

The culinary road to the first banana bread

January 2024

I made my first banana bread the other day, that traditional way to use up overripe bananas. I used a recipe from the 1950s and it turned out pretty well, or so those who ate it said. Looking for a new topic for my articles on roads less travelled in writing on Australian cuisine¹, I needed to look no further than the banana bread in my hand. I wondered when banana bread was first baked in Australian kitchens and what other culinary uses the banana been put to since its first appearance at the Australian table.

I recalled my first encounter with banana bread sometime in the 1970s and imagined that banana bread couldn't have been around much earlier than that. Certainly, it had never been a part of my family's kitchen and I couldn't recall it from school tuckshops or the cafes of my early twenties. It came as a surprise then that the earliest recipe I found was from 1933.

Banana Bread

Take $\frac{3}{4}$ cup dripping or butter, 4 tablespoonfuls peanut butter, 1 cup brown sugar, 3 ripe bananas, 2 eggs, 1 cup water, 2 cups flour, 1 teaspoonful baking powder, $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon soda, pinch of salt.

Cream dripping or butter and peanut butter with sugar, and mash bananas with this mixture.

Beat until all are thoroughly mixed. Add eggs, well beaten, then water alternately with the flour that has been sifted with salt, soda, and baking powder. Beat again, but only until combined.

Place in greased tins and bake one hour in a moderate oven. This recipe makes two small loaves.²

[It came as even more of a surprise to find peanut butter as one its principal ingredients.³ It gave a new perspective to my Saturday smoothie – with a few tweaks here and there I could be drinking banana bread.]

So, I had my research end point, what was its start?

'Delicate morsels of fried banana' are an ingredient in an 1869 recipe for 'The Puchero. — The chief dish at dinner in all Spanish regions.'⁴ I wonder if it's the plantain⁵ or a green banana that's meant here. The plantain makes a better culinary fit for what is basically a beef and beans stew.

¹ My articles on Australian food can be found at compost.sydney.

² 'Banana Bread' Strictly Domestic, *The Queenslander* 7 December 1933 p.36 [07 Dec 1933 - Banana Bread. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](http://trove.nla.gov.au)

³ The earliest recipe for peanut butter making at home was in *The Sun*, 26 January 1919 p.15 [26 Jan 1919 - PEANUT BUTTER - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](http://trove.nla.gov.au)

⁴ 'The Puchero' Recipes, *Leader* 5 June 1869 p.5 [05 Jun 1869 - RECIPES. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](http://trove.nla.gov.au)

⁵ 'Plantain, major group of [banana](#) varieties (genus *Musa*) that are [staple](#) foods in many tropical areas. The edible fruit of plantain bananas has more [starch](#) than the common dessert banana and is not eaten raw. Because plantains have the most starch before they ripen, they are usually cooked green, either boiled or fried, in savory dishes. The ripe fruits are mildly sweet and are often cooked with coconut juice or [sugar](#) as a flavouring. Plantains may also be dried for later use in cooking or ground for use as a meal, which can be further refined to a flour.' *Brittanica* [Plantain | Description, Uses, History, & Facts | Britannica](#). In Sri Lankan cuisine, the cuisine of my birth, there is a curry made from the ash plantain

The banana here plays a small part so I discount it as the first recipe. The other early reference I found was for Banana Fritters in the 1873 edition of *Slater's Queensland Almanac, Settler's Guide and Miner's Companion*.⁶

Banana Fritters

When properly managed, these fritters are very delicious, besides being wholesome and nourishing. The fruit should be thoroughly ripe. Cut into slices, then draw through a thickish batter of flour and milk, to which an egg may be added if desired, and fry in butter, dripping, or salad oil – the oil being preferable. The fritters should be slightly browned, and very tender: if fruit has not been ripe and in good condition, they will be hard and tough. Some prefer cooking the fritters in olive oil without batter. We have tried banana pancakes – made by mashing the fruit and beating it with batter, as described – but the fritters are, to our taste, much finer,

This article then looks at banana recipes between 1873 and 1933. My sources are *Trove*, the digital repository for newspapers, journals and magazine managed by the National Library of Australia, and a selection of Australian cookery books during those years.

A brief history of the banana in Australia

We have the pleasure to announce to our readers that it is ascertained that the banana can be reared in the Colony (Sydney), there being now two trees, each bearing a bunch whereon are from two to three dozen nearly ripe, in the garden of a Gentleman a few miles from Sydney.
*July 1809*⁷

This is the earliest published reference to the banana in Australia I found in *Trove*, the digitised depository for newspapers, journals, and magazines in Australia.

It was made 31 years after the banana was introduced to Australia via the First Fleet of colonisers in 1788 which had collected some plants in Rio de Janeiro. Why the fuss over two banana plants? 'By the 1830's colonial gardens in New South Wales,' writes food historian and museum curator Jacqueline Newling, 'featured a wealth of exotic plants that in Britain were only found in costly hothouses, including that staple of the fruit bowl, the sweet banana and its cousin the plantain. These plants were considered both as decorative exotics, as prestigious possessions – the phrase 'trophy plants' is certainly applicable – and for their produce, be it their timber, flowers, or fruit.'⁸ While her comment is of the 1830's I think the fuss being made over the two mango trees in 1809 is very much in keeping with her comment, if much earlier. Indeed so prestigious was it that a Captain Piper made a present of bananas to the Institution of the Agricultural Society's anniversary dinner in 1823.⁹

In 1835 Thomas Shepherd, nurseryman in his public lecture on the horticulture of New South Wales said: 'The banana is a tropical fruit great estimation at present amongst the higher classes in this Colony: but its cultivation is as yet very partial. Were the situations selected for the cultivation of the

⁶ *Slater's Queensland Almanac, Settler's Guide and Miner's Companion* 16 December 1873 p.71 [Slater's Queensland Almanac 1873 : George Slater : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

⁷ *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 9 July 1809 p.2 [09 Jul 1809 - SYDNEY. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

⁸ 'Yes, we have some bananas (and plantains)!' Newling, Jacqueline, *The Cook and the Curator Yes, we have some bananas (and plantains)! | The Cook and the Curator | Sydney Living Museums*

⁹ *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 10 July 1823 p.2 [10 Jul 1823 - MAGISTRATE FOR THE WEEK—THOMAS M'VITIE, Esq. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

They also came minimally prepared - Banana Sandwiches, Banana Omelette, Fried Banana, Baked Banana and Banana Rolls (Recipe at Appendix 1).

I'm going to sneak in here an item from 1936 on banana flavouring:

Recently [the Marketing Board] was approached by a Melbourne manufacturer ... who had successfully processed ripe bananas into a pulp which had been utilised as a flavoring for [ice blocks and cordials] This pulp can be stored in bulk indefinitely, he added, without loss of quality. Thus quantities of over-ripe bananas may be purchased when the market is over-supplied with fruit in that condition for converting into the pulp, and thereby relieve the market for fresh bananas.¹⁹

Dried bananas

There is another aspect to the banana story – dried bananas. These were imported at least by 1837.²⁰ In 1891 the *Brisbane Courier* gave credit for the first local to manufacture dried bananas to John W. Stewart 'as far back as 1877'.²¹ Stewart had no luck trying to market them locally but was successful on the London market, as also were Messrs. A. Lamb and Co in 1891: 'The consignment of dried bananas of shipped by the Port Douglas, arrived in excellent condition and suitable for trade purposes. The fruit is being retailed at 6d a pound.'²²

I found three dried banana recipes in the one article in 1910: Dried Banana Pudding, Banana Custard Pudding and Dried Bananas and Rice (Recipe at Appendix 1)

In 1921 the *Mullumbimby Star* published this [woefully copy edited] article from W. H. Caporn who seems to have been a manufacturer of dried bananas extolling the product:

We also manufacture dried ripe bananas and dried evaporated bananas in New South Wales - Sugar from the banana. Rum is made from the dried bananas, banana paste, powders and sweets ... The Tweed River dried bananas, the ideal food, fresh, cooked, or uncooked are delicious and to contain twice , the nutriment of figs , dates, or other dried fruits.²³

Banana flour

In 1933 the Department of Agriculture of New South Wales was reported to be carrying out experiments at the Hawkesbury Agricultural College in using dried bananas to produce banana flour and banana coffee.²⁴ They were coming a little late to the party.

In 1892 the *Gympie Times and Mary River Mining Gazette* re-printed a letter first published in the *Sugar Journal* published from Mr. William Key detailing how to make banana flour (See Appendix 2). There were articles recommending its use like this one from 1916:

Mixed with wheat flour, the banana meal makes satisfactory and nutritious bread and cakes that our housewives are urged to try. For bread the material may be equal to or somewhat less than

¹⁹ 'Banana Flavor A New By-product', *Coggs Harbour Advocate* 9 October 1936 p.2 [09 Oct 1936 - BANANA FLAVOR - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

²⁰ 'Cargo of the Ulitea' *The Sydney Monitor* 9 August 1837 p.2 [09 Aug 1837 - PROJECTED DEPARTURES. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

²¹ 'Dried Bananas', *Brisbane Courier* 23 June 1891 p.7 [23 Jun 1891 - DRIED BANANAS. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

²² 'Dried Bananas', *Evening News* 2 March 1891 p.4 [02 Mar 1891 - Dried Bananas. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

²³ 'Dried Bananas', *Mullumbimby Star* p.4 [31 Mar 1921 - Dried Bananas. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

²⁴ 'Dried Bananas New Uses', *Northern Star* 13 September 1933 p.10 [13 Sep 1933 - NEW USES - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

the wheat flour, and for plain cake or gingerbread the banana meal may be substituted entirely for other flour, the usual ingredients being added.²⁵

But I didn't find any reference to anyone manufacturing it on a commercial basis nor any recipes for its use apart from suggestions like that above.

In 1919 the Director of Fruit Culture in Queensland when asked about establishing banana flour as an industry in that state said that at the present price of fresh bananas it would not pay to manufacture them into flour'.²⁶ That didn't stop others from attempting it. In 1930 Messrs. V. Kearns and F. Fisher arrived in Cairns 'proposing to exploit if possible the marketable value of banana flour'.²⁷ They got to the stage of making some samples of banana flour and banana chocolate but nothing appears to have come of it..

The end of the road

So we come to 1933 and the first banana bread. It would continue developing and changing. A recipe in 1937 does without peanut butter but brings in bran.²⁸ In 1939 the Australian culinary icon Sao biscuits (a kind of salted cracker) are used, peanut butter is back and it is served hot.²⁹ In 1953 lemon rind and lemon juice are called for.³⁰ In 1996 Stephanie Alexander, eminent chef, does without peanut butter and adds in cinnamon, allspice, buttermilk and lemon juice.³¹ By 2024 banana bread is a standard item in cafes and at fundraisers. It remains for me to re-introduce peanut butter.

²⁵ 'Banana Flour' *Laverton and Burly Mercury* 13 May 1916 p.3 [13 May 1916 - BANANA FLOUR. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

²⁶ 'Banana Flour' *Daily Examiner* 4 August 1913 p.2 [04 Aug 1913 - BANANA FLOUR - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

²⁷ 'Banana flour and chocolate' *Queensland Times* 29 December 1930 p.4 [29 Dec 1930 - BANANA FLOUR AND CHOCOLATE - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

²⁸ 'Banana Bran Bread', *Northern Times* 254 March 1937 p.4 [24 Mar 1937 - Banana Bran Bread. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

²⁹ 'Banana Hot Bread' A Few Recipes, *Western Herald* 10 March 1939 p.1 [10 Mar 1939 - A FEW RECIPES; - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

³⁰ 'Banana Tea Bread' *The Gundagai Independent* 4 May 1953 p.3 [04 May 1953 - BANANA TEA BREAD - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

³¹ Alexander, Stephanie, *The Cook's Companion*, Viking, 1996 p.77

1.2 a cupful of desiccated coconut 2 tablespoons of curry powder
A little cayenne and salt 1 teaspoonful of Worcestershire sauce
1 teaspoonful of anchovy sauce 1 egg

Mode – Put in a basin the coconut, and pour over it the milk, and allow it to stand one hour; then put it into a saucepan with the other ingredients. Peel and slice the bananas and add to the curry; allow it to simmer for ten to fifteen minutes, and just before serving beat up the egg and stir it in; serve with boiled rice.³⁷

³⁷ Curried Bananas, Maclurcan, Hannah, *Mrs. Maclurcan's Cookery Book. A collection of practical recipes specially suited for Australia*, George Robertson and Company Propriety Limited 1903 Recipe no. 461

Appendix 2 – To make banana flour

Take the unripe Cavendish banana full grown; take off the peel; then split the banana and dry on straws either- in an evaporator or in the sun. I use an evaporator which I use for drying the ripe banana. With the evaporator the banana will be dry in 24 hours, the heat to be kept up to 120 degrees Fahr. The next process is to pound up the bananas which are, when dried, very brittle, to about half an inch in length; then put them in a corn cracker, which will grind them up as fine patent groats sold in tins.³⁸

³⁸ 'Banana Flour', *Gympie Times and Mary River Mining Gazette* 18June 1892 p.3 [18 Jun 1892 - Banana Flour. - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)