaked oatmeal, 1 cup flour, 1 tablespoonful golden syrup, half-cup of sugar, 1 teaspoonful carbonate of soda, 1 good pinch salt, 2 tablespoonfuls boiling water, 1 half-cup melted butter. Put oatmeal, flour, sugar and salt together. Pour on the melted butter, mix syrup and boiling water, and stir in the soda. Mix all while frothing. Put on the greased oven slide with a teaspoon, bake brown in a moderate oven.¹⁰

⁸Individual Meat Pies' Savory Meat Pies, *The Sun* 8 August 1937 p.42 [08 Aug 1937 - Savory MEAT PIES - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](https://nla.gov.au/nla:gov:1937-08-08-042)

⁹Sausage Rolls' Recipes, *Sunday Times* 13 August 1905 p.14 [13 Aug 1905 - SAUSAGE ROLLS. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](https://nla.gov.au/nla:gov:1905-08-13-014)

¹⁰'Anzac Biscuits or Crispies' Barbara Santich, *Bold Palates. Australia's Gastronomic Heritage* pp. 204 - 205