

Carping on. A brief history of eating carp in Australia

March 2026

In January 2025 The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC from hereon) showed the series 'Eat The Invaders'.

Host Tony Armstrong - with the help of scientists, land carers, an artist and a chef – will attempt to turn our unwanted ecological trash into desirable culinary gold, in a provocative attempt to Eat the Invaders.¹

The second episode was 'Carp'.

Catching an edible native fish is getting more and more unlikely because so many of our waterways are infested with an invader that Australians refuse to eat.²

The last bit of that statement niggled me. As a food historian/writer I'm wary of attributing some piece of food-related behaviour to 'Australians' a term which erases the multiculturalism of Australia's table that is otherwise lauded. I was sure I had seen carp for sale at Vietnamese and Chinese fishmongers.

First though I wanted to see if carp had been eaten by Anglo-Australians.

Carp at the early Australian table

The program attributes the importation of carp into Australia to Edward Wilson and the Acclimatisation Society of Victoria. 'By 1880 Acclimatisation Societies were established to import into the country plants and animals from across the British Empire that would, in their member's views beautify the landscape and provide opportunities for hunting and fishing familiar game'.³ Carp were 'an ornamental and game fish widespread throughout Britain', said Eat the Invader. Hanna Glasse in *The Art of Cookery made Plain and Easy* gives a recipe 'To dress a brace of carp'.⁴ Mrs. Beeton in *Mrs Beeton's Cookery Book* has recipes for Baked Carp⁵ and Stewed Carp⁶. So, carp were likely to have been imported as an ornamental and a game fish.

In still waters and streams which run part of the year. and in others which form into pools having high temperature, the perch and carp have shown adaptability. They can stand the conditions and give sport and a good food supply.⁷

As a food the first carp are reckoned equal or superior to cat-fish, suckers, perch and other common varieties, while some consider them equal to trout, bass and shad, but this opinion does not appear to have been shared by the Fish Commission. They, are fit for the table from October to May; they have a lot of bones, but the flesh flakes off very nicely.⁸

The earliest recipe I found surprisingly was for a nominally German dish of carp.

¹ 'Eat the Invaders'. Australian Broadcasting Commission 2025

² 'Carp', Episode 2 'Eat the Invaders'.

³ Van Reyk, True To The Land. A History of Food In Australia Reaktion 2021 p.81.

⁴ Glasse, Hanna, *The Art of Cookery made Plain and Easy* 1747 p.91

⁵ Beeton, Mrs. *Mrs. Beeton's Cookery Book*, Ware, Lock, & Co. New Edition 1909 p.96

⁶ Beeton, Mrs. *Mrs. Beeton's Cookery Book*, Ware, Lock, & Co. New Edition 1909 p.97

⁷ 'Acclimatisation of Fish. The Introduction of Carp. *The West Australian* 22 November 1907 p.3

⁸ 'Carp and Carp Ponds', *The Riverine Grazier* 6 March 1888 p.4

Fish Soup.-This recipe for fish soup ranks amongst the most favoured soups in German families. Heat three ounces of dripping in a saucepan, and stir in two ounces of flour. Add gradually a quart of milk and a quart of boiling water, letting it all boil well together. Put in a whole carp, plaice, or other white fish, two cloves, some mace, a bay leaf, salt and pepper, and allow to simmer gently for threequarters of an hour. Pass through a colander and return to the pan to boil up again. The fish broken up into small pieces, may be served in the soup if preferred.⁹

The earliest recipe I found for an Anglo-Australian dish of carp was this one.

Stewed Carp.

Scale and clean. Lay the fish in a stew-pan, with rich beef gravy, an onion, eight cloves, a dessertspoonful of ordinary ground pepper and the same quantity of whole peppercorns, and a tumbler of port. (About one part of wine to four parts of gravy is required. Cider is said to do as well.) Simmer close-covered. When nearly done, add two anchovies chopped fine, a dessertspoonful of made mustard some walnut ketchup (or any other sauce that is at hand), and a piece of butter rolled in flour. Shake it and let the gravy boil for a few minutes. Serve with' sippets of fried bread, and a good deal of horse-radish and lemon.¹⁰

Carp at the multiculinary Australian table

Recipes for carp are few and far between, but when they are published they are as likely to be in a non-Anglo cuisine. In 1949 the *Farmer and Settler* published Christmas Fare The World Around. One of the featured countries was Czechoslovakia:

Fish is always prominent on the Continental Christmas Menu. Indeed in Czechoslovakia boiled carp and a spicy sauce form the main dish. Sweet rolls with filled with almonds and raisins usually round off the meal.¹¹

Carp is the fish used in the Jewish community to make Gefilte Fish.

Stewed fishballs with egg

Take 2 pounds of cod and free it from all the bones;-chop it and season it with pepper, salt, grated nutmeg and a little of the rind of lemon chopped fine, parsley and marjoram, a little soaked bread with the water drained from it.

Mix well together with an egg,/make them into nice sized balls the size of an apple.

Slice in the stewpan a large onion; 3 tablespoonsful of salad, oil, let it fry, add a teacupful of boiling water, let it boil up, put in the balls.

When done beat in a basin 3; eggs, strain the juice of 2 large lemons, with a little dried saffron and a little, chopped parsley.

Stir and mix it all well together, dish them up by first taking out the balls, then strain the sauce over them.

Garnish, with parsley; 3 or 4 tomatoes added to the balls is a great improvement and makes it a pretty dish.¹²

⁹ 'Fish Soup', The Home, *The Brisbane Courier* 1 February 1911 p.15

¹⁰ 'Old Fashioned Ways of Cooking Fish', *Geelong Advertiser* 8 September 1924 p.3

¹¹ 'Christmas Fare The World Around', Country Women's Interests, the *Farmer and Settler* 16 December 1949 p.15

¹² 'Variations In Recipe', *The Australian Jewish News* 8 December 1978 p.22

Chinese dine on carp at New Year¹³ and at other times.¹⁴ Carp dishes are in the cuisine of Vietnam.¹⁵

Carp in 2025.

Carp have come back to the Anglo-Australian table. A search online for recipes for carp in Australia gave these: Grilled Carp, Carp Blue A La Grandma's Style; Carp on Butter.¹⁶

Also, this:

At a recent carp fishing competition in Boorowa, Keith Bell, of K&C fisheries, cooked up some carp for hungry anglers. Keith didn't hide the fish in a rich curry sauce or strongly flavoured soup. Instead, he rolled small pieces of carp in flour, salt and pepper, and fried them. As the locals tried it, eye brows were raised and jaws dropped. They were delicious. Before long, he couldn't keep up with the line of young children asking for second and third helpings.¹⁷

¹³ 'The auspicious symbolism of these traditional Chinese New Year foods is based on their pronunciations or appearance. Not only do the dishes themselves matter, but also the preparation, and ways of serving and eating mean a lot'.¹² Lucky Chinese New Year Foods to Greet the Year of Snake 2025

¹⁴ 'Recipes for popular carp dishes in China'

¹⁵ 'Carp is a type of fish that has long been no stranger to the rice tray of the vast majority of Vietnamese people.' *What does carp make deliciously? Top 10 recipes that the whole family loves.* chanhtuoi.com.

¹⁶ 'Carp Quick and Easy Recipes' tatselist.com

¹⁷ 'Carp - If you can't beat em, eat em!', fishingaustraliatv