The Bland or the Bountiful? Notes on Australian dining between World Wars 1 & 2

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A group of us have been meeting monthly to talk about food and food writing. At our last meeting the question was raised as to whether Australian food cooked in home until some time in the late 60s early 70s really was as plain as those of us old enough to remember recall it as being or mythologising has made it. The first formulation of this was actually that the food was 'bland' but this was howled down as a slur on the quality of Aussie meat if nothing else, and so we settled on 'plain' as the descriptor.

We didn't define plain, but let me suggest what we all had in mind. Plain means a number of things. The first is simplicity of preparation as opposed to difficulty or elaborateness. Adding flour and water to pan juices post roasting to make gravy is plain, making béchamel sauce is not. Putting a leg of lamb in a pan and roasting it is plain, inserting slivers of garlic into pockets in the flesh, marinating in red wine/garlic/herbs is elaborate. Minimal flavouring is another meaning. Serving up undressed boiled potatoes is plain; serving up roasted potato wedges with chilli garlic mayonnaise is not. Plain in this context also means stereotypically British working class food of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Stew is plain; cassoulet is not.

We decided to bring to our next discussion our thoughts on this following our own research into the subject, limiting ourselves to what Australian's ate between the First and Second World Wars. What follows are some notes on the subject. I have focused on dinner only as it was the main meal for most households during the period. I don't discuss cakes, biscuits, sweet tarts or desserts in general on the grounds that it would be a lay down misere for non-plain food.

Keeping it simple?

This is the period that Michael Symons, writing in 1982, has said displayed 'what we regard as Australia's most typical eating and drinking', a time in which 'the dominant model of male behaviour was aggressively uncultivated' and made of Australians 'lazy eaters and sudden drinkers'.[1] So what kind of meals did these 'lazy eaters' consume?

'Breakfast was a hearty meal, with oatmeal porridge or the latest American breakfast cereals doused with milk and white sugar. This was followed by a hot course of bacon and eggs or grilled or fried chops, steak, sausages or liver and bacon of a combination of these with eggs...dinner was of three courses, commencing with pea soup or broth. Next came a meat dish of beef or mutton or possibly Yorkshire pudding. Boiled mutton appeared with carrots, turnips and caper, onion or parsley sauce. ...The *Woman's Mirror* book noted a tendency "to eliminate the characteristic flavours of rabbits, hares, and game by soaking them in salt water for hours'. *The Commonsense* (Cookery Book) had sections on Green Vegetables, Root Vegetables and Dressed Vegetables. The greens made quite a list: asparagus, broad beans, French beans, celery, cabbage, cauliflower, chokoes, globe artichokes, green peas, spinach or silver beet, vegetable squash and pumpkin – and all of them boiled. The alternative was "baked vegetables"...The routine was neatly interrupted by the weekend, which might in good weather have brought a picnic of lamb chops...Saturday afternoon was dominated by sports...and a light evening meal of beans on toast, sausages and mashed potatoes. Sunday lunch was a big day for roast, ideally chicken. The evening meal was perhaps a real "high tea", using up cold meat...The left over joint would probably survive until Monday evening when it was made into patties or shepherd's pie...And so through the week again until Friday, when many families replaces butcher's meat with fish'.[2]

So far so plain it would appear preparation-wise and ingredient wise. This is perhaps not surprising. Certainly the large amount of meat consumed should not be; there was a lot of it and it was cheap. 'Clearly, anyone who had a taste for mutton could eat as much as he or she liked in Australia. It might not have been the world's best mutton but it was cheap and abundant. Beef, too, was plentiful, and although slightly more expensive than mutton for most of the 19th century, was consumed in even greater quantities. In 1903 it was estimated that the average Australian ate 61 kilograms of beef and 41 kilograms of mutton.'[3]

Then by 1910, a shift occurred toward production of lamb such that by that year 'lamb carcasses comprised around 60 per cent of all mutton and lamb exported from Victoria' and in 'New South Wales, the increase in lamb production occurred from the mid-1920s, by which time Australia was exporting more lamb than mutton to the British market'.[4] Lamb production increased from an 51,700 tons annually in the second half of the 1920s to 138,600 tons in the second half of the 1930s' which 'ensured that plenty was left over for Australian tables, and even more during the war years when shipping was restricted'[5] In the late 1930's Australians were eating, on average, 654 grams of mutton and lamb each week.

Symond's lays some of the blame for the apparent plainness with the cookery 'textbooks' of this period which 'tended to reinforce plain English style cooking'.[6] That word 'tended' is important here because they did also present the cook with recipes on the paths less travelled than boiling, baking and grilling. Miss Gibbs, Principal of the State Cookery School in Sydney in her *Cookery Guide* included recipes for Fricassee of Fowl, Veal au Gratin, Indian Cutlets, Timbale of Lamb, Beef Olives and Rabbit Casserole.[7] (The book is undated, but likely was published sometime in the 1920s from the Marcel wave favoured by the women in illustrations accompanying advertisements in the book). The *Cookery Book* of the Presbyterian Church of NSW Women's Missionary Association (192?) was less adventurous but did include Carpet Bag steak, Croquettes of Cold Meat, four kinds of curry, Gateau of Meat and Jugged Hare.[8] The *Goulburn Cookery Book* (first published in 1989 and running to 36 editions by 1936) included recipes or Spiced Beef, Rolled Steak au Pomme de Terre, Brazilian Stew, Chicken Quenelles, and Bobotjes.[9] In *Something Different* (1936), the society hostesses of Sydney included recipes for Pilaff and Paella (Mrs Julian Simpson), Veal of Chicken Paprika (Lady Smith), Breslau of Beef (Mrs W.D. Meredith), and Dodine de Canard (Lady McKelvey).[10]

Let's also not overlook that 'nose-to-tail' dining was an everyday thing in these years. Symons mentions liver, but kidneys, sweetbreads, tongues, calf's heads, pig's heads, ox heads, ox tails, ox eyes, brains, and tripe were also regularly served up – well, maybe the ox eyes not so often. And then there was rabbit (Gibbs gives nine recipes), duck, pigeon, quail and turkey. Grnted, often these foodstuffs were simply prepared, but we are moving away now from a picture of a meal as just a lump of a standard cut of meat lazily prepared.

Seafood was very much a part of the menu, and not only on Fridays. The cookbooks show a variety of species and methods of preparation. Eels, ling, schnapper (sic), whiting, cod, salmon, sardines, prawns, lobster, crayfish, and oysters, oysters, oysters take up substantial sections in them. The *Kookaburra Cookery Book* propose a Salmon Mould, Bretonne of Oysters, Crayfish au Gratin, Caviched Fish (ceviche) as well as Baked Fish and several ways with Fillet of Whiting.[11] *Carry On* has Fish Baked in Paper, Oysters in White Sauce, and two recipes for Soused Fish.[12] The *Goulburn Cookery Book* has recipes for Fillet de Sole Mornay, Fish Kromeskies, Fish Pie , Kedgeree and Lobster A La Newburg. Lady Smith contributes a Risotto with Prawns and Mixed Fish in Baked Potatoes to *Something Different*.

The range of vegetables is also worth noting, and envying. To Symond's list above, we can now add Jerusalem artichokes, aubergines, okra (there's a recipe for Creole Gumbo with Chicken in the

Kookaburra Cookery Book and two other recipes for okra); radishes, chestnuts, corn, lentils, mushrooms, parsnips, Brussels sprouts all in the *Kookaburra Cookery Book*; Haricot beans in most of the cookbooks; beetroot, lettuce, additionally in *Something Different*. No recipe imagines that these vegetables would be anything but fresh. Their preparation also goes beyond boiling and baking. Croquettes and au gratin get frequent mentions; the *Kookaburra Cookery Book* suggested Eggplant Fritters, Tomato Souffle, and a Macedoine of Vegetables a la Poulette; Mrs E W Knox suggested a Topinambone of Jerusalem artichokes, and Dorothea McKellar contributed Aubergines a'l'Italienne as *Something Different*.

No garlic, please, we're Australian

But what about flavour; will we find plainness there? Barbara Santich writes 'In mid 20th century Australian kitchens simplicity reigned; apart from parsley and mint, there was a notable lack of herbs and spices and nary a hint of garlic'.[13]

Well, again, the cookbooks do offer a counter to this. Yes, there is a lot of parsley, but there are also frequent references to using 'a bunch of herbs' which was probably the Bouquet Garni of parsley, marjoram, thyme and bay described in the New South Wales Public School Cookery Teachers' Association *Principles of Home Cookery* (I am citing the Ninth Edition of 1932).[14] These herbs are also often mentioned separately in various combinations; Gibbs's recipe for Beef Olives calls for thyme and marjoram; the *Goulburn Cookery* Book adds parsley, thyme, marjoram or mint to it Chops en Casserole.

Garlic, it's true, is avoided or given as optional as in Dorothea McKellar/s Aubergines a'l'Italienne, but other spices are often used. Both the *Goulburn Cookery Book* and *Carry On. A Collection of recipes* have recipes for Spiced Beef and while the latter leaves the spices undefined, the former gives them as pepper, cloves, nutmeg and cayenne. The *Kookaburra Cookery Book* has a recipe for Rissoles that are flavoured with pepper, mace, and cayenne. Mrs W.D. Merewhether's Breslau of Beef is flavoured with pepper, cayenne and nutmeg. Gibb's Rabbit Stew uses a blade of mace and a few peppercorns and her Casserole of Rabbit uses cloves. Sage and onion made a popular stuffing. Allspice, nutmeg and ginger also get occasional mentions.

Lemon rind or juice and vinegar are used to sharpen a dish as for example in the Boston Moulds in the *Kookaburra Cookery Book* (lemon rind) and Fricassee of Cold Roast Beef (vinegar) , Jugged Hare in *Carry On* (lemon rind again), Goulburn's Stewed Veal (lemon juice), Gibbs' Gerard Steak (vinegar) and the Exeter Stew of the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Association (vinegar).

Flavour could also be added in the cooking through incorporating home-made sauces, including Worcestershire sauce, tomato sauce, chilli sauce anchovy essence and mushroom ketchup, each 'bold, sharp, and powerful'.[15] The *Kookaburra Cookery Book* suggests marinading steak in vinegar, Worcester (sic) sauce, tomato sauce, sugar, pepper and salt. The German Collops of the Presbyters use ketchup. Gibbs' Aberdeen Sausage uses tomato sauce and Worcestershire sauce.

Another popular flavour additive is bacon, turning up in unusual places. It's there in R LeRay's Ox Tail Soup and the delightfully named Epigrammes of Lamb With French Beans of Louis Peacock both in the *Kookaburra Cookery Book*; turns up in the Mulligatawny Soup (No 1) in the *Goulburn Cookery Book*; Rabbit Curry in *Carry On*; and Gibbs' Chicken en Casserole.

Finally, '...adding piquancy to the inevitable meals of mutton and beef were tangy, spicy, pickles and chutneys'.[16] These were very likely to be home made; The Presbyterian Women's Missionary

Association cookbook has five recipes for pickles, seven for chutneys; The *Kookaburra Cookery Book* has 13 chutneys and 14 pickles; *Carry On* has 19 chutneys and 11 pickles.

The ubiquity of these flavourings is attested to in the 1920 Royal Commission into the Basic Wage in 1920 where 'Prof W A Osborne suggested that the average family of 5 required one bottle of tomato sauce and a half of Worcestershire sauce per week, together with half a bottle of pickle, one pint vinegar, one ounce mustard, or even more of curry powder'.[17]

The flavours of Empire

The chutneys on the table introduce us to the other major step away from the plain in Australian cooking since the earliest days of the British colony here – the influence of the flavours and food of India in particular and South Asia more generally. Chatni (to give it its Hindi spelling) is a relish eaten to add taste to the staples of rich and lentils. Taken up first by the traders of the British East India Company and then popularised via the British Raj it was inevitable that it would accompany British migrants to the furthest outposts of the British Empire, Australia being one of them.

'The British...adopted (chutney) with enthusiasm, tending perhaps to emphasize the sweet aspect of what is essentially sour or sweet and sour. British chutneys are usually spiced, sweet, fruit pickles, having something of the consistency of jam.'[18]

The recipes in the *Kookaburra Cookery Book* give an idea of the range of vegetable and fruit that was boiled up in the kitchens of Australia in these years: apple, apricot, choko, date, damson, grape, gramma, green tomato, mango, melon, plum, paw paw, red tomato, rosella, vegetable marrow. Curries were adopted with equally enthusiasm and every one of the cookbooks reviewed for this article carry at least one recipe for curried something or other; the Presbyterian Women's Association has eight and the *Kookaburra Cookery Book* takes the ribbon with 15 including curries of sardines, ox tail, walnuts, mixed vegetables, peaches, chestnuts, oysters and radishes.

The basic flavouring was 'curry powder' which goes undefined in all the cookbooks. Commercial curry powders had been available in England from the late 18th century. Colonel Kenney-Herbert writing in 1985 gave the standard ingredients as turmeric, coriander, cumin, fenugreek, mustard, chilli, peppercorns, poppy seed and dry ginger.[19] The other common ingredient was a cooking/sour apple, and Worcestershire sauce, lemon juice and vinegar were also added often either together or separately to mimic the sour flavour given by tamarind and lime in the dishes of India.

The other staple of Indian origin was Mulligatawny Soup which could be made with fish, chicken or meat of any description; onion; usually included root vegetables like carrot or turnips; a green apple, sometimes ham or bacon; and of course curry powder; all of which was a far cry from its origins as Tamilian mullaga thanni – 'pepper water'.

But not only curry

Running through all of what has been discussed so far is an unspoken assumption as to which Australians are being spoken of. Taking 1933 as something like a mid-point in our discussion, of the 6,629,839 people counted in the Census that year 5,726,566 gave their birthplace as Australia.[20] (This figure excludes what the Census terms 'full-blood Aboriginals') A further 712, 458 gave their birthplaces as in the British Isles (486,831 England; 132,489 Scotland; 78,652 Ireland; 14,486 Wales). Not unexpectedly It is these 'white' Australians who are the focus of most food writing about this period, and it is a cuisine largely influenced by British foodways that is described.

However, there had been migration from across the globe since the earliest days of the British colonies with some notable influxes over the years. Let's turn to looking at the three most significant of these migrant populations during the early part of the 20th Century.

While German migrants had been the most prominent group in the early years of the colonies, with 38,352 recorded at the start of the 20th century, anti-German feeling, internment and ultimately

deportation during the World War One saw many German's leave Australia and by 1933 their numbers stood at only 16,842.[21] Angela Heuzenroeder has written extensively on the foodways of the Lutheran Germans who settled in the Barossa Valley of South Australia. From the first days of settlement there in 1841, she writes, 'All the elements were there in the Barossa to keep the original culture intact good long while'.[22] She lists some of the food from these early communities remember or still made in 1991 – Streuselkuchen (a cake from Silesia), Schlesisches (a dish of smoked pork, dried fruits and dumplings from Silesia) Sauerkraut, Blutwurst, Leberwurst, Mettwurst, Quark, Kochkase and Stinkerkase (all three cheeses). But with increasing English migration, these dishes declined in popularity and 'the 1914-18 World War and its aftermath sent them underground'.[23] The first edition of the *Barossa Cookery Book:400 Tried Recipes* reflected this with a recipe for German Sausage 'the only recipe in the book that dares to show any Teutonic connections'.[24] It was not until the third edition published in the mid-thirties that recipes appeared for 'cucumbers pickled in dill and vine leaves and several versions of German cake'.[25]

Did German food find its way into the average Australian kitchen? The evidence from the cookbooks is scant. There are no identifiably German recipes in the *Goulburn Cookery Book*; Frankfurts with Cheese Sauce gets into Mrs Gibbs' as does Sauerkraut; The Presbyterian Women's Missionary Association give a single recipe for German Collops and German Patties and German Biscuits are in the *Kookaburra Cookery Book*, though in each of these cases it's hard to see what makes them particularly German. Lady Smith does contribute Red Cabbage (German Recipe) which is a concoction of floured sautéed cabbage, vinegar and sugar.

Chinese domestic servants and labourers began to arrive in Australia in 1827. Then came the major influx of Chinese to the goldfields in the 1850s until by the population of the China-born in Australia had reached 38,258, 3.4 per cent of the total Australian population.[26] But as the gold ran out many returned to China. Chinese were the specific target of the *Immigration and Restriction Act 1901* and the White Australia Policy. By 1921 the China-born population had declined to 15,224, and only 8,579 Chinese born persons were recorded in the 1933 census.

But what of a Chinese influence in Australian kitchens? Symons says that this was more by way of the raw materials than the techniques or flavours. While there were Chinese cookshops all over the gold fields they were not frequented by other miners. But 'Chinese on the goldfields were supplied by a chain of compatriot merchants, storekeepers, gardeners and fishermen, who dried their catch to send inland. This trade steadily broadened and by about 1880 they virtually fed every settlement in Australia'.[27] This continued well into the 20th Century. Chinese were also prominent as cooks in other eating places and hotels but they stuck with English fare. Chinese cafes did not become an integral part of the Australian urban and rural landscape until the 1950s. Few ventured into the cafes in the Chinatowns of Haymarket-Dixon Street in Sydney and Little Bourke Street in Melbourne. One of these was the journalist E.M.Clowes who was a regular in the latter where she would 'sup on savoury ragout of duck, served in a porcelain bowl, flanked by lesser bowls, each filled with some mysterious odoriferous condiment, or venture daringly on eggs of an infinite age and most potent flavour'.[28] The cookbooks reviewed for this article show nary a sign of an identifiably Chinese dish. However, there is one significant influence of Chinese cuisine that goes largely unacknowledged – ketchup. 'Ketchup originally meant "fish sauce" in a dialect of China's other southern coastal region, mountains Fujian province...'[29] It was Fujianese settlers who took ketchup to South East Asia from whence it made its way via spice seeking merchants to Britain, becoming 'as profitable for British merchants as they were for Chinese traders'.[30] It was here that it was transformed into the mushroom ketchup that is a frequent addition to a meat dish in the Australian kitchen.

While the story of the German and Chinese populations during this time is one of decline, it was the reverse for Italian migrants. At the 1901 Census only 5,678 gave Italy as their birth place. By 1933,

this had swelled to 26,756 Italy making them the largest non-United Kingdom born group in Australia. This growth is attributed to two factors; the restrictive immigration policies of the United States during the intervening years, and a depressed economy in Italy post Work War One.[31] So what of the Italian influence at the Australian table during these years?

Pasta appears to be the majority of it from a look at the cookbooks. The *Kookaburra Cookery Book* gives us Neapolitan Croquettes built from chicken and macaroni cut small, Macaroni Soup and Roman Pudding again made with macaroni. *Carry On* gives as a Tomato Spaghetti Soup and a Mock Macaroni for Soups - which consists of an egg mixed with flour till stiff and thence to be cut into strips and dried, and Spaghetti Mince and with Tomatoes. Gibbs gives us Fish and Macaroni in a pie topped with a fresh tomato sauce. All these call for dried pasta that is to be cooked in boiling water, not tinned pasta in tomato sauce as was popular in the 50s and 60s. The other identifiably Italian ingredient is Parmesan cheese, appearing Mrs Ware's Potatoes A La Genovese in The *Kookaburra Cookery Book* but not specified as the cheese in Tilly Parkinson's Potatoes A L'Italienne.It appears again in Dorothy McKellar's Aubergines a'l'Italienne in, a kind of eggplant Parmigiana, and Mrs R Broadbent's Parmesan Puree both in *Something Different*. Mrs M S Hawker contributes two egg recipes to the *Kookaburra Cookery Book* – Uova Col Pomodoro and Uova Trippate – but neither comes across as particularly Italian. But there are no signs of those signifiers of Italian food for many Australians today – olive oil and pizza. Symons includes a fancied description of a night at Fasoli's in Melbourne in the early part of the century, one of the restaurants favoured by the Bohemian set as they other such were in Kings Cross in Sydney.[32]

The great changes to the average Australian in-home meal, however, were yet to come, first with the mass migration from Europe post World War Two and then as Australia turned its gaze north to South East Asia.

Notes

1. Michael Symons *One Continuous Picnic* Penguin 1984 Ringwood Vic (first published by Duck Press in 1982) p138
2. Symons pp142-144
3. Barbara Santich, *Bold Palates, Australia's Gastronomic Heritage* Wakefield Press Kent Town SA 201 p118
4. Santich 172
5. Santich p177
6. Symons p140
7. A Gibbs *Miss Gibb's Cookery Guide*, The Central Press, Sydney 19(??)
8. Presbyterian Church of New South Wales Women's Missionary Association *Cookery Book of Good and Tried Recipes* Angus and Robertson Sydney, NSW 1920(?)
9. Mrs Forster Rutledge, *The Goulburn Cookery Book,* National Trust of Australia Sydney 1975 40th Edition compiled by Helen Rutledge from 1905 and 1907 editions
10. Mary Allen, (Compiler) *Something Different for Dinner* Angus and Robertson Ltd, Sydney 1936
11. Lady Victoria Buxton Girl's Club *The Kookaburra Cookery Book of Culinary and Household Recipes and Hints* W E Cole, Melbourne Vic 1915
12. Annie J King, *Carry On. A Collection of recipes* Northern Star, Lismore 1918 (my copy is a 5th edition of 1926)
13. Santich p181
14. New South Wales Public School Cookery Teachers' Association, *Principles of Home Cookery*, Sydney 1932 6th Edition
15. Santich 248
16. Santich 248

17. Santich 246
18. Davidson, Alan *The Oxford Companion to Food* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999 *Everything a lady should know* George B. Philip and Son, Sydney 190(?) p186
19. Davidson p236
20. Census of the Commonwealth of Australia 30th June , 1933. PART X.-BIRTHPLACE. Accessed at http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/8E20C54FF42D1136CA2578400010818C/$File/1933%20Census%20-%20Volume%20I%20-%20Part%20X%20Birthplace.pdf on 8th February 2015
21. Statistics Section, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs *Immigration. Federation to Century's End 1901–2000*, Commonwealth of Australia, October 2001 p42
22. Heuzenroeder, Angela *Barossa food* Wakefield Press, Kent Town, 1999 p8
23. Heuzenroeder p8
24. Heuzenroeder p14
25. Heuzenroeder p18
25. Heuzenroeder p19
26. Statistics Section, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, p48
27. Symons p75
28. Symons p79
29. Jurafsky, Dan *The Language of Food. A linguist reads the menu* W.W.Norton & Company, 2014 p48
30. Jurafsky p57
31. Statistics Section, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs p36
32. Symons p121