

Do you want chips with that? A brief history of the potato chip in Australia 2024

Straight after school we headed for the fish shop opposite the station. One or two would stay with our bags at the bus stop while the rest of us went to get the chips. They would be sitting in a pile to one side of the deep fryer pale oblongs of varying sizes. We ordered. Whoever was behind the counter would slouch towards the chips, collect a heap in a metal basket – if that’s the right word for something that was like a small cage with one side open - drop the basket into the hot oil, handle balanced out of the deep fryer. A few minutes later the doneness of the chips was checked by lifting the basket and giving it a good shake. Back into the oil it would go for a couple of minutes more. Meanwhile the staff would have got a couple of sheets of butcher’s paper – so called because it was also used by butcher to wrap the meat you bought sprig of parsley for garnish and all – and flattened the sheets out on a counter next to the deep fryers.

The basket of well-cooked chips was tipped onto the paper. Next a liberal sprinkling of salt shaken onto the chips. ‘Vinegar?’ Vigorous nods from us and the vinegar bottle with holes in its lid was upturned and shaken over the chips. Then the wrapping off the now slightly soggy chips in the aforementioned butcher’s paper.

We pay, take the parcels and amble down to the bus stop. There the butcher’s paper was unwrapped exposing the chips, balanced on someone’s palm in lieu of a plate. From there it was slightly more polite than seagulls fighting over a chip. Someone invariably said they were too salty. Someone else hadn’t wanted vinegar and fossicked around like a gold digger till they found a chip or two that were blessedly only wet with oil. Preparing for this article I read that "Francatelli," the famous chef, says : “Chip potatoes should be so dry and free from grease when served that a lady could finger them without soiling her glove.”¹ Or they could remove their gloves. Our fingers got tastily greasy-suckable.

Someone would say they were too hot and be told not to eat them, more for the rest of us. One or two of us would have gone and bought cans of coke which were shared mouthful by mouthful.

The bus comes and we get on, chip bundle, coke and all. We head to the back bench seat eating chips and – gossiping, I think you could call it.

Sometimes we’d get potato scallops also – about which more later. Did we sometimes get a battered fish? I don’t remember.

Last person off the bus might score some to take home with them and get stuck with the now greasy ripped paper to dispose of.

This was the pattern most afternoons for four years of high school.

Occasioned by a serve of chips and beer battered fish it came to mind as an item of Australian food I hadn’t read about. So, I set out to write about it.

[Vignette. We had fish and chips pretty regularly from Nicko’s shop around the corner from us in Alexandria. Always on a Friday. Fish was always battered, and it had to include chips and potato scallops with lots of salt and came wrapped in newspaper. My parents would add vinegar, seemed a hideous idea to me. Sometimes my dad would buy a bottle of oysters if he were feeling

¹ “Dorothy’, Household and Cookery, *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate* 18 July 1903 p.9

flush. The owners were Greek, and I was at the local primary school with their daughter who I always felt jealous of because how wonderful would it be to live in a Fish and Chip Shop. V.S]

The making of potato chips

The earliest recipe for Potato Chips I've found was in 1872:

Potato Chips

Wash and peel some potatoes, then pare them, ribbon-like, into long lengths; put them into cold water to remove the strong potato flavour; drain them and throw them into a pan with a little butter, and fry them a light brown. Take them out of the pan and place them close to the fire on a sieve; lined with clean writing-paper, to dry before they are served up. A little salt may be sprinkled over them.²

This like many subsequent recipes this calls for chips of quite a different shape than I am used to. More like those over-salted crisp potato chips we buy - of which more later.

This recipe calls for potato wedges:

Potato Chips

Select kidney potatoes or smallish potatoes, hard potatoes are the best: pare them and cut them in eight, like the divisions of an orange, and put them in water. Put at least one pound of lard or dripping in a. stewpan; when it smokes put in the potatoes, and let them cook till they get yellow, and if the potatoes are the right kind they will puff out.³

At last, in 1916 I found a recipe that calls for chips more like what I am used to.

Chip Potatoes — Wash and peel several medium-sized potatoes cut each length wise into eight or ten pieces. Soak in cold water for about an hour. Dry on a towel and fry in deep boiling fat; drain on. brown paper and sprinkle with salt. The fat must be boiling, or the chips will not be good. An authority from the bush tells us to let them stand till partly cold after frying, and then to re-dip and brown them. A Dutchman from Java said to par-boil and then fry them — once only.⁴

This was 26 years before the oblong chip is ascribed to American serviceman in Australia in 1942.⁵

Many recipes called for twice frying the chips. I thought this was just for colour but no:

Having cut the potatoes to the requisite size, they are slightly fried in boiling fat or batter, of which there must be plenty in the pan. They are then drained off and fried again, until they acquire a nice golden-brown colour. It is the twice cooking in plenty of boiling fat that causes them to swell up like puffs, and at the same time renders them mealy and sweet within. The process favours the successive expansion and contraction of the air and moisture within the little pieces, very little of which can escape, because the first cooking seals the outsides. In the second cooking there is a second generation of gas and vapour within each little piece, and this breaks up

² 'Potato Chips' Useful Recipes, *The Pastoral Times* 9 November 1972 p.2

³ 'Potato Chips' Potatoes Many ways, *The Capricornian* 25 June 1892 p.14

⁴ 'Chip Potatoes' Cookery, *The Australian Worker* 24 August 1916 p.11

⁵ 'Chip potatoes specially cut for American soldiers', *Daily Mirror* 13 October 1942 p.7

the cells and makes the flesh glandular, while it causes the outside to puff lightly like a delicate paste.⁶

[Vignette. My dad was the local butcher. but we were Catholic on my mother's side of the family so fish on Fridays was a thing. Dad was also a keen fisherman and rather good at it! so he made fresh fish and chips for all of us on a Friday night. All the kids would help sweep out the sawdust floor of the butcher shop while dad would tidy and finish making sausages, check the smoker for the hams and get us all a treat...usually a freddo frog that we were allowed to eat on the ride home. Then its big cut chips, cooked twice to get a great crunch and beer battered fish. with lemons from the tree and white vinegar with herbs, usually a parsley from the garden. yum. favourite meal. Dad had to make sure there were no bones in my fish, or I refused to eat it! secretly I adored the chips cooked in fat. L.A.]

The many uses of the potato chip

Chips became an item in suggested daily and weekly menu plans.

Complete Daily Menu (By An Experienced Housekeeper.)

BREAKFAST.

Liver and Bacon.

Poached Eggs

Potato Scones.

Dry Toast.

Lemon Jam.

LUNCHEON.

Cold Pork.

Salad.

Veal Cutlets.

Potato Chips

Rice Custard.

DINNER.

Mulligatawny Soup.

Rump Steak and Oyster Pie.

Potatoes Cauliflower⁷

Tuesday-1. Fried garfish. 2. Broiled rumpsteak and oyster sauce, minced lamb with poached eggs (mince made from cold remains of leg), mashed pumpkin, potato chips.⁸

Chips were suggested as an accompaniment to the main meal: Cutlets and Potato Chips⁹; Sausages and Potato Chips¹⁰; Stewed Sheep's Kidneys and Potato Chips¹¹; Anchovy Potato Chips¹²

⁶ 'Potatoes' Cooking Vegetables, *The Australasian* 13 September 1884 p.7

⁷ 'The Daily Dinner', *The Herald* 20 May 1896 p.3

⁸ 'Plain Family Dinners For A Week', *The Australasian* 3 May 1884 p.7

⁹ 'Cutlets and Potato Chips', *The Wyalong Star and Temora and Barmedman Advertiser* 17 May 1901 p.5

¹⁰ 'Sausages and Potato Chips', *The Queenslander* 3 June 1905 p.4

¹¹ 'Stewed Sheep's Kidneys and Potato Chips' *The Daily News* 17 July 1907 p.4

¹² 'Anchovy Potato Chips' Cool Drinks and Snacks for the Holidays, *The Queenslander* 9 January 1936 p.36

The earliest reference to fish and chips I found was in 1909 and the basics haven't changed since then:

Make a batter of two tablespoons self-raising flour, one egg, half teaspoonful of salt and little water. Fillet the fish (largest ones are the best) and cut in pieces suitable for one person: wash and drain. Peel half dozen medium size potatoes, cut in half inch slices lengthwise, and then in half inch strips; wash and drain; have two frying pans with plenty of boiling fat - one for fish and one for potatoes, Fry the potatoes until nicely browned; turning then frequently. Dip each piece of fish in batter and when a golden brown on the underside turn over with a fish slice; when done drain the fish on paper and serve very hot.

Miss Steele¹³

I mentioned potato scallops in my introduction to this article. This was an alternative to chips with fish. They were made with mashed potato formed into flat patties and fried. In one of those puzzling quirks while in New South Wales these were called scallops in other states they were called potato cakes. To complicate matters further potato scallops could also mean a dish of sliced potatoes baked with mince or such.¹⁴

In 1942 a potato shortage led some chefs to try swede chips. Their absence since then suggests they did not appeal.¹⁵

In 1964 there was finally a recipe for the Chip Buttie:

CHIP BUTTIES are similar to Jam Butties, but, instead of jam, crisply golden hot potato chips are sandwiched between the buttered bread slices¹⁶.

[Vignette. After the Saturday afternoon flics, if we had any money left over after the Minties or the Jaffas, it was pooled to pay for chips (no fish). They had a good shake of salt over the lot, salt being the only option. We stood around outside the shop eating them together. They were wrapped first in white paper and secondly with newspaper. P.G.]

Selling chips

By 1907 chip stalls were a feature of Agricultural Shows. 'Only of very recent years has this more modern luxury come into fashion, but it has taken hold of the people, and it has come to stay.'¹⁷ The stalls were very lucrative.

Potato Chip Sales Up £2000

Sales of chips at the Brisbane Show exceeded any previous effort by £2000, the secretary of the Potato Marketing Board (Mr. P. de Bomford) said in Burnie yesterday.

A staff of 60 was employed on the single stand. The deep fat fryer was slightly remodelled, and gave a remarkable performance throughout the seven-day show. It had an output of one and a half tons of potato chips an hour.

¹³ 'Fried Chips and Fish Potatoes', *Sunday Times* 25 July 1909 p.2

¹⁴ For example, 'Ham and Potato Scallop' *Daily Advertiser* 24 November 1937 p.7

¹⁵ 'Fish Without Potato Chips', *The Herald* 14 August 1942 p.3

¹⁶ 'Jam, Chip Butties', Beatle Party Food, *The Australian Women's Weekly* 13 May 1964 p.8

¹⁷ 'Our Sydney Letter' *The Uralla News* 19 October 1907 p.2

Chips were on sale for an average of 14 hours daily.¹⁸

At the Royal Easter Show in Sydney in 1949:

In every part of the ground people were to be seen eating potato chips and reading the two attractive advertisements on the greaseproof bags in which chips were packed. ... On one day 88,000 people were served with potato chips, and over 5000 sales were made of cups of tea with potato scones.¹⁹

Disappointingly the advertisements were not published.

The earliest reference to a fish and chip shop I found was in a 1908 quite dramatic court report:

A COWARDLY BLOW.

At the Water Police Court; Douglas Kleeber, fireman, was charged with assaulting Annie Mary Heare. Prosecutrix is the proprietress of a fried fish and chip potato shop in George-street. On Saturday, accused entered her establishment, and asked for fish and potatoes. He seated himself at a table which was reserved for customers, and when Mrs. Heare asked him to shift, he struck her on the face, cutting her mouth, and loosening a tooth. Kleeber was fined £5; in default, one month's gaol.²⁰

In 1949 potato chips came under price control in New South Wales when it was found that some proprietors of fish and chips shops were forcing people to have chips with their fish or refuse to sell chips alone.²¹

[Vignette. I grew up in Mornington when Port Phillip Bay still had schnapper, flathead and scallops. We could get scallops, flake, flathead and schnapper really cheap. (By the mid-1970s the scallops were nearly fished out and the fleet of scallop boats went elsewhere). We always had fish and chips on Fridays. My Dad and my brothers were keen fisherpeople. There were three fish and chip shops in Mornington and a couple of shops that sold fish to take home and cook. I loved chips wrapped in newspaper that got greasy, lots of salt and vinegar ... and after they had just come off being too hot. I also loved flake and scallops - didn't like flathead cos of the bones and could pass on schnapper. For flake I only like a light batter - not a crispy overdone one that one fish shop used to do. R.D.]

Enter the Smith's potato crisp/chip

In 1931 *The Mercury* reported of a product lately come to the market:

Smith's Potato Crisps

One of the most delightful innovations to the table is the new product, Smith's Potato Crisps. They were first made in England 10 years ago, and are the product of a secret formula and method of cooking that has so far defied accurate imitation ... In New South Wales Smith's

¹⁸ 'Potato Chip Sales Up £2000', *Advocate* 19 August 1950 p.3

¹⁹ 'Potato Chips Good Advertising', *Examiner* 23 April 1949 p.10

²⁰ 'A Cowardly Blow' Police Courts, *The Daily Telegraph* 28 April 1908 p.10

²¹ 'Potato Chips Under Price Control', *Border Morning Mail* 9 April 1949 p.2

Potato Crisps have caught on like wildfire, and the factory is hard put to supply the demand that is increasing dally.²²

It wasn't long before they became more familiarly known as potato chips and not crisps. Under this name they became part of dinner or party fare.

A HURRIED shopping expedition results in a comparatively modest selection of groceries—tinned fish, asparagus, devilled ham, apricots - a box of lady finger sponge biscuits, a packet of potato chips, some fruit, and a few, eggs.

The menu will include fish croquettes, salad and sandwiches, fruit dessert, jelly roll, punch, olives, and iced water with cherry cubes floating in it.

For the fish croquettes Prudence mixes white sauce with the flaked fish, shapes it into croquettes dips them in the. beaten eggs and crumbled potato chips, and fries them in deep fat one minute only, in 390 degrees, we are told.²³

The traditional potato chip and the Smith's Potato Crisp continued together making way for each other in different contexts. The former, for example, was too substantial to ever become snack food, whereas the latter was arguably the perfect snack food – portable, light, moreish and cheap.

[Vignette. *Mum & Dad had a fish & chip shop in Wangaratta. Years earlier Mum worked at The Olympic Cafe, it was an iconic cafe operated by a Greek family, first starting to cater for the people of Wangaratta when the Olympic Games were in Melbourne. Multi-coloured laminates, bench seats, planter pots with sad plastic plants. It had the first espresso machine in town & of course, it had fish & chips. Wind forwards a couple decades; Mum & Dad were semi-retired but decided to open their own fish & chip shop. Dad had been, in a previous life, a baker. Chips were made the old way, a big mechanical rumbling peeling machine. They then went through the chopper, you always made sure that they went through lengthways to get longer chips. Fish was defrosted the previous night so it was ready to be battered & precooked for the day. Mum made sweet & sour pork in her crockpot, pieces of pork crispy battered were placed in a sweet & sour sauce & kept warm for either lunchtime or dinner. Dad baked cakes & pies for the shop too. But the smell of that shop was pervasive, its stink stuck to everything, so clothing smelled like chips & eventually their home smelled of frying oil. But it was the best fish & chip shop in Wangaratta, despite there being a fish & chip shop on the other side of town, people would travel across town to buy the best from Mum & Dad. Friday evenings were always busy, Wangaratta has a big Catholic population. They sold the business; it survived a few years & then closed down. G.J.]*

The potato chip today

The prospects for the potato chip in Australia are excellent. There has been something of a revival and upscaling of it in the gastropub where a bowl of well-made chips can hold its own in the menu and whose quality is often is part of the conversation. Sadly, however the local fish and chip shop redolent of eons of oil is a thing of the past.

²² 'Smith's Potato Crisps' *The Mercury* 26 May 1931 p.3

²³ 'When the Business Girl Gives as Party', *The Courier Mail* 25 August 1938 p.2