

A National Dish?

March 2024

What would you say was the Australian National Dish? Posing the question and asking for nominations is sort of going where angels fear to tread. But that's what I did in March 2024 on Facebook. This article is a summary of the responses.

It's probably no surprise that there was virtually no consensus as to a national dish. Two comments here I think are apt:

'The wonderful thing is that there isn't just one!'

'I don't think we actually have a national dish. I think that's wonderful, it reflects our diverse and constantly changing demographics.'

I like these comments for their inclusivity. In an avowedly culinarily multicultural society the search for *a* national dish seems embarrassingly out of step. But I had stepped so on I press.

At the same time two comments pointed to a lack of diversity in the responses:

How interesting this list is! Mainly Anglo offerings c1950s and 1960s - some honourable exceptions notwithstanding. Is this due to the age cohort of contributors? Where are: pizzas; pasta (apparently now the go to for the 'average household'), Pad Thai (beloved fast food of the inebriated) etc. etc. etc.

I think the dishes that go along with an Australiana theme are the ones that are seen as typical Aussie food (as presented in advertising) from the 50s-70's. All very Anglo and not that popular now (apart from the Pavlova and meat pies). However our restaurants and the food we eat at home is so diverse and not very Anglo.

This is a fair call also. The only dish nominated that is not categorizable as 50's to 70's Anglo Australiana is chicken parmigiana – chicken breasts crumbed with parmesan and breadcrumbs, fried then covered with a pasta sauce and mozzarella and baked.

To the question is this an artefact of the age group of contributors I don't have an answer but it is not beyond the realms of probability. Equally, I can't answer for respondents' ethnic and cultural backgrounds, which may also have an impact on their choices.

These limitations granted, what were the responses?

Leading nomination is shared by two stand-alone items and one situational item. Taken alphabetically they are the hamburger, the pie and pub food.

Comments on the hamburger were:

'Beetroot and/or pineapple on a burger.'

'Egg on a burger too. In fact a steak sandwich with thin steak, tomato, onion, lettuce, beetroot, egg and pineapple with white pepper and rosella fruit chutney.'

'Hamburger with the lot. Found nowhere else in the world that I've traveled.'

'Fried chicken burger, with mayo and lettuce. One of the first Australian foods I came across, in milk bars, on my arrival in Australia.'

Comments on the pie were:

'There would have to be a pie in the list,'

'Meat pie definitely.'

'Pie with frozen middle at the footy.'

'Without too much mental deliberation I think a chunky meat/mushroom pie. Though it's hard to block out the international culinary voices that migration has given us.'

Comments on pub food were:

'Lambs fry and bacon, any country town pub and Cafe back then.'

'Crumbed cutlets - irresistible in country pubs!' To which another respondent said: 'irresistible anywhere. If I were a nation, they would be my national dish but not sure about the whole country

'Soggy chips. Ubiquitous. That's what we eat. Don't blame fast food chains. Pubs, restaurants, sport stadiums, independent fast-food outlets. That's our most common dish.'

I'm at the pub for dinner. We were talking about this just now. I suggested "schnitz & tits'. But chicken parmigiana was popular at our table'. Chicken parmigiana is also nominated outside of any link to pubs.

My take on these three is that they are levelers, using ingredients that are commonly acceptable, in a form (for the pies and hamburgers) that is manageable without needing specialized tools for ingestion, that can be eaten inside or outside (I count pub beer gardens as outside), in a formal or informal setting, with opportunity for individualization and adaptability culinary culture and health wise. So I think it is the basic form of each that is part of a national cuisine – that is, the buns for burgers, pastry cases for pies.

I think here of the two pies I buy each week from a pair of Thai sisters from their stall at the Addison Road markets – one filled with a satay and the other with green curry. Or the vegan restaurants and cafes opening recently and the range of vegan products now available including vegan pies and burgers and the vegan options appearing on the menu of any pub that wants to attract business. There are bread rolls and pastries for the gluten intolerant. At the Ramadan night markets in 2024 camel burgers were walking away from the footpath hot plate as soon as they were made.

Main course wise there were some outriders:

'Chiko roll - that was one of my introductions to Australian cuisine.' (For those who don't know what a Chiko roll is, Frank McEnroe created this in 1951 - it's basically an upsized Chinese spring roll filled with cabbage and barley, carrots, beans, beef, wheat, celery, and onion.)

'Probably some fish and chips' (With or without vinegar was not specified but I suspect with)

‘Curry mince and potatoes’

I would’ve thought spag bol (spaghetti bolognese) at home and salt and pepper squid when out, served in almost every type of restaurant. (Salt and pepper squid at a pub was a late entrant to the game).

The last comment raises the question do I mean national at home or do I mean national outside the home or both? I think it’s interesting that the distinction was made.

Moving away from the main meal there were nominations for five Australian culinary icons:

- Fairy bread (a slice of white bread buttered and with a sprinkling of ‘hundreds and thousands’ minute balls of multicolored sugar)
- Vegemite on toast (often a contentious spread as here where miso was suggested as a substitute)
- Iced Vo-Vo biscuits (an Australian created wheat flour biscuit topped with 2 strips of pink fondant flanking a strip of raspberry jam and sprinkled with coconut). There is currently much debate about whether they have shrunk or not. There was also a nomination for a biscuit I have not heard of – Honey Jumbles.
- Golden Gaytime ice cream (nominated as an industrial food product as Australian as vegemite)
- Lamingtons (with positive and negative views on them)

As an aside on cakes, one respondent told this lovely anecdote: ‘I tried to be serious but, instead, what came to mind was the episode of Bluey where she helped her father, Bandit, make the Australian Women’s Weekly’s “rubber duck cake” and, in doing so, brought a notoriously difficult recipe into the global spotlight.’ (For those who don’t know Bluey is a cartoon blue-heeler dog star of the eponymous t.v. program)

One respondent suggested a national menu:

For breakfast - avocados on toast; for lunch - Barramundi; for dinner - roast lamb. Biscuits - Anzacs; Cake – Lamingtons. National drink probably coffee or lemon, lime and bitters.

Another suggested a dinner based on native ingredients:

Warrigal greens salsa with BBQ Skull Island prawns with a crusty lemon myrtle marinades as entre. I think a pie as the main ..maybe the popular croc and leek pie; or a lamb and yam? Pies must be a full pie ... not the easy ‘pot pie’ with no base. A side of peas and broad beans with mountain berry touches.

There were three other nominations for drinks – Bailey’s Irish Cream, Bundy (Bundaberg Rum) and Coke and the flat white coffee. The last remains in contention between Australia and New Zealand.

On the other hand I ruled out the pavlova for dessert as its New Zealand credentials are now well-established.

One final nomination.

Nobody mentioned the sausage sanga (democracy sausage if the timing is right). White bread, red or brown sauce, and a mix of semi caramelised and severely charred onion.

Vegemite, kangaroo, salt and pepper squid, lamingtons, meat pies, laksa, spag bol, every sort of BBQ and prawns at Chrissie deserve a big mention but that's all the more reason to make (the national dish) a sausage sanga. But not just any sausage sanga – it has to be the democracy sausage. Our influences and tastes are too diverse to choose from all the others but we can pick the democracy sausage as unique and representing us because it celebrates the best of Australia and the unique contribution we have made to democracy, not least the democracy sausage itself. I love heading off to (compulsorily) lodge my secret ballot (a.k.a. the Australian ballot) and support a local school knowing the worst that will happen to me is that someone might put the onions on top. You don't even have to be a meat-eater because, like us at our best, it's evolved. And after you've voted, eaten your democracy sausage and had a little dance to the music playing outside the voting booth, you can grab a democracy lamington if you pick your polling booth right (there's an app) before heading home to see what Antony Green has to say about the whole thing. So many icons ...

The Democracy Sausage is also my nomination for a national dish. It is ubiquitous on polling days at polling booths across Australia at every election as a fundraiser for some cause, often for equipment for the school at which the polling booth is. It is nowadays inclusive of vegans with plant-based sausages at many stands. Whether the onions go under the sausage or on top is a rich field for discussion – sort of like in Lilliput with the big or small enders for cracking the shell of a boiled egg, but with no political referencing). I read the name as a play on three meanings of democracy the makings are in themselves democratic, affordable by most and with ingredients common to all; it stands for the voting process itself in Australia with universal suffrage for all citizens over 18 years; and for the political system of government. It's a symbolic heavy burden for a sausage in a bun to bear but one it meets admirably if at times a little soggily.