

Eating Skippy: The kangaroo at the Australian table¹

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There is a slur on Australia at times with being told that Australia is the only country which eats the animals on its coat of arms or flag – the kangaroo and the emu. It's not true. At least it's not true that only Australia eats its national symbolic animal. But it is true that we eat kangaroo (and occasionally emu). Not all of us, some Australians don't eat kangaroo because they can't see it as meat, have tried it and not liked it, or are vegetarian or vegan. This article is however concerned with non-Indigenous Australians who did/do eat kangaroo.

I do not deal with the kangaroo as a pest except where this intersects with the culinary kangaroo.

Kangaroo hunting in the early colonies

'Kangaroo meat got mixed reports from the early colonists', writes historian Jacqui Newling, 'who compared it unfavourably with English beef or mutton, but met with more approval when likened to European venison and hare - a logical step given its gamey qualities.'²

They are noted in 1803 in *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* along with emus and wild duck in a context that suggests they were seen as game for the table.³

In 1815 they were listed among field game in the Bathurst area along with, 'emus, black swans, wild geese, wild turkeys, (sic) bustards, ducks of various kinds, quail, bronze, and other pigeons, &c. &c., the water mole, or paradox,[platypus].'⁴

They were hunted sometimes with the help of trained 'kangaroo dogs'.

'With the assistance of one Man and half a dozen greyhounds, which I keep my table is constantly supplied with Wild Ducks or Kangaroos - averaging one a week with another, these dogs do not kill less than three hundred pounds.'⁵

The dogs were valuable. In 1804 'no pains or expense will be spared' to recover a six month old stolen greyhound puppy' which has been much noticed by persons who go out catching kangaroos'.⁶ Good trainers of the dogs were publicised:

Capital Kangaroo Dog – To be sold by William Furber at Kissing Point, an excellent dog of the above description broke in by Miller of Parramatta.⁷

Not everyone was onside with kangaroo hunting. The writer of this 1824 letter perceptively notes the impact of kangaroo hunting on Aboriginal people.

In the first place, I would beg the European hunters of kangaroo in this Colony to remember the fable of the boys and the frogs; and hence to infer that what proves their amusement, is the

¹ 'Skippy' was the name of the 60s television programme starring the eponymous marsupial as something of a crime stopper. Australian born people are called a 'Skip'

² Newling, Jacqui, *Eat Your History. Stories and recipes from Australian Kitchens*, Sydney Living Museums, The Mint and NewSouth, 2015 p.56

³ Sydney, *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 11 December 1803 p.3

⁴ 'Government and General Orders', *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 10 June 1815 p.1

⁵ John Macarthur cited in Newling p.56

⁶ 'Stolen', *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 2 September 1804 p.1

⁷ 'Capital Kangaroo Dog', *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 21 July 1805 p.1

cause of starvation to the Natives. For it cannot admit of doubt, that to the flesh of the kangaroo and opossum, the Aborigines naturally look for support; and if that support be abstracted for the thoughtless recreation or superfluous profit of intrusive Europeans, - what, Sir, can result, but desperation, degeneracy, extinction, or recriminative robbery?⁸

The earliest reference I found for kangaroo being sold as food was in 1805, with an interesting comparison of the price for kangaroo with that for pork.

The foresters lately abate in their ardour of hunting the Kangaroo, because the price like that of every other species of animal food, has *unfortunately* experienced a fall.— But that this should totally discourage the pursuit is unaccountable, as the *expence* of procuring cannot be supposed to equal that of rearing any other kind of *stock*; and yet the difference in price between that and pork is only as *three* to *four*.⁹

In 1805 also it's noted that 'Sixty seven large kangaroos were caught from the first to the 10th of September and issued from the Store instead of Salt Meat'.¹⁰

Kangaroos were also killed for their skins, probably more so than for their meat. In 1822, 2235 skins are among the cargo of the *Little Mary*.¹¹

Cooking skippy 1824 – 1924

The earliest published reference to cooking kangaroo I found was in 1824 in a letter to the Editor *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*:

I chanced to espy a cottage in which a notable and homely looking woman was employed in preparing dinner, with a frying-pan on the fire, loaded with excellent kangaroo steaks, and rich fat bacon. I made some apology for intruding, and the good dame civilly desired me to sit down ... The dinner was by this time on the table, which was covered with a white, clean, although coarse cloth, and down the whole party sat, presenting an appearance of health, comfort, and content, that I believe is seldom witnessed in superior dwellings. Having walked a long way, and fasted a long time, I did not require a second invitation to partake of the welcome meal and enjoyed it most cordially.¹²

Another entry in the *Colonial Times* lists a range of ways of cooking kangaroo.

But first, let me tell you a little more about our meal, which, like the cold tea drinking, might be really termed Colonial; of course, you know the natural history of the kangaroo, but the manner in which it is hunted I will hereafter tell you. Its hind quarters afford very fine eating, and are dressed in various ways - some roast various parts of them, using gravy, stuffing and jelly in the hare fashion - some stew the meat down to a rag, and extract a most delicious soup, nearly equal to turtle - others make what they call steamers, which, by the by, is the most common method, and which is a species of stew mixed with bits of bacon - others again, cut and hack the flesh into chops or collops, which they fry. In whatever way it comes to table, it is a delicate food, of fine flavour and of easy digestion.¹³

⁸ 'To the Editor', *Hobart Town Gazette and Van Dieman's Land Advertiser* 24 July 1824 p.2

⁹ *Gazette* 3 February 1805 p.2

¹⁰ *Gazette* 13 October 1805 p.2

¹¹ *Gazette* 28 January 1822 p.2

¹² *Gazette* 25 November 1824 p.4

¹³ 'Dear Donald', *Colonial Times* 10 December 1830 p.4

Some of these would be codified as recipes in the Edward Abbott's *The English and Australian Cookery Book. Cookery for the Many As Well the "Upper Ten Thousand"*.¹⁴ He has 11 recipes for it: ham, hashed, jugged, pan jam, pasty, roast, Slippery Bob [a recipe using kangaroo brains], steamer (three recipes), and stuffing.

Abbott also cites a recipe from *Mrs Meredith's "Home in Tasmania"* that wouldn't be shunned at a modern barbecue.

Here I was first introduced into the bush art of "sticker-up" cookery, and for the benefit of all who go "a-gypsyng" I will expound the mystery. The orthodox material here is of course kangaroo, a piece of which is divided nicely into cutlet, two or three inches broad and a third of an inch thick. The next requisite is a straight clean stick about four feet long sharpened at both ends. On the narrow part of this, for the space of a foot or more, the cutlets are spitted at intervals, and on the end is placed a piece of delicately rosy fat bacon. The strong end of the spit-stick is now stuck fast and erect in the ground, close by the fire, to leeward, care being taken that it does not burn. Then the bacon on the summit of the spit, speedily softening in the genial blaze, drops a lubricating shower of rich and savoury tears upon the leaner kangaroo cutlets below, which frizzle and steam and sputter with as much ado as if they were illustrious Christmas beef grilling in some London chop-house under the gratified nose of the expectant customer.¹⁵

Abbott's recipes got traction with three published in *The Age* in January 1865. 'We take the following improved methods of making kangaroo palatable from *The English and Australian Cookery Book*.'¹⁶ There were two recipes for Kangaroo Steamer, and one for Roast Kangaroo. It would be interesting to know what the unpalatable methods were.

Newling writes 'Like most meats in the 19th century, kangaroo was used in Anglo-style curries – a truly colonial expression of 'eating Empire'.¹⁷

Kangaroo Curry. — Get a young kangaroo and cut up the body and hind quarters into pieces, and stew with salt and herbs; when done add the following and boil two minutes — 2 large tablespoonfuls curry, teaspoonful pepper, dessertspoonful of mustard, ditto corn-flour, ¼ bottle oriental pickles pint of milk. Mix up well, boil, and serve with rice.¹⁸

In 1880 there was a recipe for another candidate for a barbecue - Kangaroo Sausages.

Kangaroo Sausages — Sometimes, instead of putting all the meat into the soup pot, we keep out the solid part of one hindquarter, and put it through the sausage-machine (another house keeper's friend). As, of course, it would be much too dry alone, we also put through the machine some beef suet, or fat bacon if we happen to have it mix well, put in seasoning to taste, and a little thyme: form it into round cakes, rather flat, as they must be thoroughly cooked, and fry in boiling fat. These are really good, and much relished by those who can partake of our 'Australian venison'.¹⁹

¹⁴ Abbott, Edward, *The English and Australian Cookery Book. Cookery for the Many As Well the "Upper Ten Thousand"*, Sampson, Low, Son & Marston London 1864

¹⁵ Abbott p.86

¹⁶ 'How to Cook Kangaroo', *The Age* 6 January 1865 p.7

¹⁷ 'Newling, Jacqui, *Eat Your History. Stories and recipes from Australian Kitchens*, Sydney Living Museums, The Mint and NewSouth, 2015 p.56

¹⁸ 'Kangaroo Curry' Recipes, *The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser* 25 January 1879 p.130

¹⁹ 'Kangaroo Sausages' *Freeman's Journal* 28 August 1880 p.20

As the century moved towards its close the *Queenslander* published this recipe in 1889 from 'Delphia' for Kangaroo Tail Soup

Kangaroo Tail Soup.

(By Delphia.)

After skinning the tail, divide in joints, well wash, rubbing with the hands, put the pieces into clean salt and water to soak for an hour. Have a small boiler very clean, with a lid that fits properly put the tail in and cover with two quarts of water and add a teaspoonful of peppercorns and two of salt. Let the liquid come to a boil, and let it boil for the first half hour, but you must take the scum off as fast as it rises, or the soup will not be clear. Half-a-cup of cold water thrown in now and then while the liquid is boiling will help the scum to rise to the top. Now pull the boiler on one side, and allow it to simmer all day, or for ten or twelve hours, keeping the lid firmly closed, or the flavour will deteriorate. Then turn the soup into an open flat pan, and allow it to get cold or cool, so that every particle of fat can be skimmed off. Many epicures prefer this soup perfectly clear like sherry, without fine addition of any foreign ingredients; you then get the whole gamy kangaroo flavour. If that is the case, you will have to clear your soup by beating up the whites and shells of two eggs, stir this into the soup which has been returned to the cleaned boiler, simmer for a short time. An immense quantity of grey-brown scum will rise; take it off with a perforated ladle; add a glass of sherry to the soup, pass the whole through a jelly-bag, boil up again, adding salt to taste, and serve with small toasted sippets. If you do not care to go to the trouble of clearing the soup, merely boil it up again, with a small stick of celery, two carrots, one small turnip, an onion and thicken with a little brown flour.²⁰

There continued to be recipes published in newspapers for eating kangaroo till 1924 most of them for kangaroo tail soup.

I reviewed other cookery books other than +Abbott's published before 1924. *The Kookaburra Cookery Book* has a recipe for Kangaroo Tail Soup.²¹ *The Queensland Cookery and Poultry Book* discussed ways to eat kangaroo but gave no recipes.²² *The Goulburn Cookery Book* had a recipe for Kangaroo or Wallaby Steamed.²³

Cooking Skippy after 1924

Contrary to a generally held idea kangaroo did not drop out of the Australia table sometime in the 20s or 30s. Kangaroo Tail Soup recipes continued to be published as in the 1938 *Courier Mail* recipe Kangaroo Tail Soup.²⁴ In 1946 Mrs. Flight won first prize in the competition conducted by *The Mercury* for her recipe for Kangaroo Tail Pie.²⁵

In recent years kangaroo has become a standard in Bush Food. Sharon Winsor gives three recipes for Kangaroo, none of them for soup: Kangaroo Meat Pie with Bush Tomato Chutney²⁶, Saltbush Dukkah Crusted Kangaroo.²⁷

²⁰ 'Kangaroo Tail Soup' The Table, *The Queenslander* 27 November 1897 p.1039

²¹ The Lady Victoria Buxton Girls' Club Adelaide, *The Kookaburra Cookery Book*, South Australia, E.W. Cole, 1911 p.5

²² Rawson, Mrs. Lance (Mina) *The Queensland Cookery and Poultry Book*, William Hopkins, Rockhampton, 1890 p.31

²³ Forster Rutledge, Mrs., Compiler, *The Goulburn Cookery Book*, 1899 p.54

²⁴ 'Kangaroo Tail Soup', *Courier Mail* 17 November 1938 p.1

²⁵ 'Kangaroo Tail Pie', *The Mercury* 2 July 1946 p.11

²⁶ 'Kangaroo Meat Pie' Winsor, Sharon, *Bushfood & Botanicals* Indigiearth 2024 p.34

²⁷ 'Saltbush Dukkah Crusted Kangaroo.' Winsor, Sharon, *Bushfood & Botanicals* Indigiearth 2024 p.34103