

SAOs: The ways of an iconic Australian biscuit

2024

My first encounter with a SAO biscuit was soon after arriving in Australia in the early 1960's. I had never seen or eaten a biscuit like it. A bubbled surface, colour gradation from white to caramel, lighter than air, almost insubstantial. I bit into it and flakes flew everywhere, mostly down my shirt front. The taste? Floury but in a pleasant way. Umami.

While I have been writing lately about Australian foods that have been little written about the SAO was not at the fore. But biting into one recently set me wondering about its origins and how it has been used in Australian recipes.

As to where it came from it never occurred to me that it might be uniquely Australian. But so it turns out to be. Created by the Australian biscuit maker Arnotts and introduced to the biscuit marketplace in 1906.¹ So what is a SAO?

SAOs are basically a square flaky biscuit reputedly made from seven layers of pastry which gives them that bubbly effect that so entranced me as a kid.²

Why is it called a SAO? The more common story is that it was named for Arthur, one of William Arnott's sons who became a Salvation Army Officer³. However, Ross Arnott interviewed for *The Story of Arnott's Biscuits* said:

The name Sao comes from a sailing boat that was seen on Lake Macquarie at Toronto, New South Wales, where grandfather and grandmother lived for many years. It was simply called 'Sao'. Grandfather (James Hayden Leslie Arnott, son of William) said, 'That would make a good name for a biscuit.'⁴

In 1923 Arnotts advertised in *Smith's Weekly* seeking a slogan for the SAO. They were described as 'light, dry, crisp biscuits, easily digested.'⁵ The winning slogan was 'SAOs satisfy'.⁶ Just two years later, in 1925, the slogan had changed to:

Often buttered
Never bettered

'This slogan was sent in by an Aditorian, and is now part and parcel of Arnott's goodwill. It's capital value is unlimited.'⁷

Home-made SAOs

In July 1930 the *South Coast Bulletin* published a recipe for home-made SAOs

Half pound flour, 1 oz. castor sugar (optional), one tablespoonful cream, 1 oz. butter, cold water to mix. Rub butter evenly into flour; mix well with the cream and sugar; then add

¹ '1906 SAO biscuits introduced', *Australian Food Timeline*.

² 'SAO biscuits' tasteatlas.com/sao-biscuits; also SAO ... *Australian Food Timeline*.

³ SAO ... *Australian Food Timeline*.

⁴ Ross Arnott in *The Story of Arnott's Famous Biscuits* cited in Santich, Barbara, *Bold Palates, Australia's Gastronomical Heritage* Wakefield Press, 2012 p.284

⁵ 'Arnotts' Slogan' Aditorial, *Smith's Weekly* 3 February 1923 p.24

⁶ *Sunday Times* 6 June 1926 p.28

⁷ *Smith's* ... 12 December 1925 p24.

enough water to make a stiff paste. These biscuits should be rolled out very thinly and cut into rounds. Prick them well and bake in a very moderate oven.⁸

No seven layers of pastry here or in other recipes for making SAO biscuits at home which appeared in the press. Arnotts doesn't appear to have taken any legal action to prevent the name SAO being abused.

Uses of the SAO

In 1923, Arnotts advertised SAOs:

Excellent to Serve with
Relishes or Salads

The addition of Sao Biscuits gives the welcome touch that makes relishes and salads doubly appetising.

You enjoy the wholesomeness of high quality in Arnott's Sao Biscuits; only the best and purest ingredients are used in their manufacture.

Crisp, delightful, satisfying, they can be depended on to add enjoyment to any repast.

Arnott's

Sao Biscuits⁹

I didn't find any recipes for SAOs in a salad. The closest was this recipe for Egg and Cheese Salad Loaf.

Ingredients: 8 hard-boiled eggs, ½ lb. sharp cheese, 8 Sao biscuits, 1 (7 oz.) jar pimentos, 6 sweet pickled onions; 1 clove garlic, salt and pepper, egg mayonnaise.

Method: Chop eggs, cheese, biscuits, pimentos, pickled onions and garlic and mix together in a salad bowl rubbed with garlic. Add seasonings and mayonnaise to bind. Press into a paper-lined mould and chill. Serve, cut in squares; or slices on lettuce, or heaped in a small bowl.¹⁰

A common use was as a base for a spread or a pile of items for a savoury.

Take 1 egg, hard boil, and separate the yolk from the white. Mix the yolk with a knob of butter, and a small level teaspoon of curry powder. Spread Sao biscuits with mixture, and sprinkle tops with finely chopped egg white, and place a thin slice of pickled gherkin in the centre. Serve either hot or cold.¹¹

I had never thought of having a warm SAO but there were recipes for this.

FOOD FOR THE GODS

4ozs of chopped walnuts, 4ozs. of dates, 1. small cup of castor sugar, 4 tablespoons of crushed Sao biscuits and a pinch of salt. Beat the whites of 4 eggs until stiff and add to the above. Put in a small sandwich tin for three quarters of an hour in a moderate oven.¹²

The most unusual use made of SAOs I came across was for Fish Balls.

FISH BALLS.

⁸ 'Sao Biscuits' *South Coast Bulletin* 18 July 1930 p.12

⁹ *The Telegraph* 19 February 1923 p.5

¹⁰ 'Egg and Cheese Salad Loaf' *Today's Story Queanbeyan Age* 4 February 1966 p.2

¹¹ *Quickly Made Dainties, Truth* 18 August 1935 p.38

¹² 'Food for the Gods' *To-day's Recipe, Warwick Daily News* 24 November 1947 p.3

1 pound cooked fish, 1 ounce butter, salt and pepper, 1 onion, 1 egg cup
Arnott Sao biscuits (crumbled)
Separate fish from bone and mince, fry onion in butter. Mix onion with fish and seasoning, also well-beaten yolk of egg. Roll into balls, dig lightly in beaten white of egg and roll in crumbled SAOs. Fry until golden brown. Serve with anchovy sauce.¹³

What SAO eaters say

I did a small informal survey through a social network asking the question 'What do like to do with them'? There were 37 responses.

Among The most popular by a long shot was butter, cheese and tomato, variations of which were combinations of butter, tomato, Vegemite, cheese, and jam. One respondent proposed a cross cuisine version: 'Immerse them in hummus and taramasalata and enjoy'.

Four remembered their mother or sister making vanilla slice with them:

- Back in the 1970s my sister would sandwich SAO biscuits with custard powder custard - voila, vanilla slice. Part of me thinks she used to split the SAOs in half to simulate flaky pastry but I'm not 100% sure.
- I recall my Mum making SAO vanilla slices at least once and that would have been 1960s. And yes she spit them in half. The custard was a bit of an issue though, not quite as firm as one would have liked.
- My mother used to use them to make snot blocks¹⁴, drizzled with runny icing and passionfruit pulp. I have had a few goes. I can never get the custard to be stiff enough. And hey who needs snot blocks at my age.
- My mum had an excellent custard slice recipe. Line a square tin with greaseproof paper. Layer Sao, pour over custard, lay over SAOs. Top with passionfruit icing Pop in fridge. Voila. Custard powder obligatory.

This is the recipe from Arnotts for Arnotts' SAO Vanilla Slice

Ingredients

80g custard powder
120g castor sugar
750m milk
1 tsp vanilla bean paste
1 packet Arnott's SAO biscuits
½ cup of passionfruit pulp
50g butter
3 cups icing sugar

¹³ "Fish Balls', Introducing Arnott's Famous Biscuits, The Cookery Corner, Ballidu-Wongan Budget 9 August 1935 p.3

¹⁴ An Australia slang term for vanilla slices

Method

Step 1

Place custard powder and sugar in a saucepan and make into a smooth paste with a little of the milk.

Step 2

Gradually stir in the remaining milk. Stir continuously over gently heat until custard comes to boil and thickens. Remove from heat and stir in vanilla bean paste.

Step 3

Cover surface of custard with cling wrap to prevent a skin from forming and allow to cool completely.

Step 4

When custard is cool, spread generously (1-1.5cm thickness) on the base of a SAO biscuit and top with another biscuit to make a slice. Repeat this process until all biscuits have been used.

Step 5

Combine pulp, butter and sugar in a heatproof bowl and mix over a pan of simmering water, stirring until the icing is smooth and glossy. Chill for 5 mins to thicken slightly.

Step 6

Spread icing on top of each of the slices and chill until set.¹⁵

And there you have it, some of the story of the adaptable SAO biscuit, which shows no sign of retiring any time soon.

¹⁵ 'Arnott's Sao Vanilla Slice' www.arnotts.com/recipes/vanilla-sao-slice