

## **'Some people may think I'm a cissy'. Men and Cookery Competitions 1904 - 1954**

'When so much is heard of women invading men's domain in the sphere of sport,' wrote *The Telegraph* in 1936,' it would appear that the male sex in the metropolis have taken to cooking, and pride themselves on their prowess. Included in the sections at a prominent flower show today was one devoted to cakes made by men. And the entries were surprisingly good. In fact, the ladies were quite envious. Man delights in making sponge sandwiches more than any other variety, If the number of entries in this section was any criterion.<sup>1</sup>

The male sex had taken to cooking, specifically in this case cake making, a considerable time before this. The first instance I found was at Saint Luke's Christmas Fair in 1904. Mr J. Wicking entered a bachelor's cake and Mr. Trinnick entered a married man's cake.<sup>2</sup> In this article I track men contestants in cake baking competitions 1904 – 1954. I look at what cakes they entered, what prizes they got, and their motivations where that was recorded. I end with a comment on Australian masculinity occasioned by men cake-makers.

### **A sketch of men's participation in cookery competitions**

In the years 1904 till 1954 many fetes and fundraisers included a men's section in the cookery competitions. In 1930 at the anniversary event for the Methodist Church Mr. V. Dovey won first prize for his cake in the men's cooking competition, Mr. H. Haslam won the prize for sponges and M. Mowday for his scones.<sup>3</sup> At the Rugby Social in 1946 Mr. D. Sharps won the men's cooking competition with a cinnamon sponge.<sup>4</sup> In 1954 Mr. Les Parker won the competition for men (sponge cake) at the Salvation Army Harvest Thanksgiving.<sup>5</sup>

But it wasn't all sponges. In the 1924 presentation night of the Leura Football Club to its 'ladies committee' awards were given for the men's cooking competition without books: Small cakes, Messrs L. Ledger 1, A Jones 2, F. Bunyan 3; Sandwich, Messrs, A. Jones 1, F. Bunyan 2, L. Ledger 3. In 1930 Mr. Mowday won a prize for his scones.<sup>6</sup>

Men didn't only enter in men's competitions.

At the annual show of the Wonthaggi and District Horticultural Society women exhibitors received a severe set back when Mr. R. Bentick, Archie's Creek, not only won the aggregate prize, but invaded the kitchen and won several cooking prizes. In this section Mr. Bentick, who acts as cook on a farm, won three first and three second placings. His entries ranged from iced Victoria sandwich to cream puffs.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'When Man Turns To Cooking', *The Telegraph* 5 September 1936 p.11

<sup>2</sup> 'Cooking' Christmas Fair, *Independent* 10 December 1904 p.2. An odd distinction to make and the only instance of it over the 50 years.

<sup>3</sup> 'A successful Entertainment' Methodist Men's Concert, *The Narrogin Observer* 22 November 1930 p.10

<sup>4</sup> 'Rugby Social', *The Henty Observer and Culcairn Shire Register* 18 October 1946 p.3

<sup>5</sup> 'Salvation Army Harvest Thanksgiving', *Victor Harbour Times* 9 April 1954 p.1

<sup>6</sup> 'A Successful Entertainment' Methodist Men's Concert, *The Narrogin Observer* 22 November 1930 p.10

<sup>7</sup> 'Male Cook Outdoes Women', *The Sun News-Pictorial* 13 November 1937 p.34

There were sections for men only making damper: April 1933 first and second prizes<sup>8</sup>; October 1937 Q. Lenton first prize for damper<sup>9</sup>; July 1938 Mr. Staunton first prize in damper made by a man, Mr. Lenton second prize<sup>10</sup>; August 1938 Mr. S. Adams second in a field of eight men's cooking class section<sup>11</sup>; June 1952 Mr. Doug Lee best damper competition for men only.<sup>12</sup>

In 1938, Mr. L. Duckworth, won five cooking prizes at the Wentworthville Agricultural Exhibition, the third year of winning cake cookery competitions. 'At the next Blacktown Show' he joked, 'they are going to advertise that I will not be competing. It is about time something was done about me.'<sup>13</sup>

In 1952 Mr Tickle scooped the pool winning for his puff pastry, every division in the iced cake, the Madeira cake and, yes, his 'Crowning victory was his win in the sponge cake section. Many a woman has shed tears as she opened the oven and instead of withdrawing a featherweight sponge, inches high has extracted a deflated rubbery mess, but Mr. Tickle, the name of the intruder into this hitherto feminine field brings out beautifully golden, soft sponges light as fairy floss.'<sup>14</sup>

Men cookery competitions weren't only conducted at community events. This one was run by two commercial food manufacturers.

Men's Cake Cookery Contest (baked with White Wings Flour). First prize silver cup and barrel of beer. Entries to Daffodil Margarine Stand. Judged by chefs.<sup>15</sup>

It wasn't only making cakes in which men were competing in cookery. 'A feature of the fete' said the *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 'was the home made goods by men. Pickles, jams, chutney, woodwork, etc.'<sup>16</sup> In 1948 78-year-old Mr. R. Kirkwood 'won all three first prizes offered for jams and jellies in the section at the Royal Horticultural Society's chrysanthemum show at the Town Hall yesterday. ... Since he began exhibiting three years ago, Mr. Kirkwood has won innumerable prizes ... "The ladies all wonder how I get my jellies so clear," he said yesterday. "I give them all my secret. I just scrub the fruit with soap and water and then wash it.' Mr. Kirkwood did not add any hints on cooking!<sup>17</sup> In 1953 Sgt. Brick and Norman Jaggar tied for jams, pickles and preserves,<sup>18</sup>

### **Making cakes and Australian masculinity**

The title of this article is from an interview with Jack Paterson-Kane published in *the Longreach Leader* in 1938 in which he said: 'Some people may think I'm a cissy'<sup>19</sup>. I have always been fond of cooking, and as a matter of fact, I took a domestic science course at school ... I do a bit of knitting,

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<sup>8</sup> 'While Men Win Cooking Prizes', *The Sun News-Pictorial* 24 April 1933 p.2 Names of the contestants obscured in article.

<sup>9</sup> 'Winton Notes', *Townsville Daily Bulletin* 30 October p.11

<sup>10</sup> 'Men Cooks', *The Longreach Leader* 23 July 1938 p.25

<sup>11</sup> 'Men Cooks', *The Longreach Leader* 23 July 1938 p.25

<sup>12</sup> 'Damper Cooking Competition For Korora Men', *Coff's Harbour Advocate* 27 June 1952 p.7

<sup>13</sup> 'Man Cook Too Good', *The Daily Telegraph* 22 March 1938 p.8

<sup>14</sup> 'Male Cook Shows How', *Northam News* 1 October 1952 p.12

<sup>15</sup> 'Men's Cake Cookery Contest', *The Sun* 20 July 1953 p.17

<sup>16</sup> 'Gossip', the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* 27 March 1914 p.6

<sup>17</sup> 'Man 78 Scoops Cookery Prizes', the *Sun News-Pictorial* 1 May 1948 p.6

<sup>18</sup> 'Bandiana Flower Show', *Border Morning Mail* 10 November 1953 p.6

<sup>19</sup> Code for homosexual at that time

too... But I'm not so hot at that as I only got a second prize (for a knitted jumper). Maybe I'll do better next year." <sup>20</sup>

In 1949, the *Sun News-Pictorial* reported: 'A Melbourne man, Mr. E. A. James, of Elsternwick, won cookery and needlework prizes at the Shepparton annual show today. He was awarded second prize for an embroidered tray cloth and a second prize for an embroidered doyley. He won a first with a fruitcake and a second with a decorative cake. Mr. James has exhibited at the show for the past three years.'<sup>21</sup>

What these two men suggest to me is that cake making, knitting, embroidery and other feminised arts/crafts were opportunities for men to express alternative masculinities. In 1932, the *Narrogin Observer* reporting the results of a men's cooking competition hinted at this: 'It is now proved that not only can a man cut wood and draw water, but also cook a first-class cake'.<sup>22</sup> This is a proposition for future research.

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<sup>20</sup> 'More Men Cooks. And Knitters Too', *The Longreach Leader* 3 September 1938 p.7

<sup>21</sup> 'Men Win Shepparton Crafts, Cake Prizes', the *Sun News-Pictorial* 21 October 1949 p.22

<sup>22</sup> 'Methodist Church' *Church News* 19 November 1932 p.2





