

To the Lentil Burger. A brief history

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I was chomping on a lentil burger the other day and got to wondering when the first recipe for the burger was published.

The earliest mention of the lentil burger I found was in a 1974 promotion of the forthcoming third Coff's Harbour Paddy's Day in which Mrs. Norma McConnell (one of the organisers) was reported as saying: 'lentil burgers and herbal tea would be on sale for health food fanatics'.¹ In 1977 Lentil Burgers were on the menu of the newly opened Health Food Bar at the University of New South Wales.²

The earliest *recipe* I found for the lentil burger was this one from 1979:

Lentil burgers

3 cups of cooked brown lentils

1 cup of creamy mashed potato

1 cup of wheatgerm

½ cup each of ground almonds, sesame seeds, chopped parsley

1 egg

salt and pepper to taste

To make:

Mix the ingredients well by hand then shape into patties. Coat each with extra wheatgerm and place on a well-greased baking tray. Bake in a hot oven for 20 to 25 minutes.³

So, what was lentil's Australian table story to this point?

The versatile lentil

In 1851 the *Port Phillip Gazette* published an article on lentils within which was the earliest recipe I found for cooking with lentils.

Mode of Preparing Lentils.

Steep the lentils in cold water an hour or two; withdraw them and place them in a goblet with enough of water to cover the surface, a little butter, some salt, flavour with parsley, place the whole on a slow fire. They must boil slowly, and you must take care to add water enough to keep the surface merely covered. You may boil them with ham, bacon, sausage, or merely with water and salt, to prepare them afterwards with onion, " a la maitre d'hotel."⁴

This morphs into the most common recipe - Lentil Soup with a base of lentils and water or stock and variations in some ingredients. This recipe is from 1875.

Lentil Soup - Wash a quantity of lentils in cold water, put them into a saucepan with plenty of cold water, an onion stuck with cloves (six or more), and a blade of mace and a bay leaf tied together. Let them boil till done, adding at intervals small quantities of cold water. When quite done strain off the water and pass through a sieve. Dilute them with vegetable stock, or with the liquor in which they were boiled, to the consistency of a puree, or very thick cream. Make it quite hot, add a pat of fresh butter and the yolks of two eggs beaten up with a little

¹ 'Paddy's market is assured of success', *The Bananacoast Opinion*, 7 November 1974 p.2

² 'Health Food Bar', *Tharunka* 25 July 1977.

³ Karen Meyer cited in Scotter, Sheila, 'Plain Sailing with Chichester', *The Australian Women's Weekly* 16 May 1979 p.83

⁴ *Port Phillip Gazette* 8 February 1851 p.4

water and strained. Serve with sippets of bread fried in butter.⁵

In subsequent years the versatility of lentils saw several recipes published: - Lentil Rolls⁶, Lentil Puree⁷, Lentil Roast⁸, Lentil Salad⁹, Savoury Lentil Loaf¹⁰, Lentil and Marmite Roast¹¹ Lentil Cutlet¹².

Lentil Salad

½ pint lentils

French Dressing

½ teaspoon minced parsley

1 medium onion

Place the lentils in a basin. Cover with cold water. Soak for 12 hours. Drain and boil in salted water with the peeled onion until tender. When soft, drain well, chill, season with salt and pepper and moisten with equal quantity of oil and vinegar, or leave out seasoning and moisten with French dressing. Serve in a salad bowl lined with salad greens. Sprinkle with parsley.¹³

Lentils and curry powder came together in recipes for Dhal¹⁴ and for Lentil Curry.

Lentil Curry (Indian Recipe)

Ingredients: 1 cup lentils, ¾ stock or water, 1 tablespoonful butter or dripping, 2 teaspoonfuls curry powder, 2 onions sliced, 2 eggs hard boiled.

Method: Wash and dry lentils, cover with stock or water, simmer gently until tender, adding more stock gradually. When cooked they should be quite dry. Heat the butter, fry onions until lightly browned, sprinkle on the curry powder, stir for few minutes, add lentils, cook gently for ten minutes, garnish with hard-boiled eggs, cut in quarters, serve with boiled rice.¹⁵

Keeping in the Indian mode lentils were in the batter for Pakoras¹⁶ and were the basis for Doris Ady's Lentil Cakes.¹⁷

Lenten lentils

Along the way lentils were recommended as a meatless meal during Lent.

The Lenten season may present some catering problems to a number of housewives, but at the same time it may, through her search for suitable dishes, enable her to introduce in her household menus some interesting variations quite apart from her more usual list of recipes... Eggs, cheese, nuts and lentils are sources of the protein part of our diet, which so many people

⁵ 'Lentil Soup' Useful Recipes, *The Tasmanian* 24 October 1885 p.4

⁶ 'Lentil Rolls', A Few Useful Recipes, Home Cookery, The Australian Star 22 February 1905 p.4

⁷ 'Lentil Puree' Value of Lentils, *Sunday Times* 31 January 1915 p.6

⁸ 'Lentil Roast', 16 February 1928 p.30

⁹ 'Lentil Salad', Recipes, For the Women, *West Coast Recorder* 9 May 1935 p.7

¹⁰ 'Savoury Lentil Loaf', *Worker* 31 May 1943 p.11

¹¹ 'Lentil and Marmite Roast' Advanced Commonsense Cookery Book, *Compiled by The N. S. W. Public School Cookery Teachers' Association* Angus and Robertson 1948 p.67

¹² 'Lentil Cutlets' Tasty Vegetable Dishes, *Warwick Daily News* 7 August 1950 p.3

¹³ 'Lentil Salad', *West Coast Recorder* 9 May 1935 p.7

¹⁴ 'Dhal An Indian Dish', What's What, *Every Woman Observer* 17 October 1925 p.

¹⁵ 'Lentil Curry (Indian Recipe)', *Sunday Times* 21 May 1911 p.27

¹⁶ 'Pakoras', Pakistani Party Food for Guests, *News* 12 January 1951 p.15

¹⁷ Ady, Doris, 'Lentil Cakes' *Curries from the Sultan's Kitchen*, A. H. & A. W. Reed 1968 p.58

take mainly in the form of meat, and these may be served in dozens of different and appetising ways. In preparing lentil dishes, always allow the lentils to soak well. Lentils au Bechamel is one way of serving lentils in a thick creamy white sauce. The should be soaked well and cooked with a little chopped onion in two ounces of butter. The sauce is made separately, and the water in which the lentils have been cooked allowed to boil away. When the lentils are dry, add an ounce of butter, a teaspoon of finely-chopped parsley and the white sauce. It should be served very hot.¹⁸

Lentils were recommended more generally as a meatless alternative, for example 'Lentil Sausages'¹⁹ or 'Lentil And Tomato Rissoles'.²⁰

Lentil Sausages

Four ounces of lentils, 4 oz. of bread crumbs, ¼ lb of tomatoes, one prepared onion, quarter of teaspoonful of salt, half a teaspoonful of curry powder, a pinch of mixed herbs, fat for frying, a little flour. Soak the lentils overnight, then boil with the onion until tender, and all the water is absorbed. Mash up the tomatoes and boil with the lentils for a few minutes, then remove from the fire and mix in the breadcrumbs, salt, curry powder, and mixed herbs. Form into sausages about three inches in length roll in some more breadcrumbs, then leave for about an hour. Melt the fat in a frying pan, roll the sausages in flour, and fry. Drain and serve hot.²¹

Nutritious lentils

One of the selling points for lentils was their nutritional value.

A very interesting report on the comparative nutritive properties of food, was presented to (in 1842) the French Minister of the Interior, by Messrs Percy and Vanquelin, ... The result of their experiments is as follows:- In bread, every hundred pounds weight are found to contain 89 lbs. of nutritious matter; butcher's meat, averaging the various sorts, contains only 35 lbs. in 100: French beans, 89 j peas, 23 ; lentils, 94 in 100.²²

In 1867 The Sydney Morning Herald noted that arriving by the 'John Duthie' was 'Pure Flour of Lentils - Wholesome, nutritious , easy of digestion, recommended for children and invalids'²³ In 1915 the *Daily Telegraph* wrote: 'The greatest bulk of the indispensable energising food come to us in the form of starches and sugars. The starch we get in rice, flour, potatoes, peas, beans, and lentils...'²⁴ 'These are the essential food groups:' said the *Lilydale Express* in 1949, 'Protein, or body-building material —found in milk, lean meat, fish, eggs, cheese, poultry, rabbits, soya beans, peanuts. Second grade protein is supplied by cereals, dried peas, beans and lentils.'²⁵ In 1969 the *Australian Women's Weekly* published a two-page spread 'Dishes Rich in Protein', one of which was Lentil Soup.²⁶

¹⁸ 'Some dishes for Lent', *The Age* 13 February 1940 p.3

¹⁹ 'Lentil Sausages' Meatless Dishes, *Examiner* 8 October 1927 p.4

²⁰ 'Lentil And Tomato Rissoles' Meatless Dishes, *Advocate* 22 June 1935 p.12

²¹ 'Lentil Sausages', Meatless Dishes, *Examiner* 8 October 1927 p.4

²² 'Nutritive Food', *Southern Australian* 20 December 1840 p.4

²³ To Arrive By John Duthie, *The Sydney Morning Herald* 12 December 1867 p.6

²⁴ 'Keeping the Body Healthy', Food Functions *The Daily Telegraph* 17 March 1915 p.6

²⁵ 'Well Balanced, But Not Dull', *Lilydale Express* 15 July 1949 p.5

²⁶ 'Dishes Rich in Protein', the *Australian Women's Weekly* 30 April 1969 p.65

Vegetarian lentils

Lentils and vegetarian dishes have long been paired. In 1899 at the Vegetarian Banquet held by the Vegetarian Congress among the Savouries was Lentil and mushroom croquettes, with Lyonnaise sauce.²⁷ In 1918 lentil flour was called for in a Vegetarian Haggis²⁸. In 1927 the Geelong Advertiser published a recipe for 'The Vegetarian Dieters Lentil Cutlet':

Stew ½ lb. red lentils and a chopped onion in about 1½ pint of vegetable stock for about ¾ an hour until tender. Add ¼ lb. of bread crumbs and a ¼ lb. of mashed potatoes, rub all through the sieve, add a little pepper and salt and some dried herbs and chopped parsley. Mix well spread out on a dish to cool, then cut and shape into cutlets. Dip in egg and bread crumbs rubbed through a sieve and fry in a basket in boiling Nucoline (fat? oil?). Serve with sauce and gravy.²⁹

In June 1930 'Lentil Stew' headed a list of recipes for Vegetarian Dishes.³⁰ The *Warwick Daily News* In 1948 published a recipe for Lentil Cutlets in its feature Vegetarian Dishes for a Change.³¹

Lentils got a fillip from the counter culture movement of the late 1960's and early 1970's with its emphasis on vegetarian foods. In 1973 Jacqueline Parkhurst published *The Australian Natural Food Cook Book* in which were five recipes for lentils: Savoury Brown Lentils, Lentil And Vegetable Soup, Lentil Salad, Lentil and Vegetable Loaf, and Brown Lentil Rissoles.³² In 1974 Jim Corbett published *Super Natural Cookery. Recipes for Vegetarian Gourmets*. It had four lentil recipes: Lentil Carrot and Soya Soup, Lentil and Cream Cheese Soup, Lentil Tomato Soup, and Curried Lentils.³³

Charmaine Solomon's Lentils

In 1976 Charmaine Solomon published *The Complete Asian Cookbook*. Solomon gave eight recipes for lentils: Lentils and mutton rissoles, Lentils and savoury rice, Dhal chapatis with lentil and spinach filling, Lentils and vegetable soup, Lentil puree, Deep fried savoury lentils, Sri Lankan style lentils, Lentils with chicken or meat, and Lentils with pepper water.³⁴ Solomon's book sold over a million copies as of 2020. Arguably lentils had through the book the deepest penetration into the Australian kitchen of all the sources for recipes in newspapers and magazines.

Dhal Rasam
Pepper Water with Lentils
½ cup toor dhal or red lentils
Small stick of cinnamon
3 whole cloves
10 black peppercorns
2 small onions
4 cups water
2 teaspoons salt
Lemon juice to taste
1 cup (or more) coconut milk, optional³⁵

²⁷ 'Vegetarian Banquet' *Leader* 18 November 1899 p.39

²⁸ 'Vegetarian Haggis' Honourable Mention, *Sunday Times* 10 March 1918 p.19

²⁹ 'The Vegetarian Dieters Lentil Cutlet' *Geelong Advertiser* 17 February 1927 p.3

³⁰ 'Lentil Stew', Vegetarian Dishes, *The Cairns Post* 25 June 1930 p.10

³¹ 'Lentil Cutlets', Vegetarian Dishes for a Change, *Warwick Daily* 23 August 1948 p.3

³² Parkhurst, Jacqueline, *The Australian Natural Food Cook Book* Sun Books 1973

³³ Jim Corbett, Jim, *Super Natural Cookery. Recipes for Vegetarian Gourmets* A. H. & A. W. Reed 1974

³⁴ Solomon, Charmaine, *The Complete Asian Cookbook*, Paul Hamlyn 1976

³⁵ 'Dhal Rasam', Solomon p.94

Wash lentils well and put into a saucepan with the whole spices, 1 onion, the water and salt. Bring to the boil and simmer until lentils are very soft. Push lentils and onion through a sieve, discarding the whole spices. Slice remaining onion thinly and fry in the ghee until quite brown. Add the strained lentil liquid, salt and lemon juice. If a richer rasam is preferred, add a cup or more of coconut milk at the end of the cooking and adjust the seasoning.

Precursors to the lentil burger

Before the lentil burger there were dozens of recipes for the Lentil Rissole like this one in 1902.

Lentil Rissoles

Wash some lentils and rice. Chop an onion and cut a carrot small; put all together in a stewpan. Cover with water and cook gently one hour, adding more water as required. Stir occasionally. The mixture must be stiff when cooked. Turn out to cool, then form into cutlets or rolls. Flour thinly with wholemeal. Fry until brown.³⁶

The lentil at the Australian domestic table

This article looked for recipes for lentils from the 1850s when the first recipe for using lentils was published to 1979 the year the first recipe for a lentil burger was published. Lentils have proved versatile over that time from the simplest of soups to the relatively more complex making of lentil sausages. They have been sought for their nutritional quality and as meatless meals both factors of which make them an important food resource for vegetarians.

³⁶ 'Lentil Rissoles' Housekeeper, *Glen Innes Examiner and General Advertiser* 22 April 1904 p.2