

## Passionate : The passionfruit in Australia 1890 - 1940

2024

I recall my first sighting of a passionfruit – first its bruise-purple colour, then the hundreds (so it seemed) of black seeds inside a saffron yellow gel all sitting in a white membrane around the inside of the fruit. The scent was intoxicating and penetrating. Then the shock of being encouraged to eat the seeds – I'd been admonished constantly not to swallow fruit seeds as they would germinate in my belly. Then the mouth feel - like jelly but not. Then the taste - sweet acidity. Lately I have found a stall at the local growers' market with superb fruit to have with yoghurt after dinner or as a revitaliser at elevenses or afternoon tea. Which prompted me to have a look at the story of the passionfruit in Australia - origins, cultivation and uses.

### About the passionfruit in Australia

The first thing I found out was that the variety I'm buying and enjoying is *Passiflora edulis* the most popular kind currently grown in Australia. There are a few varieties of it: 'Misty Gem', 'Sweetheart', 'Tango' and 'Flamenco'. The other variety we grow and enjoy is *Passiflora flavicarpa* with skin from light yellow to red, commonly called a Panama style with varieties including 'Pandora' and 'McGuffies Red'.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest published reference I found for *Passiflora edulis* in *Trove* was in September 1839 when it was exhibited at the Floral Society:

5. *Passiflora edulis* (sic) (the eatable passion fruit-the Granadilla of the West Indies), Mr. McKnight

In 1844 George McEwin 'begs to inform parties about to lay out Gardens, that he will have on sale during the planting season, a choice selection of Nursery Stock, at such moderate prices for cash, as will defy competition by the neighbouring Colonies ... In addition, he can supply ornamental plants of many varieties ... Edible fruited Passion flower *Passiflora edulis* ...'.<sup>2</sup>

By 1848 passionfruit was being sold at the markets at 6d per dozen.<sup>3</sup>

By 1863 passionfruit plants were being sold by nurseries in the Sydney colony<sup>4</sup> and advice on their cultivation was given.<sup>5</sup>

In 1886 it was championed as a fruit worthy of commercial cultivation for export.

Certainly, this fruit is one of our neglected industries. Growing as it does without the slightest trouble rampantly over the half cleared scrubs and the fences of the scrub land farms, no one seems to think that it is of any commercial value, and consequently no attention is bestowed upon it. The fruit is one that bears transport well ; it wants no packing in sawdust, bran, or straw ; and it is as saleable when shrivelled as when just gathered. The plant is found in every garden, and yet it has never been raised to a commercial rank as an exportable fruit.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Passion Fruit Industry of Australia Inc. Varieties passionfruitaustralia .org.au

<sup>2</sup> 'To Horticulturalists', *Adelaide Observer* 18 May 1844 p.1

<sup>3</sup> 'Fruit and Vegetable' Sydney Markets, *The Sydney Daily Advertiser* 12 June 1848 p.2

<sup>4</sup> 'To Persons Forming Gardens', *South Australian Gazette and Mining Journal* 15 June 1850 p.2

<sup>5</sup> 'Garden and Field Calendar', *Sydney Mail* 1 January 1867 p.12

<sup>6</sup> Passion Fruit, *Western Mail* 22 May 1886 p.22

The problem of export durability was not as easy as the writer in 1886 thought. It was reported that a tin of passionfruit had been sent to England and 'reached London in excellent condition, and realised 15s'. But that was a dead end. Then in 1894 a shipment sent via a cool store on the vessel by the New South Wales Department of Agriculture arrived in excellent condition.<sup>7</sup> Again there were hopes for creating an export market. But as late as 2017 a market report found that 'In the year ending June 2017, Australian growers produced more than 5000 tonnes of passionfruit, all of which was sold on the domestic market'.<sup>8</sup>

## Uses thereof

So, what was the domestic market doing with the passionfruit?

The earliest recipe I found via *Trove* in 1890 was for a fruit salad:

### Fruit Salad

Peel two good oranges, two good-sized bananas, half a small pineapple; chop all these into small squares, and add the pulp of four passion-fruit and one pound of strawberries or stewed cherries. Arrange them neatly in a compote dish, strew three ounces of finely-powdered sugar over them, and pour upon them a wine-glassful of sherry. This dish should, if possible, be made the day before it is wanted.<sup>9</sup>

There were recipes for Passionfruit Jam and Jelly.

### Passionfruit Jelly

Remove pulp from fruit, boil in saucepan for 10 minutes, stirring all the time. When cool squeeze boiled pulp through muslin; measure juice and allow ½ lb. sugar to 1 pint juice. Boil till it jellies, about 20 minutes.<sup>10</sup>

Passionfruit cake was popular with recipes like this one for a passionfruit sponge:

### Passionfruit Sponge

4 ozs butter, 4 ozs sugar, 2 eggs, 3 tablespoons milk, 2 cups s. r. flour, flavouring essence  
Cream butter, beat in sugar until soft and creamy, beat in the beaten egg yolks, sieve in the flour alternately with the milk and essence. Fold in the stiffly beaten whites. Bake in two sandwich tins at 425 degrees for about twenty minutes. When cold fill with cream and ice with passionfruit icing.<sup>11</sup>

Passionfruit Preserve, Pudding, Souffle, Tart, Fluff, Shortbread, Pancakes, Custard – there were recipes for all of these. There also was passionfruit butter.

### Passionfruit Butter

Ingredients: Half-dozen passionfruit, 3 or 4 yolks of eggs, 2oz. butter, 4oz , sugar.  
Method: Remove the pulp from the passionfruit and strain. Put the liquid into a saucepan with all other Ingredient and stir over a low gas till thick.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 'A shipment of Passionfruit', *Evening News* 15 November 1894 p.5

<sup>8</sup> 'Passionfruit Industry Export Market Development Strategy', Hort Innovation 2023.

<sup>9</sup> 'Fruit Salad' Recipes, *The Queenslander* 13 February 1890 p.10

<sup>10</sup> 'Passionfruit Jelly' Delicious Passionfruit Recipes *Northern Star* 3 August 1933 p.4

<sup>11</sup> 'Passionfruit Sponge' Electrical Association for Women, *Cookery Book and Electrical Guide*, McKenzie, Mrs. F. V. (compiler), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1938 p.142

<sup>12</sup> 'Passionfruit Butter.' *The Sun* 4 December 1932 p.41

One of the potential uses was for coffee. In 1892 students at the Technical College Sydney during experimentation with passionfruit 'discovered that the fruit contains the substances which make coffee nourishing .. it is found that the shells of the fruit, after the pulp has been removed, make the best " coffee:" In order to use them the shells are dried and roasted like coffee beans until quite crisp; then ground fine and infused like coffee'.<sup>13</sup>

One last use, in 1893 it was suggested that 'Passion-fruit creepers should be run over all fences and fowl-houses'.<sup>14</sup> A suggestion taken up with verve to the present day.

### **Passiona, the Passionfruit Pavlova and Passionpop**

There are three ways passionfruit has been used in Australia that can without much argument be called iconic – Passiona, the Passionfruit Pavlova and Passionpop.

#### ***Passiona***

In 1924 dairy farmer Spencer Cottee created a passionfruit syrup/cordial as a way to use up passionfruit grown on his farm. Soon after a bottler named Bryant developed an aerated version. Passiona in both forms has remained popular since then.<sup>15</sup>

#### ***Passionfruit Pavlova***<sup>16</sup>

This 1939 recipe is the earliest I found for a pavlova with passionfruit

##### **Pavlova Cake**

Whites of 4 eggs, 1 teaspoon vinegar, 1 teaspoon vanilla, and 1 cup of castor sugar. Beat the egg whites to a stiff froth, add the sugar, vinegar and vanilla, and beat all together and bake on a large deep plate for ¾ hour in a slow oven. When cold spread with cream flavored with two or three passionfruit. This is a meringue and can be cut in slices. The inside is like marshmallow.<sup>17</sup>

#### ***Passionpop***

In 1895 a recipe for Porphyry Cup was published:

1 quart Porphyry, 2 bottles soda water, 4 large or 6 small passionfruit; sugar to taste; half glass of whisky or brandy, ice well, and drink through straws.<sup>18</sup>

This and an unanswered question asking for a recipe for passionfruit wine were the only references I found for an alcoholic use for passionfruit

That was until Passionpop, created by Frank 'Pop' Miranda in 1977-78. Described as a 'lively sparkling wine overloaded with sweet passionfruit flavours and a crisp bubbly finish'<sup>19</sup> it has fallen in and out of favour.

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<sup>13</sup> 'Coffee From Passionfruit', *Macleay Argus* 12 October 1892 p.3

<sup>14</sup> 'A Famous Carpet', *Kyabram Free Press* 6 October 1893 p. 5

<sup>15</sup> '1924 Passiona first developed', Australian Food Timeline [Passiona first developed - Australian food history timeline \(australianfoodtimeline.com.au\)](http://australianfoodtimeline.com.au)

<sup>16</sup> Yes the pavlova is a New Zealand creation, but it seemed reasonable to include it also as an adopted Australian icon.

<sup>17</sup> 'Pavlova Cake', *Recipes For the Kitchen, Mudgee Guardian and North Western Representative* 5 January p.1939 p.34

<sup>18</sup> 'Porphyry Cup' *The Housekeeper, The Australasian Hebrew* 27 December 1895 p.108

<sup>19</sup> 'Original' [passionpop.com.au](http://passionpop.com.au).

## Passionfruit in 2024

Today the industry in Australia is valued at \$16.8 million and produces approximately 4,790 tonnes of passionfruit per year. Most passionfruit is sold fresh on the domestic market with only 302 tonnes sent for processing. 19% of Australian households purchased fresh passionfruit, buying an average of 300g per shopping trip. The consumption per capita was 180g, based on the volume supplied.<sup>20</sup>

The future looks uncertain, however. 'Passionfruit yields are declining in Australia as current grafted varieties are losing their vigour. But it's hoped a new, national breeding and evaluation strategy will help change that, securing the industry's future by developing at least two new, high-quality varieties over the next few years.'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Passion Fruit Industry of Australia Inc. [passionfruitaustralia.org.au](http://passionfruitaustralia.org.au)

<sup>21</sup> 'Australian Passionfruit Farmers Working to Reverse Declining Yields By Creating Tast New Varieties'  
[passionfruitaustralia.org.au](http://passionfruitaustralia.org.au)