

A Little Adventure: The Festival of Asia 1963 *Cook Book*

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In 1963 the Festival of Asia Committee in New South Wales¹ published a slim volume of 32 x A5 pages simply titled *Cook Book*.² The content was recipes in the form of Menus from thirteen Asian countries. It was the most comprehensive collection of recipes from Asian cuisines published in Australia from the earliest days of the colony up to and including 1963. This article describes the *Cook Book* (from here 'the *Festival Book*) and its contents positioning it in the political context at the time of publication and in the context of recipes for Asian food published in cookery books over this time.

The Political Context: Debate about Asian migration and Asian students

In 1954 Asian migration to Australia was the subject of public debate.

The admission of a small quota of Asians to Australia was advocated by the Archbishop of Brisbane (Most Rev. R. C Halse) on Sunday. Speaking in St. John's Cathedral. Australia did not want to be overrun by Asians who would lower her standard of living, he said. The type who could be admitted would need qualifications to live our life and also be able to add something to our way of living.³

Asian students suffered collateral damage. It prompted Professor Howard K. Wormer, Chairman of the Overseas Advisory Council, University of Melbourne, to write to *The Age*

gravely concerned at the publication recently in certain Australian papers (not the Melbourne dailies) of articles urging curtailment of opportunities for Asian students in this country, it has even been inferred that we are endangering the security of Australia by continuing to admit such students.⁴ As Australians who have worked and played with visiting students from several countries of South and South-East Asia, the members of my council are unanimous in believing that, far from reducing the number of Asian students who may study here, the opportunities and facilities should be extended. We have gained much as a result of our association with these young men and women from countries of widely different traditions and cultures.⁵

Support came from unlikely sources. *The Land*, a conservative rural affairs oriented newspaper, published an article under the headlines 'Asian Students As Goodwill Agents. By inviting Asian students to rural districts and offering them hospitality, we were really doing a good thing for Australia, because they would be ambassadors of goodwill towards us when they returned to their own lands.'⁶ Backing this up the article went on to quote Mr. John Adrian, President of the north western New South Wales rural town of Moree's branch of Apex 'that the letters of thanks of two Malayan students who recently visited Narrabri, Moree, Inverell, Glen Innes and Armidale had been quite sufficient to show that whatever was done for them had been for the good of Australia.'

¹ This article focusses on the Festival of Asia in New South Wales and its 1963 *Cook Book*. It does not attempt a comprehensive study of similar festival and organising bodies in other States and Territories.

² Festival of Asia Committee, *Cook Book*, Wentworth Press, Sydney, 1963

³ 'Asian quota for Australis Urged', *Chronicle* 26 August 1954 p.48

⁴ I have not been able to find the material he refers to.

⁵ 'Restricting Asian Students', *The Age* 16 July 1954 p.2

⁶ 'Asian Students As Goodwill Agents', *The Land* 15 October 1954 p.29

The Asian Students' Council

This was the political context in which seven overseas student organisations formed the Asian Students' Council of New South Wales in October 1955. Appendix 1 details the organisations involved, and the Council's Objectives. Positioning itself as a 'Goodwill Agent' Objective four was 'To promote friendship, goodwill and mutual understanding between all Asian students and the people of Australia.'⁷

The Festival of Asia

One of the activities of the Council was the Festival of Asia begun in 1957. '*Hemisphere*'⁸ reported of that event:

Students of more than a dozen Asian nationalities joined in raising funds for an Australian Charity by organising a Festival of Asia week in Sydney. During the week they presented a three-night revue and art exhibition, held a ball and pageant, showed films from Asian countries and sent speakers to a number of Sydney schools to tell children something of their home countries. ... More than 5000 people attended on the first two nights, and large attendances were recorded during the whole period of the exhibition. ... Items from the revue were televised, national dances were seen over three television channels in Sydney during the Festival week, and Asian music and folklore were featured by radio stations.⁹

Reporting on the 1960 Festival *Hemisphere* said:

Crowds of Australians swirled slowly through the basement of the Sydney Town Hall, finding at every turn some new aspect of Asia.¹⁰

The 1960 Festival featured 'cooking lessons' which went otherwise undescribed in the report on it.¹¹ The 1963 Festival was also noted as having 'demonstrations of Asian cooking' again undescribed.¹² However, I have not come across any reference to a cook book from a Festival other than that in 1963.

The 1963 Cook Book

The aim of the *Festival Book* was simple: 'We hope you will enjoy the adventure of cooking these meals and in the process will gain an understanding of the countries and their people'.¹³ For a group of volunteers its scope was audacious '... to present a typical menu of each country, which it would be possible for an Australian, with a little adventure in his or her make-up, to cook.' The cuisines represented were Burma, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaya, Northern China, Pakistan, Thailand and Vietnam. There is a list of the authors of the recipes which unfortunately doesn't indicate who contributed what so you are left to do a match up between names and possible country of origin.

⁷ 'Asian Students Council of N.S.W. Formed', *Tharunka* 10 October 1955 p.10. *Tharunka* is the student newspaper of the University of New South Wales, Kensington.

⁸ "Hemisphere" was first published by the Australian government (Office of Education) in 1957 as a continuing means of linking past and present Colombo Plan students with Australia. In essence an Australia-Asia cultural exchange journal, "Hemisphere" ceased publication in 1948 as a result of a government decision." National Library of Australia

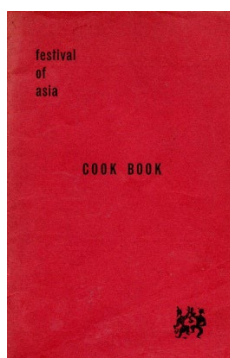
⁹ 'Festival of Asia', *Hemisphere* Volume 1 No.6 (August 1957) p.26

¹⁰ 'Sydney 's Festival of Asia', *Hemisphere* Vol 4 No 7 (July 1960) p.23

¹¹ 'Sydney 's Festival of Asia', *Hemisphere* Vol 4 No 7 (July 1960) p.23

¹² 'The Twain Do Meet', *The Canberra Times* 16 May 1963 p.5

¹³ *Festival Book* ... p.3



Cover of the Festival of Asia Cook Book 1963

I have found no information on the number of books printed nor the distribution. However, I would hazard a guess that it was given free to Fair visitors attending a cooking class and/or was available to all those attending the Fair free or for a modest fee. There is no indication that the *Festival Book* was taken up by a publishing house nor of a wide distribution.

Both the 1957 and 1960 reports suggest that most visitors to the Fairs were Anglo-Australians. Photographs accompanying the articles also indicate this. I think I am safe in saying this was the target audience for the *Festival Book*.

How was the *Festival Book* funded? The introduction does not say anything here. However, there are advertisements in the *Festival Book* that were probably paid for. Two are full page advertisements for Asian grocery and spice sellers: Hong Kong Pty Ltd of Campbell Street, Sydney on the inside of the front cover, specialising in Chinese ingredients, and Say Tin Fong & Co. of Dixon Street, Haymarket, on the inside of the rear cover, with an extensive list of the ingredients that are in the recipes in the *Festival Book*. Both are obliquely mentioned in the introduction to the *Festival Book*: 'All the ingredients (for the recipes) can be obtained in Sydney if you are prepared to look around – the shops in Dixon and Campbell Street and the spice shops in the arcades are the places to look, not in the big stores with their limited range of such products'.¹⁴

There are three advertisements for restaurants who I assume would have paid for the advertisements. The *Bamboo Chinese Restaurant Beautiful* 'congratulates the Asian students and their Australian friends on organising the Festival of Asia. The goodwill that will develop from this Festival will be of immense value to Australia'.¹⁵ The *Tai ping Restaurant* advertises 'Genuine Chinese Meals'.¹⁶ The third restaurant was the *Malaya Restaurant* which even in the early 70s when I went there had the reputation as the pre-eminent Malaysian restaurant in Sydney.¹⁷

There is another business promoted in the *Festival Book* who also may have helped fund it. In the middle pages of the *Festival Book* is advice on how to cook rice. On one of these pages is a photograph of a packet of Sunwhite Rice. Sunwhite Rice was launched in 1955 by a cooperative of rice growers in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation. On the opposite page of the *Festival Book* methods for making rice given: 'Absorption', 'Large Quantity of Water', and 'The Easy Sunwhite Way'.¹⁸ Sunwhite Rice would dominate the market for decades.

¹⁴ *Festival Book* ... p.3

¹⁵ *Festival Book* ... p.21

¹⁶ *Festival Book* ... p.24

¹⁷ *Festival Book* ... p.23

¹⁸ *Festival Book* ... p.17

How did the *Festival Book* present its recipes to an adventurous Australian? I can't vouch for other cuisines, but the Ceylonese Menus were a good introduction to the cuisine. A full review of the Ceylonese recipes is Appendix 2.

The Cook Book's place among Australian cookery books

Looking at other cookery books between the first published and 1963, there were generalist cookery books which had several recipes for Indian or Chinese dishes. For example, Hannah McLurcan in her 1898 *Mrs Maclurcan's Cookery Book. A collection of practical recipes specially suited for Australia* gave four recipes for curries.¹⁹ In 1937 the Country Women's Association published *The Coronation Cookery Book* which had a chapter – 'Chinese Cookery' – with 13 recipes.²⁰ In 1949 the *All Electric Cookery Book* had eight curry recipes.²¹

There also were four specialist Asian cookery books. In 1948 Roy Gheechoun published *Cooking the Chinese Way*.²² Yep Yung Hee published *Chinese Recipes for Home Cooking* in 1951.²³ In 1961 Ella-Mei Wong published 'Chinese Cookery'.²⁴ The most proximate cookery book to the *Festival Book* was Maria Kozslik Donovan's 1961 *Far Eastern Epicure* which had recipes for Indonesian, Malaysian Singapore-Indian Chinese and Japanese dishes.²⁵ In 1968 Doris Ady would publish, *Curries from the Sultan's Kitchen. Recipes from India, Pakistan, Burma & Sri Lanka*.²⁶

Neither Donovan's nor Ady's had the scope of the *Festival of Asia's Cook Book*. It would not be till Charmaine Solomon published *The Complete Asian Cookbook* in 1976 that a cookery book in Australia would match the ambition of the *Festival of Asia Cook Book*.²⁷

¹⁹ Maclurcan, Hannah, *Mrs Maclurcan's Cookery Book. A collection of practical recipes specially suited for Australia*, George Robertson and Co, Melbourne, 1898

²⁰ *The Coronation Cookery Book* pp.81-82

²¹ McKenzie, Mrs F. V. (Compiler), *The All Electric Cookery Book*, Sydney, 1949

²² Gheechoun, Roy, *Cooking the Chinese Way*, W. D. Joynt, Melbourne, 1948

²³ Yep Yung Hee, *Chinese Recipes for Home Cooking* Associated General Publications Sydney 1951

²⁴ 'Chinese Cookery by Ella-Mai-Wong, *The Bulletin* 9 September 1961 p.9

²⁵ Kozslik Donovan, Maria, *The Far Eastern Epicurean* Heinemann 1951

²⁶ Ady, Doris, *Curries from the Sultan's Kitchen. Recipes from India, Pakistan, Burma & Sri Lanka*, A.A. & A. W. Reid, 1968

²⁷ Solomon, Charmaine, *The Complete Asian Cookbook*, Paul Hamlyn 1976.

Appendix 1. The Asian Students' Council in New South Wales

The Asian Students' Council in New South Wales formed in October 1955 comprising two representatives from each of the following Constituent associations: —

Colombo Plan Fellows' Association of N.S.W.²⁸

Indonesian Students' Association of N.S.W.

Malayan Students' Association of N.S.W.

Thai Student Association of N.S.W.

Sydney University Chinese Students Society.

Sydney University International Club,

N.S.W. University of Technology Overseas Students' Association.

The objectives of the Council are: —

(1) To promote the general interest and welfare of all Asian students in N.S.W.

(2) To co-ordinate the various activities of the Asian national and international student Organisations in N.S.W.

(3) To promote co-operation among Asian students in the sponsoring of joint functions such as Asian concerts, cultural displays, etc.

(4) To promote friendship, goodwill and mutual understanding between all Asian students and the people of Australia, and

(5) To provide a medium whereby Australian individuals and Organisations may approach or contact Asian students through the representative constituent associations.

²⁸ 'The Colombo Plan was a Commonwealth initiative aiming to build the technology and infrastructure of Asian Commonwealth countries through partnerships with non-Asian members.' Van Reyk, Paul, *True to The Land. A History of Food In Australia*, Reaktion, 2021 p.181

Appendix 2. Ceylonese recipes in the Festival of Asia Cook Book 1963

Menu 1 – Chicken Pulau, Beef Curry, Tomato and Onion Sambal, Vattalappam (Malay Pudding)

Menu 2 – Yellow Rice, Pork Curry, Brinjal Curry (Eggplant), Coconut Sambal

A soup is missing but that's forgivable as apart from Mulligatawny and beef broth we don't go so much for soup. The lack of any fish or seafood is perplexing: Ceylonese cuisine has several ways of dishing them up. Dhal is also strangely absent, though there is a recipe for it in the Indian menu.

It's good to see Vattalappam (a baked custard using coconut milk, eggs and palm sugar) on the menu for dessert instead of a predictable fruit salad. I think cooks would have been surprised to see a baked pudding as part of Ceylonese cuisine.

Also good is the Yellow Rice recipe, a celebratory dish, and the inclusion of Chicken Pulau also a rice dish.

Turning to the curry recipes, there is the standard use of curry powder instead of individual spices. The earliest reference to curry powder I have found was in an 1813 advertisement for an importer.²⁹ It was developed to meet the needs of Anglo-Indian cuisine which is the root of all curry recipes in Australia, and which continues now alongside recipes that call for individual spices. The *Festival Book* recipes call for curry powder but ask for the addition of individual spices - cinnamon, cumin, cardamom, turmeric, fennel, nutmeg, cloves and fenugreek.

Recipes for Beef Curry, Yellow Rice, Pork Curry and Brinjal Curry asked for another common ingredient in Ceylonese cuisine – coconut milk, substituting plain milk if the other was not available. Canned coconut milk was available by at least 1953.³⁰ The Glossary on the last page gives a simple way of turning either desiccated or fresh coconut into coconut milk.

As with coconut milk so with coconut flesh. In the absence of fresh coconuts two recipes call for desiccated coconut – Beef Curry and Coconut Sambol. Desiccated coconut was in the market since at least 1887 when canned desiccated coconut was displayed at the Adelaide Jubilee Exhibition.³¹ It was widely adopted for its ease of preparation – no coconut to arduously break open and scrape - and storage capability – being dry it keeps well in a jar.

Four recipes call for chilli powder, an admirable refusal to dumb down the cuisine. Bay leaves are substituted for curry leaves though there really is no comparison in their flavour profiles. The earliest reference I have come across for selling curry leaf was in 1960 so the substitution of bay leaves is unaccountable.³²

²⁹ 'Curry Powder' *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 4 December 1813

³⁰ 'Coconut milk makes curries taste much better' *News* 2 December 1953 p.2 23

³¹ Adelaide Jubilee Exhibition, *The South Australian Advertiser* 21 June 1887 p.6

³² 'Our Eating Habits' *Tharunka* 29 February 1960 p.4