

## A damper tale

January 2025

Just get the plain flour, baking powder and mix 'em with water, knead it with your hand. Make a fire. Then take it out and roll it with your hands. Roll it into a moon shape.

Wait 'till the flames die down and you just have the coals. Get a stick or a shovel make a shape like the damper. Then get the hot sand and chuck it over the damper.

Knead it with your hands. Make a fire. Then take it out and roll it with your hands. Roll into a moon shape. People can make fruit damper with egg dried fruits – just add 'em at the end.

Linda de Lower, *Bush Tucker Magic* 1966<sup>1</sup>

I like many other Australians have cooked a damper in the ashes of a fire while camping. I didn't give any thought to its origin or its place at the Australian table at the time, I was too busy enjoying it hot from the ashes spread with honey. Having lately come across a reference to it it snagged the food historian in me. The result is this article.

Both Jacqui Newling<sup>2</sup> and Barbara Santich<sup>3</sup> have written of damper. My article is offered as complementary to them.

### Damper: Defined

The Australian *Macquarie Dictionary* entry defines damper as:

Damper *noun* bread made from a simple flour and water dough with or without a rising agent, traditionally cooked in the coals or in a camp oven; bush bread

[British dialect *damper* something which takes off the edge of appetite]<sup>4</sup>

Jacqui Newling writes of the emergence of the word:

The term seems to have emerged in the early 1820s (possibly from Tasmania) and was in common use by the 1840s, usually referring to the type of unleavened coal-baked bread made by bushmen, itinerant labourers or 'swaggies' (swagmen), and pioneering families.<sup>5</sup>

### Damper: Formative years

The earliest reference to damper I found was in 1828 in an article about the assignment of convict labourers to a colonist, one condition being that the employer had to provide an allowance to the labourer.

Their usual allowance I have already stated to be a peck of wheat; seven pounds of beef, or four and a half of pork; two ounces of tea; two ounces of tobacco; and a pound of sugar, weekly ... The (farm?)men usually bake their flour into flat cakes, which they call dampers, and cook these in the ashes, cutting their salted meat into thin slices, and boiling them in the iron pot or frying pan, by which means the salt is in a great measure extracted.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Damper', Linda De Lower, *Bush Tucker Magic*, Freemantle Arts Centre Press 1997 (unpaginated)

<sup>2</sup> Newling, Jacqui, *Eat Your History. Stories and recipes from Australian Kitchens*, Sydney Living Museums, The Mint and NewSouth, 2015 p.96

<sup>3</sup> Santich, Barbara, *Bold Palates, Australia's Gastronomic Heritage*, Wakefield Press 2012 p.216

<sup>4</sup> 'damper', *Macquarie Dictionary*

<sup>5</sup> Newling, Jacqui, *Eat Your History. Stories and recipes from Australian Kitchens*, Sydney Living Museums, The Mint and NewSouth, 2015 p.96

<sup>6</sup> Cunningham's New South Wales Letter XXVIII, *The Australian* 28 February 1828 p.3

In 1829 the first description of making a damper was published in the *Hobart Town Courier*.

To make a damper in the bush you must take the lid of your apparel box or the bottom of the largest iron pot you have, and mix upon it as much flour, water, & salt, as it will hold, with a little old leaven, or the remains of the last batch, and knead with all the elbow grease you can command into a good manageable lump of dough, When it has stood an hour or two (if your time and hunger will allow you to wait as long) you rake a hole in the ashes of your fire, previously made brisk for that purpose, and clapping your batch down upon the hot hearth, cover it gently over with the hot ashes. In the course of an hour your damper will be baked and fit for the meal of an emperor, that is if that emperor has had the good fortune to have visited the further side of the Shannon in Van Diemen's land.<sup>7</sup>

The earliest formal recipe I found for damper was Edward Abbott's in his 1864 'The English and Australian Cookery Book. *Cookery for the Many As Well the "Upper Ten Thousand"*.

This bush fare is simply composed of flour and water, with a little salt, made into flat round pieces on bark, and baked in the coals. All old colonists are expert in making damper. "Tea, damper, and mutton" is a colonial institution, as the weary bushman is fully aware of.<sup>8</sup>

A version of this triumvirate - tea, damper, mutton- was standard fare for swagmen who travelling 'tucker tracks' in outback Australia were given flour, tea, and salted meat from homesteads along the way. In his short story 'The Babies in the Bush', in 1901, author Henry Lawson describes a scene he no doubt had seen on his wanderings:

Meals on the road were simple affairs. It could be a 'hunk of damper and meat (with) a clasp-knife in (my) hands – sitting on my heel in the dust, or on a log or a tucker-box. Or a fried chop or a piece of steak if you had been lucky on the tucker track.'<sup>9</sup>

Dampers were entered in competition at horticultural and agricultural shows.

**Damper (made by gentleman)**

W. Scott, 1; R. Beveridge, 2.

Prize List

Annual Autumn Show Hagley Horticultural Society

*The Mercury* 11 May 1896

It wasn't only swaggies who could expect to be sustained by the triumvirate. In 1936 they appear in the rations that workers on sheep and cattle stations were given:

The general ration per man was 2, 8, 10, and ¼ —21b. sugar (black, and came to the station in mats), 8 lb. flour, 10 lb. meat, and ¼ lb. tea. The damper simply had to be good in these circumstances. The meat was kept either in a bag or gin case and an old song used to go:—

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<sup>7</sup> 'Recollections of a short excursion to Lake Echo in March 1823' *The Hobart Town Courier* 1 August 1829 p.1

<sup>8</sup> Abbott, Edward in 'The English and Australian Cookery Book. *Cookery for the Many As Well the "Upper Ten Thousand"*, Sampson, Low, Son & Marston London 1864 p.79

<sup>9</sup> 'The Babies in the Bush', *Joe Wilson's Mates* 1901 p.137

"And if you were not careful, and did not keep it shut,  
The flies would make it canter round the old bark hut."<sup>10</sup>

### **Damper: Making the dough**

Newling writes:

Typically made 'on the go' damper was generally made without yeast or, by most accounts, added rising agents.<sup>11</sup>

Santich writes:

Damper was a bread of necessity, unleavened, the simple product of flour, raising agent and water, the same staples that could also yield johnny cakes, fat cakes and leather jackets, depending on how they were cooked.<sup>12</sup>

They sound contradictory on the use of rising agents but are not. Both versions without and with rising co-existed.

This 1896 recipe for damper without rising agents appears in a list of 'Australian Dishes' in North Queensland published by the *North Queensland Register*.

Damper – a well-made damper is both wholesome and nutritious, and a real bush damper is made in the following way: Take three breakfastcupfuls of flour, one saltspoon full of salt, one cup of water. Mix the salt into the flour, make a hole in the centre and pour in the water. Gradually work into the flour, and knead the dough well for about fifteen minutes.<sup>13</sup>

This 1909 recipe uses 'carbonate soda' and cream of tartar

#### **Damper**

3 cups flour, 1 teaspoonful carbonate soda, 3 teaspoonfuls cream tartar, milk, salt. Mix cream of tartar and a little salt with the flour, melt the soda in milk, mix up quickly, and bake at once.<sup>14</sup>

Damper has now moved toward Santich's damper.

The other change that has happened in 1909 is that milk replaces water. Where has the milk come from? Paralleling damper was soda bread made with flour, bicarbonate of soda and milk or buttermilk. The earliest recipe I found for it was in 1886.

#### **Plain Soda Loaf**

heavy. Put about 1 lb. of flour into a dish or crock: mix in a small teaspoonful of sola pounded quite free from lumps; a teaspoonful of salt, and mix the whole with enough thick or sour milk to form into a dough. .... If you cannot get sour milk use the baking powder instead of the plain soda and mix with warm water.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 'Making the Damper Rise', *The Australasian* 12 December 1936 p.4

<sup>11</sup> Newling, Jacqui, *Eat Your History ...* p.96

<sup>12</sup> Santich ... *Bold Palates* p.216

<sup>13</sup> 'Damper' Australian Dishes, *The North Queensland Register* 24 June 1896 p.8

<sup>14</sup> 'Damper' *Warwick Examiner and Times* 6 November 1909 p.7

<sup>15</sup> 'Plain Soda Loaf' A Course of Cookery, *Morning Bulletin* 18 August 1886 p.5

Confused? I am. I cannot see the difference between damper and soda bread at this point. The confusion isn't helped by the 1896 article beginning with 'A damper is very easily made..,'

And there's one more change to come. Self-raising flour was selling in the colony by at least 1887<sup>16</sup>. The earliest instance I found for it being used in baking is in 1919 when it is referenced in a recipe for damper.

Put some flour into a large bowl, and to every pound allow 2 teaspoonfuls of baking-powder, unless self-raising flour be used, when the former will not be necessary.<sup>17</sup>

Self-raising flour did not replace plain flour in dampers. The two continued side-by-side.

#### **Six Footers Know How to Cook Damper**

Two 15-stone men, both over six feet, won first and second prizes in the damper cooking contest yesterday at Brookvale Show. A man also won third prize. ... Mrs. W. Lees, who awarded the prizes, said that they were some of the best dampers she had seen. Cooked to a crisp brown, they reposed on the judging table. Cutting a slice out of each, the judge smelt it, pinched it, estimated its lightness, and then awarded first prize to W. Wakeling, second to L. Thew, and third to W. Botham. The other damper was the entry of Mrs. Dennis.

Six Footers Know How to Cook Damper

*The Daily Telegraph* 22 April 1933 p.8

#### **Damper: Shaping the dough**

Once the dough is made it's time to decide what shape the damper is going to be.

When it is quite soft and pliable flatten it out with the hands till the cake is about two inches in thickness.<sup>18</sup>

Shape into a cottage loaf.<sup>19</sup>

Knead dough into round, place on greased oven tray. Pat dough out to a 15cm (6in) circle. With sharp knife, cut two slits across dough like a cross, approximately 1cm (½in) deep. Brush top of dough with milk, sift a little extra flour over dough.<sup>20</sup>

Sometimes wrap it round a stick. (Technically I think the result is called a doughboy)<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> 'Turner's Improved Self-Raising Flour', *Newcastle Herald and Miners' Advocate* 20 June 1878 p.2

<sup>17</sup> 'Damper', *The Sydney Morning Herald* 20 September 1919 p.9

<sup>18</sup> 'Damper' Australian Dishes, *The North Queensland Register* 24 June 1896 p.8

<sup>19</sup> 'Let Scones, Damper Replace Bread', *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* 13 October 1947 p.7

<sup>20</sup> 'Damper' Weekly Cooking Class, *The Australian Women's Weekly* 3 November 1976 p.99

<sup>21</sup> D. T. in private communication with author 2025.

### **Damper and Christmas**

Damper has always retained its popularity with swagmen. At Christmas time, when these peripatetic gentlemen foregather in celebration, they sometimes put threepenny-bits in the damper.

'Damper Invented In Pitt Street'

*The Sydney Morning Herald* 21 September 1946 p.7

### **Damper: Baking it**

There are three camps here: those who bake it in the ashes/coals of a fire, those who use a camp oven<sup>22</sup>, and those who use a domestic oven.

... choose a clean and level spot beside your camp fire and cover it with ashes, and there you have your oven. Next, please lay the dough gently thereon, and cover it with another layer of clean wood ashes, and in due time, only to be ascertained by constant practice, you will have your damper nicely cooked. It is the bushman's food; enjoy it.<sup>23</sup>

The way we do it out this way is to dig a hole a little larger than a camp oven, then put one-and-a-half shovels of hot coals into the hole, and the camp oven on the coals. Pile up all round the oven and on top with coals and ashes, then cover with dry dirt and leave the damper to cook for one hour. Be sure to grease the oven.<sup>24</sup>

A modified kind of damper may be made and baked in the oven, which will, perhaps, be found the most convenient way in towns. In the latter case add baking-powder in the proportion of one teaspoonful to one pound of flour, and only knead it lightly. Milk or milk and water may be used to mix it with. Bake in a moderate oven.<sup>25</sup>

Put an oven-proof lidded saucepan or Dutch oven that is approximately 25cm/10 inches in diameter into the oven to heat up while making the damper dough ... Remove the saucepan from the oven and lightly dust the bottom with extra flour. Carefully sit the dough in the pan, cover with the lid and cook 25 minutes.<sup>26</sup>

### **Damper: Variations**

There were variations on the standard recipe. For example, Cheese Damper (grated cheese and cayenne pepper, and Orange Damper (finely grated rind of an orange)<sup>27</sup>

Miss J Bartley was awarded a consolation prize of \$5 in 1977 for 'an unusual damper made with health food ingredients'. Serve sliced and buttered.

Health Damper

2 cups rye flour

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<sup>22</sup> A camp oven is a pot with a lid placed on the coals and with more coals sometimes placed on the lid. They were being used in the colonies. In 1837 A. B. Smith & Co advertised 70 camp ovens for sale. 'Cargo of the Tamar', *The Sydney Monitor* 25 October 1837 p.2

<sup>23</sup> 'A Night Camp in The Great Australian bush', *Illustrated Sydney News* 19 July 1890 p.5

<sup>24</sup> 'Camp Oven Damper' Tested Recipes From Readers, *Chronicle* 19 July 1933 p.64

<sup>25</sup> 'Damper' Recipes, *The North Queensland Register* 24 June 1896 p.8

<sup>26</sup> 'Damper' Ross Dobson, *Australia the Cookbook* Phaidon 2021 p.242

<sup>27</sup> Your Diet Need Not Suffer, *The Canberra Times* 6 December 1972 p.22

1 ½ cups wholemeal self-raising flour

¼ cup coconut

375g (12oz) pkt mixed fruit

1 teaspoon mixed spice

2 tablespoons honey

1 ½ cups water, approx..

In large bowl combine sifted rye flour, wholemeal flour, coconut, mixed fruit, mixed spice, honey and sufficient water to give a soft dough. Place on floured surface and knead lightly. Divide dough in two, form into 2 small loaves.<sup>28</sup>

Wholemeal flour was also used in a 1972 'Christmas Damper'<sup>29</sup> from the *Canberra Times*, in a recipe from the *The Australian Gas Cookbook The Bicentennial Edition 1987*<sup>30</sup> and in Ross Dobson's 2021 'Wholemeal Walnut Damper'.<sup>31</sup>

In 1986, the *Australian Cook Book* published a recipe the ingredients for which are quintessentially Australian.

Damper

4 cups self-raising flour

1 x 375 ml (12 fluid oz) can beer<sup>32</sup>

### **Damper: Eating it**

There are many ways suggested for eating damper from savoury to sweet.

We used to have hot damper and fried chops for breakfast every morning.<sup>33</sup>

The damper may be used for lunch with cheese or jam, or served as a substitute for bread at the dinner table.<sup>34</sup>

One beautifully fine Sunday morning we prepared breakfast, consisting of porridge (no milk), grilled mutton birds, damper, and the usual billy tea ...<sup>35</sup>

Used as gravy bread with roast lamb.<sup>36</sup>

Quite delicious when spread with jam and cream or honey.<sup>37</sup>

The damper can be sliced when hot and spread with butter or be eaten cold in place of bread for dinner.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> 'Health Damper' Prize Recipes, *The Australian Women's Weekly* 17 August 1977 p.87

<sup>29</sup> 'Christmas Damper', Your Diet Need Not Suffer, *The Canberra Times* 6 December 1972 p.22

<sup>30</sup> 'Wholemeal Damper' *The Australian Gas Cookbook. The Bicentennial Edition* The Australian Gas Association 1987. p.129

<sup>31</sup> 'Wholemeal Walnut Damper,' Ross Dobson, *Australia the Cookbook* Phaidon 2021 p.242.

<sup>32</sup> 'Damper', *Australian Cook Book*, compiled by Anne Thorpe 1986 p. 458

<sup>33</sup> 'Real Damper', *Western Mail* 13 September 1913 p.5

<sup>34</sup> 'Recipe You Might Need', *The Courier Mail* 4 June 1943 p.3

<sup>35</sup> 'Mutton Birds and Damper' Gold Seekers Life On The Rocky Tas, *Sunday Times* 27 May 1906 p.1

<sup>36</sup> P. H. Private communication with author.

<sup>37</sup> 'Delicious Damper', *The Riverine Herald* 5 February 2001 p.6

<sup>38</sup> 'Damper for Bread', *The Telegraph* 31 May 1943 p.3

### **Damper: Its Darker History**

In 1932 the *Manning River Times and Advocate for the Northern Coastal Districts of New South Wales* published an account of the murder of a group of Aboriginals by poisoned damper.<sup>39</sup> This was not the only murder of Aboriginal people by poisoned damper. At [sothatweremember.com.au](http://sothatweremember.com.au) you can read an account of the 1841 Kilcoy Massacre.

### **Damper: Mainstreaming**

By 1976 damper no longer was a food only of bushmen and swaggies or a substitute for bread. It had come into its own.

Damper has become a popular item on barbecue menus. You can whip it up in minutes and bring it piping hot to the barbecue table. It does not keep well, so for best flavour eat it the day it is made.<sup>40</sup>

In 1981 it's served up by members of the Australian Culinary Olympics team to raise funds to fly them to Frankfurt.

For me the outstanding dish of the meal was the smoked loin of lamb in damper. ... The meat was dark pink, perfectly cooked, tender, with a strong flavour of the smoking, and the herbs in the dough just detectable.<sup>41</sup>

At the 1986 Canberra National Wine Show lunch Kangaroo Waikerie served in a small cocotte covered with a thyme-flavoured damper was a featured dish.<sup>42</sup>

In 1991 'Picnic basket pleasures include herbed damper, drover's brunch with a selection of relishes and ham and cheese loaf.'<sup>43</sup>

#### **For Scouts**

Boys of 1st Gwynneville Scout Troop, which won the Rally Pennant at the Scout and Cub Rally at the Showground last Saturday, will give an exhibition of their hobbies and handcrafts and demonstrate a model camp at the Gwynneville Scout Fete which is being organised by the Troop's Women's Auxiliary next Saturday at the Gwynneville Scout Hall. A highlight of the day will be the inter-patrol Damper Twist cooking competition, to be made from Scout recipe. The dampers will be sold by the boys at the fete. Scouts and Cubs from other troops may enter the open Damper Twist competition and it is expected that there will be keen rivalry.

Damper Comp't'n for Scouts

*Illawarra Daily Mercury*

14 October 1953 p.7

<sup>39</sup> 'Loaded Damper,' *The Manning River Times and Advocate for the Northern Coast Districts of New South Wales* 12 March 1932 p.1

<sup>40</sup> 'Damper Bread' *Weekly Cooking Class Australian Women's Weekly* 3 November 1976 pp.99 - 100

<sup>41</sup> 'Olympian chef's heavenly food' *Dining, The Canberra Times* 22 July 1983 p.2

<sup>42</sup> 'South Australian culinary art promoted in Canberra,' *The Canberra Times* 27 November 1986 p.8

<sup>43</sup> 'Making the catch taste like more,' *The Canberra Times* 12 November 1991 p.14

In 1994 it was one of the breads suggested by *Army*, the armed service magazine for a sandwich 'When you have lunch or a snack', along with focaccia, bagels, and rye bread.<sup>44</sup>

### **Damper: With bush tucker**

Damper and bush tucker have been coming together for at least 65,000 years. The oldest evidence for Aboriginal occupation at Madjedbebe in the Northern Territory comes from what is thought to be a grindstone which may well have ground native seeds to mix with water and cook in the coals.<sup>45</sup>

Indigenous chefs and cooks are now bringing the two together in bush tucker cuisine.

Chef Mark Olive gives this recipe from his *Outback Cafe*.

With some flour, roll the dampers into a dinner roll size, place them on a greased tray, brush top with milk and sprinkle some sea parsley.<sup>46</sup>

Damien Coulthard & Rebecca Sullivan have been at the forefront of developing bush tucker cuisine. This recipe is from *Warndu Mai. Good Food*.

#### Damien's Damper (2009)

2 tablespoons macadamia or lemon myrtle infused oil

300 - 500 ml water

500 g self-raising flour, plus extra for dusting

pinch of salt

2 tablespoons roasted and ground wattleseed (or lemon myrtle, strawberry gum, bush tomato, or saltbush).

If using the oven, preheat to 220C.

Mix the oil and water in a jug. Sift the flour into a large bowl, and mix through the salt and wattleseed. Slowly pour in the oils and water, and mix to make a dough.

Turn out the dough onto a floured surface and knead until smooth. Dust with flour, place on a baking tray and bake in the oven for 15-20 minutes, or ideally wrap in foil and cook on a fire in the ashes. Damper is always eaten best hot with lashings of butter.<sup>47</sup>

Chef Dale Chapman published this recipe in her 2016 cookery book *Coo-ee Cuisine*.

#### Bush Tomato Damper

3 cups self-raising flour

¼ cup extra self-raising flour

1 tbsp baking powder

½ cup buttermilk

½ cup soda water

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<sup>44</sup> 'Nutrition', *Army* 14 July 1994 p.4

<sup>45</sup> Hayes, E.H., Fullagar, R., Field, J.H. et al. 65,000-years of continuous grinding stone use at Madjedbebe, Northern Australia. *Sci Rep* 12, 11747 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-15174-x>

<sup>46</sup> 'Flash Damper', Mark Olive, *Outback Café*, R. M. Williams Publishing 2006 p73

<sup>47</sup> 'Damien's Damper', Damien Coulthard & Rebecca Sullivan, *Warndu Mai. Good Food.*, Hachette 2019 p.52



2 tbsp ground bush tomatoes

Sift flour, add bush tomato fold in soda water & buttermilk

Very quickly combine and dust surface with extra flour and knead

Cut into 10 and individually roll 10 balls. Bake in a moderate to hot oven for 110 minutes

Chef's Note: Wetter mixture is preferred to a drier one. You can add feta cheeses, herbs, spices and fruits into the dry flour mixture for a variety of dampers. Do not over-knead.<sup>48</sup>

### **Damper: The end of the tale**

This tale has tracked the fortunes of damper from a staple of bushmen and swaggies to playing a part in the evolving bush tucker cuisine. It's been quite a journey for a simple mix of flour and water.

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<sup>48</sup> Chapman, Dale, 'Coo-ee Cuisine', *Bush food Kitchen*. 2016