**More than that vegemite sandwich. Australian songs and poems about food**

**March 2024**

In 2008 I gave a paper to the 16th Symposium of Australian Gastronomy in the Hunter Valley. The theme of the paper was Australian songs about food and rivers. In an idle moment recently I thought why not do something of a follow-up and ask Facebook Friends ‘What song or poem do you know that is about food in Australia?’

Let’s begin with a song that got 4 nominations, [‘Down Under’](https://www.bing.com/search?q=land+down+under+youtube&qs=MT&pq=land+down+under+&sk=SS4AS1MT1LT1&sc=10-16&cvid=3D95FC29A50D480A84E306E766452BAE&FORM=QBRE&sp=8&lq=0&sm=asprodmb) from Men At Work and the lines ‘I said do you speak-a my language/he just smiled and gave me a vegemite sandwich’. This is funny, catchy and for a food historian/writer like me an excellent example of food as a medium of cultural exchange, the giver, a man from Brussels with lots of muscles, non-verbally showing not only that he speaks-a the language but understands sharing a vegemite sandwich as an act symbolic of the mateship that is the core of Australian society. Or something like that.

In one of those oogy-boogy moments the other song to get four nominations was the 1953 jingle ‘[Happy Little Vegemites’](https://www.bing.com/search?q=happy+little+vegemites+song&form=ANNTH1&refig=ec4ffc4edaa644f3bfee4a992da5c60d&pc=U531). Set for no fathomable reason in a circus ring with kids being clowns and acrobats doing handstands, cartwheels and the splits, one of them prowling in a catgirls suit, all claiming, to a somewhat martial beat, that they love their vegemite because it ‘puts a rose in every cheek’. It’s the stuff of nightmares.

There was a third Vegemite nomination for Amanda Palmer’s hysterical [‘Vegemite (The Black Death)’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1L2UiUtg14g...), a woman singing to her partner of the impossibility of being in a relationship with someone who loves The Black Death declaring ‘Put down the Vegemite you fucker or I’ll have to leave’.

The vegemite ad wasn’t the only ad nominated. There’s the 1970’s cringeworthy ad for Holden cars ostensibly about Oz’s favourite game, food, native animal and car [Football, Meat Pies Kangaroos and Holden Cars](https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=VGW-WX77zjY) which ‘go together underneath the southern skies’. And of course there’s the 1930 [Aeroplane Jelly](https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=aeroplane+jelly+song+youtube&mid=3559FDEAA7925B940A963559FDEAA7925B940A96&FORM=VIRE) with seven year old moppet Joy King swinging away in a flower-bedecked swing assuring us that ‘it’s flavour is high as the name will imply’ sending those of us of a certain age into paroxysms of laughter at the double entendre.

Coming in with three nominations each were The Wiggles’ [‘Fruit Salad Yummy Yummy’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYYGD56CxTw) and Paul Kelly’s [‘How to Make Gravy’](https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=how+to+make+gravy+paul+kelly&mid=CFC0E930999B72131E32CFC0E930999B72131E32&FORM=VIRE0&ru=%2fsearch%3fq%3dhow%2bto%2bmake%2bgravy%2bpaul%2bkelly%26qs%3dAS%26pq%3dhow%2bto%2bmake%2bgravy%26sk%3dAS2%26sc%3d10-17%26cvid%3d81B4EA7330864A398F0064BB44D4DBC2%26FORM%3dQBRE%26sp%3d3%26ghc%3d1%26lq%3d0%26sm%3dasprodmb). Can there be two songs more different to each other than these. ‘Fruit Salad’ a catchy, smiley, simply choreographed recipe for a healthy brekkie for the little and not so little uns, though I am surprised at the non-inclusion of pineapple without which a fruit salad is just a bowl of cut up fruit. Kelly’s ‘How to Make Gravy’ is a Christmas letter to his brother from a con in prison imagining the family get together he can’t be at and asking poignantly ’whose gonna make the gravy’ his customary job at the get together, with a bonus recipe for his gravy. In the hands of anyone else other than Kelly – except maybe Johnnie Cash – the song would be mawkish.

The Wiggles score big having for not only Fruit Salad and Hot Potato but also [Smashed Avocado,](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6POHpKR_1SY) the Gilbert and Sullivanesque [Irish Stew,](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vGX3LnZO-A) the Beach Boysesque health song [Broccoli Bunch,](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DonVI9qojuM) the musically mashed upped [Vegan Hot Dog](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQcV6kPqQvA), and [Rock & Roll Preschool](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETngvzpeokI) which warns of the dangers of sharing your lunch and bringing peanuts to school.

Oz rock legends Cold Chisel were nominated for two songs – [Breakfast at Sweethearts](https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=breakfast+at+sweethearts+cold+chisel&mid=216852294E488BABDC5C216852294E488BABDC5C&FORM=VIRE) – which I reckon is the first time a cappuccino was mentioned in an Oz song ‘Anne Marie ... pulls another cappuccino’ - and [Cheap Wine](https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=cheap%20wine%20and%20a%20three%20day%20growth%20videos&FORM=VIRE0&mid=4D9E67DFC2F33E8E8B3F4D9E67DFC2F33E8E8B3F&view=detail&ru=%2Fsearch%3Fq%3Dcheap%20wine%20and%20a%20three%20day%20growth) (and a three-day growth) with a line unimaginable these days – ‘any time you want to find me I don’t have a telephone’.

While we’re on the subject of wine Tim Minchin got a nomination for ‘[White Wine in the Sun’](https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=white%20wine%20in%20the%20sun%20by%20tim%20minchin%20videos&FORM=VIRE0&mid=D17CCE00B4A80E330D22D17CCE00B4A80E330D22&view=detail&ru=%2Fsearch%3Fq%3Dwhite%20wine%20in%20the%20sun%20by%20tim%20minchin), the second of songs about Christmas that were nominated. A Funny, acerbic, sentimental and schmaltzy song to his ‘baby girl’ assuring her that no matter where she roams ‘Your brother and sister and me and your mum will be waiting for you in the sun when Christmas comes drinking white wine in the sun’ which sends sales of chardonnay through the roof each Christmas.

And speaking of sentimental, The Seekers - Australia’s answer to Peter, Paul and Mary - got nominated twice, once for [‘Lemon Tree’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRXNVqpLYIA)  - where in a metaphor for pursuing the wrong things in life the tree is described as very pretty but the fruit is impossible to eat - and [‘When Will the Good Apples Fall’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wowT95tkesk) – ‘on my side of the fence when will I find my true true love’ to which one could answer ‘you really need to get out more’.

Then there was a clutch of Oz rock songs. Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs’ [‘Mashed Potato’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=br5y-qozYO0) the single lyric for which was mash potato yeh oh yeh; Mental As Anything’s [Let’s Cook](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FbYOvn4U84) with another single line lyric – Let’s cook, let’s eat, let’s growl, let’s work work work’ which through repetition is as meaningless and tiresome as Mashed Potato; Crowded House’s [Chocolate Cake](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M699TqhO06k) which wins points for putting Tammy Baker, Elvis Presley, Andy Warhol and cheap Picasso fake into an Oz pop song (oh all right, NZders but I’m all for being inclusive of those across the ditch); the Chats who are just hanging out having a punt and getting hungry for a good [Pub Feed](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LGM82uPuvA); and Joyride whose [Aunty Tracey’s Cookies](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZvlSg5TjhW4) have him fucked up, with a natty cooking demo vid but not about making cookies. And speaking of pubs Slim Dusty reckons there's nothing so lonesome, morbid or drear than to stand in the bar of the [‘Pub With No Beer’.](https://www.bing.com/search?q=slim+dusty+pub+with+no+beer&cvid=dc47250f5a2740d9868a95bc8936710e&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIGCAEQABhAMgYIAhAAGEAyBggDEAAYQNIBCDU5NzVqMGo0qAIAsAIA&FORM=ANAB01&PC=WSEDDB)

At the folky end we have socialist Redgum’s [‘Brown Rice and Kerosine’](https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=Tksmfufv0pI) where said ingredients are used to update the Molotov cocktail; Bushwhackers rhapsodising the itinerant work life and the satisfaction of cooking and eating [Four Little Johnny Cakes](https://www.bing.com/search?q=four+little+johnnny+cakes+bushwhackers&cvid=952ee7b6517b41b2b5bcb487a78c4d44&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIGCAEQABhAMgYIAhAAGEAyBggDEAAYQNIBCTI0MTE5ajBqNKgCALACAA&FORM=ANAB01&PC=WSEDDB) in the bend (of the river); Waltzing Matilda with its swagman and stolen jumbuck and who would rather die in the billabong than surrender himself to the troopers mounted on their thoroughbreds one, two, three; and Eric Bogle extolling the [Aussie Bar B Q](https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=%22The+Aussie+Barbecue+by+Eric+Bogle.&mid=D6DFA526E7E1CD9C295ED6DFA526E7E1CD9C295E&FORM=VIRE)  - ‘when the steaks are burning fiercely, when the smoke gets in your eyes, when the sausages taste like toothpaste and your mouth is full of flies’.

There’s the cheesy novelty of Peter Combe’s paean to [‘Spaghetti Bolognaise’](https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?&q=peter+combe+spaghetti+bolognaise&qpvt=peter+combe+spaghetti+bolognaise&mid=6B954BB8D4753FDB747A6B954BB8D4753FDB747A&&FORM=VRDGAR) and Robyn Archer’s ‘[Eating on the Plane’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yk9D2extcvc), with its kid saxophonists. There’s Malcolm Hart’s ACDC send up ‘[It’s a Long Way to the Top If You Want a Sausage Roll’](https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=It%27s%20a%20Long%20Way%20To%20The%20Shop%20If%20You%20Want%20A%20Chiko%20Roll&mid=F5FEFAE94431A73748AFF5FEFAE94431A73748AF&ajaxhist=0), and the Aussie as John Meillon’s [Hot Pie and Tomato Sauce](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_7eAwq-bHM) which I’m surprised didn’t get snapped up to advertise Big Ben’s or Sargent’s pies.

Two poems were submitted also.

[The dog shat in the tuckerbox - Charlie 'Bowyang' Yorke](https://janedogs.com/the-irony-of-the-dog-on-the-tucker-box/?fbclid=IwAR3UIRsM6n3tss23u3_iJPtBOKQ3Is_WgzhhbBFm0ru2xcAvkz7sFrMYWgg)

I'm used to punchin' bullock teams across the hills and plains.

I've teamed outback for forty years through bleedin' hail and rain.

I've lived a lot of troubles down, without a bloomin' lie,

But I can't forget what happened just five miles from Gundagai.

'Twas getting dark, the team got bogged, the axle snapped in two.

I lost me matches and me pipe, so what was I to do?

The rain it was a-coming on, and hungry too was I,

And me dog shat in me tucker-box five miles from Gundagai.

Some blokes I know have stacks of luck, no matter where they fall,

But there was I, Lord love a duck, no bloody luck at all.

I couldn't heat a pot of tea or keep me trousers dry,

And me dog shat in me tucker-box five miles from Gundagai.

Now, I can forgive the bleedin' team, I can forgive the rain.

I can forgive the damp and cold and go through it again.

I can forgive the rotten luck, but hang me till I die,

I can't forgive that bloody dog, five miles from Gundagai.

And the poem/doggerel/travesty whatever you wanna call it, written by ChatGPT which I may be alone in finding smilesome.

In sun-drenched lands where kangaroos roam,

Amidst eucalyptus trees and golden loam,

There lies a feast, a culinary embrace,

Australian food, with its unique grace.

From the shores where waves crash and foam,

Comes treasures of the sea, a maritime home.

Oysters plump and prawns so sweet,

In every bite, the ocean's heartbeat.

But venture inland, where the bush reigns supreme,

A symphony of flavors, a tantalizing dream.

Bush tomatoes, quandongs, and wild game abound,

On the rugged terrain, culinary wonders found.

On barbie grills, the sizzle of steak,

A ritual cherished, no dish can fake.

With onions caramelized and sausages bold,

A backyard tradition, a tale retold.

And who can forget the hearty Aussie pie,

With flaky crusts that reach for the sky.

Filled with beef or lamb, or perhaps a veggie delight,

In every bite, a taste of Aussie might.

But it's not just the savory that captures the soul,

For sweets and treats play a significant role.

Lamingtons, pavlovas, and Anzac biscuits too,

Each bite a tribute to Aussie ingenuity true.

So raise a glass to the land down under,

Where food is more than just a mere plunder.

It's a celebration of culture, a story untold,

In every dish, a nation's pride unfolds.

But out of all the nominations my fave is definitely the kids of Manmoyi community singing the song they co-wrote with their fathers and uncles [‘Bush Food Is Really Really Good’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_y9nnPOz6A) to ‘encourage everyone to eat better food and the best food of all is ‘Bush Tucker’.