Cakes, Biscuits, Puddings and Sometimes Curry. Fifty years of culinary use of coconuts in Australia.

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Few people know how useful cocoa-nuts are in cooking. They can be used in both the sweet and savoury dishes and, as many old Indians will tell you no curry is perfect without a good share of cocoa-nut.

Mrs. Lance Rawson

The Queensland Cookery and Poultry Book.¹

I think she was being harsh. In the years before she published her cookery book there had been a number of recipes for using coconut published: Cocoanut Cake 1877²; Cocoanut Pudding 1878³ and 1880⁴; Cocoanut Pie 1883⁵; Cocoanut Cheese-cake; Cocoanut Cream, Cocoanut Gingerbread, Cocoanut Poundcake; Cocoanut Macaroons, and Cocoanut Pudding all 1887⁶; Cake, With Oranges, Pyramid, Bread Pudding' Pudding x 2, Cheesecake, Tart all 1889⁷; Loaf Cocoanut Cake 1889⁸; Cocoanut Filling for Cake 1889⁹; and Cocoanut Tablets¹⁰ Rawson gave recipes for Cocoanut Drops, Cocoanut Cake, and Cocoanut Pudding¹¹.

She was right about the lack of savoury dishes up to 1890. There were no recipes I could find until in 1893 for How to Make a Curry.¹²

But was this the full story of the coconut at the Australian table? I went in search of the coconut in the first fifty years of formally being at the Australian table via published recipes. For what follows my sources are *Trove*, the digital repository for newspapers, magazines and journals managed by the Australian National Library, and cookery books in my library. The list of the latter is Appendix 1. I reviewed recipes with cocoanut or coconut in their title and also where cocoa/coconut was an ingredient.

The coconut in Australia

Coconut native to Australia

The coconut has till now been assumed to be a plant introduced in the early years of the colony. Recent scholarship shows otherwise. André Leu revisited early reports from European sea captains and botanists and found numerous references to sightings of coconut palms and coconuts in northern Australia.¹³ Leu also pointed to a fossil that could date coconut palms in Australia which

¹ Rawson, Mrs. Lance (Mina) *The Queensland Cookery and Poultry Book*, William Hopkins, Rockhampton, 1890 p.85

² 'Cocoanut Cake' Domestic Economy. The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser 28 July 1877 p.7

³ 'Cocoanut Pudding' Recipes, *Leader* 20 April 1878 p.5

⁴ 'Cocoanut Pudding' Scientific and Useful, 1 September 1880 p.11

⁵ 'Cocoanut Pie' *The North East Ensign* 2 March 1883 p.2

⁶ 'Cocoanut Recipes', *Morning Bulletin* 12 September 1887 p.3

⁷ 'Cocoanuts', Portland Guardian 13 September 1889 p.3

⁸ 'Loaf Cocoanut Cake', Cooking Recipes, *Macleay Argus* 30 March 1889 p.2

⁹ 'Cocoanut Filling for Cake' The Household, The Colac Herald 31 January 1890 p.4

¹⁰ 'Cocoanut Tablets' The Household, Albury Banner and Wodonga Express 31 October 1890 p.

¹¹ Rawson Queensland Cookery pp. 85 - 86

¹² 'How to Make a Curry', A few Indian Dishes Recipes Western Mail 8 April 1893 p.29

¹³ Leu, André, 'The evidence for native coconuts growing in Australia', International Journal of Plant Biology 2021; 12:9025]

indicates that coconut were in Australia more than five million years. He also lists the coconut in several Indigenous languages. 'The fact is multiple traditional owners state that coconuts have always been in Australia, owned trees, had words for them, specific names for groves, and used them for food, artifacts and ceremonies'.

The cultivation of the coconut in colonial Australia

The story of coconut cultivation in Australia is one of high hopes with no return.

The earliest colonial record for the coconut plant in Australia I found was its listing in the 1851 Catalogue of plants cultivated at the Darling Nursery, Sydney, New South Wales.¹⁴ There was no information I could find on who the plants were sold to and to what purpose they were put.

In 1869 The Queensland Acclimatization Society recorded that 'Categorical lists of queries on the cultivation of the coconut, banana and tamarind have been drawn up and sent to likely correspondents in the localities where these plants are most grown, and the answers thereto when received will be published for general benefits'.¹⁵ Again I found no information on the results of this.

In 1881 the *Queenslander* published an article about the successful coconut plantation of a Mr Barnes. In Mackay, Queensland. Barnes had reportedly begun the venture 16 years before and was an example, the *Queenslander* said 'of steady persevering industry rewarded by comfortable success'.¹⁶ But when asked about the market for his coconuts Barnes said 'it was entirely local and that there was not rteady sale for the quantities tha he grows ... the trees at Macaky are not yet up to their best, so Mr Barnes has not as yet troubled about finding an export market.'

In 1914 the *Queenslander* reported: 'The raising of cocoanuts has not made much headway in Queensland. On the mainland and on some of the islands trees were planted, and have proved that the conditions are suitable for them. On some of the islands the Government planted groves of cocoanuts for the use of ship-wrecked people.'¹⁷ I found no references for the success of this.

Also in 1914 the *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser* reported that 'Coconut planting has been started on a commercial scale in North Queensland'.¹⁸ I found nothing further about this venture. I suspect it failed.

I found no references to coconut cultivation past this to 1927.

In 2017 Courtney Wilson posted for the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) an article wondering why Australia did not have a coconut industry. They noted: 'Despite having plenty of coconut palms in northern Australia, most coconuts and coconut products sold domestically in supermarkets come from overseas, or are produced from imported raw materials.'¹⁹ In response arborist Jim Scott said "The bigger coconuts we use — we've got a couple of people we supply them to, they sell them at markets. For a long time, there have never been any commercial plantations up here. There're a lot of smaller sort of plantations, but nothing of a scale big enough to make it commercially viable. If someone could rise to the game, there's definitely potential.' The only

¹⁴ Coconut in the Caroline Simpson Collection record/25092

¹⁵ Queensland Acclimatisation Society, The Brisbane Courier 25 November 1869 p.3

¹⁶ Mr Barnes' Coconut Grove', The Queenslander 31 December 1881 p.4

¹⁷ 'Raising Cocoanuts in Queensland' The Queenslander 7 February 1914 p.34

¹⁸ 'The Day of the Nut', Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser 16 May 1914 p.9

¹⁹ Wilson, Courtney, 'Australia has a lot of coconut palms — so why don't we have a coconut industry?' Landline 30 Sep 2017

international success has been for a coco-tap to make it easier to drink the coconut water inside the fruit. The article went on to describe some recent entrepreneurial ventures which are as yet not showing return.

Imported coconuts

The first reference to cocoanuts in the market place was not for a sweet or savoury recipe it was for 'a Keg containing about 30 gallons' of coconut oil.²⁰ Many of the references before 1877 are for oil. For what was it used? Not for culinary purposes. It was used for lamps and soap making. It would later also be used as a shampoo.²¹

The earliest reference to cocoanuts themselves I found was for importing 600 of them in 1837.²² This was a modest quantity. In 1865, Dun(rest of name illegible), confectioner, advertised 10,000 for sale.²³ Unfortunately what buyers were doing with the coconuts is not documented. I wonder whether Dun... as a confectioner was using them to make sweet treats like those above.²⁴ I wonder also if buyers were using them for making cakes and biscuits and for curries?

As the ABC article states, Australia continues to import most of its coconuts and coconut products.

Coconut's Culinary uses

Cakes, biscuits, puddings

'If passionfruit was more comfortable in the company of desserts and preserves,' wrote Barbara Santich in *Bold Palates*,' coconut found its niche among the cakes and biscuits.'²⁵

Proof of this is the list at the beginning of this article and the other published recipes 1877 – 1977. Of 96 recipes reviewed just 10 were for a savoury use. Appendix 2 lists coconut recipes for cakes, biscuits and puddings and other sweet uses for the coconut and the year of their appearance in *Trove*.

Early recipes make it clear that they require freshly grated coconut:

Coconut Pudding.— Break the shell of a moderate sized cocoanut, so as to leave the nut as whole as possible. Grate it after removing the brown skin $...^{26}$

Coconut Cheesecake - Pare off the rind from a fresh cocoanut, grate the white part \dots^{27}

There is nothing said about how to get at the white flesh inside the coconut. My experience from using coconut in Sri Lankan recipes is that the hard shell needs to be struck across its widest point with something heavy. I can only surmise that the knowledge of doing this was common enough for home cooks not to need it spelled out. I assume that the flesh was grated with the common cooking

²⁰ Andrew Thompson, Classified Advertising, *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 15 March 1897 p.1

²¹ 'Colinated Cocoanut Oil Shampoo' Display Advertising The Canberra Times 23 March 1932 p.4

 ²² Imports, Sydney General Trade, *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 15 August 1837 p.2
²³ 'Cocoanuts! Cocoanuts! Cocoanuts!, The Sydney Morning Herald 31 Mach 1865 p.6

²⁴ 'Cocoanuts Marvels of Utility', A note in this item though distant from it suggests that my supposition was on the right track. 'Fresh cocoa-nuts are bought in England chiefly by confectioners.' Cocoanuts Marvels of Utility Newcastle Morning Heralds and Miners' Advocate 31 July 1913 p.11

²⁵ Santich, Barbara, 'Bold Palates. Australia's Gastronomic Heritage' Wakefield Press 2012 p.201

²⁶ 'Cocoanut Pudding' Recipes, *Leader* 20 April 1878 p.5

²⁷ 'Coconut Cheesecake' Cocoanut Recipes, Morning Bulletin 12 September 1887 p.3

utensil for this. In 1931 there was humorous description of breaking the shell and extracting the flesh in an article titled 'Those Time-Eating Domestic Tasks'.²⁸

The other day I bought a coconut. Later I drained off the milk, carefully strained it. Then I cracked the coconut, incidentally cracking my own thumb, laboriously removed the shell, and just as laboriously pared off the brown skin from the edges of the broken pieces of white nut. After all that the nut had to be grated, after which five minutes were required to clean the grater, and at the end of all that there was the cocoanut ready to be used to enrich the filling and icing of a layer cake which, of course, still had to be made, and which could have been made just as palatable with the use of desiccated coconut already grated and ready to use. All the time I was thinking of a woman whose coconut cakes I had eaten as a child. She had made hundreds and hundreds of them, and if for every one she had taken as much trouble as I had just taken for mine, when her housework was done she must have been just a little nearer to being a mental and physical wreck than she had ever-been.²⁹

The earliest reference I found for desiccated coconut is among Oilmen's Stores advertised by S. Hoffnung and Co in 1876.³⁰ The earliest recipe asking for desiccated coconut I found was for Coconut Jelly from Harriet Wicken's 1888 Kingswood Cookery Book.³¹

Coconut Jelly	
1 cupful Sugar	Essence of lemon
1 tablet of Jelly	½ tin Desiccated Cocoanut
Essence of Almonds	3 cupfuls Boiling Water

Put the cocoanut into a saucepan and pour over it the boiling water; simmer for twenty minutes, then press out and strain the liquid; pour into a saucepan and bring it to the boil; stir in the packet of jelly and sweeten to taste; when the jelly is dissolved add five drops of essence of almond and ten drops of essence of lemon; pour into a wet mould and stand away till firm.

From the first appearance of desiccated coconut both it and fresh coconut were alternately called for. Of 96 recipes between 1876 and 1927 using coconut in its title or as an ingredient 57 called for desiccated coconut and 39 for fresh coconut.

Most often the grated or desiccated coconut is mixed directly in with the other ingredients as in the recipe for the much-loved Coconut Ice.

Take 2 1b. of loaf sugar, 1/2 pint of water, 1/2 lb. of desiccated cocoanut, 2 tablespoonfuls of lemon essence, 1 teaspoonful of cream of tartar. Put the sugar and water into a saucepan and boil until the sugar is quite dissolved, stirring well all the time. Stir in the cream of tartar and the desiccated cocoanut. Boil for 15 minutes. Allow to slightly cool, and then add the lemon essence. Pour into deep plates, and allow to stand until cold.³²

Both fresh and desiccated were also used for dusting on a cake or slice or rolling some cake or other sweet confection through. The iconic Australian example of this is the Lamington.

²⁸ 'Those Time-Eating Domestic Tasks', The Sun News-Pictorial 27 June 1931 p.24

²⁹ 'Those Time-Eating Domestic Tasks', *The Sun News Pictorial* 27b June 1931 p.24

³⁰ S. Hoffnung and Co, The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser 22 April 1876 p.526

³¹ 'Coconut Jelly, Wicken, H.F. *The Kingswood Cookery Book*, George Robertson and Company, Melbourne and Sydney, 1888 p.171

³² 'Cocoanut Ice', The Daily News 7 February 1920 p.6

Take one cup butter, three cups flour, two cups sugar, five eggs, leaving out the whites of two for icing, one small cup of milk, one small teaspoonful of carbonate of soda, two small teaspoonfuls cream of tartar. Rub the butter and sugar together; add the eggs and the milk with the flour, in which the soda has been mixed. Bake for twenty minutes in long flat tins, and when cold cut into small blocks, and ice all over with an icing made as follows : $-\frac{1}{10}$ butter, 1lb. icing sugar, beaten well together. Add the whipped whites of two eggs with three large tablespoonfuls of grated chocolate (or cocoa of a dark colour), essence of vanilla to taste. Cover the blocks all over, and immediately roll them in desiccated cocoanut.³³

Coconut milk

In September 1887 a recipe was published for a Baked Pudding which was the first instance I came across using the term coconut milk.

Baked Pudding - Mix with 3 oz of grated cocoanut, 4 oz of breadcrumbs , 3 oz of sugar, about half a pint of cocoanut or other milk, and two well-beaten eggs; butter a piedish, pour in the mixture, place a piece of butter about the size of a walnut on the top, and bake in a moderate oven.³⁴

The recipe doesn't say how to make coconut milk. Usually it is the result of soaking either grated fresh or desiccated coconut in hot water as in Wicken's recipe. Once soaked there are a couple of ways it can be used. The milk and the grated coconut can both be added or, as in Wicken and the recipe above, the mixture can be strained and only the milk used.

Curries

There were 10 recipes for the savoury use of coconut 1877 – 1927 all of them for curries as per Rawson's comment that opened this article. Of those which used coconut four used desiccated. One recipe was for a general rule about the use of coconut in curries using both fresh and desiccated cocoanut.

When making curries pour 1 gill of water over 2 oz of desiccated or grated coconut, cover and let it stand for 20 minutes, then strain into the curry gravy. Hand grated coconut and chutney with the curry.³⁵

One recipe asked for the strained grated coconut to be pounded to a paste which is added to the curry which already has the curry milk as cooking medium.³⁶ The paste would have acted as a thickener.

Concluding remarks

This survey of the first 50 years of the culinary use of coconut in Australia is a riposte to Mrs. Lance Rawson's comment that 'Few people know how useful cocoa-nuts are in cooking'. What I have presented is an ingredient that was prolifically used albeit overwhelmingly in making cakes, biscuits and puddings.

³³ 'Lamington Cake' Recipes, Western Mail 1 November 1902 p.39

³⁴ 'Baked Pudding' Cocoanuts, Portland Guardian 13 September 1889 p.3

³⁵ 'Uses for Coconut' The Kitchen, The Week 17 August 1923 p.4

³⁶ 'How to Make a Curry' A Few Indian Dishes, Recipes, Western Mail 8 April 1893 p.29

Appendix 1 Australian cookery books reviewed

Forster Rutledge, Mrs., Compiler, The Goulburn Cookery Book, 1899

Green and gold cookery book; containing many good and proved recipes, issued by Combined Congregational and Baptist Churches of South Australia in aid of the King's College Fund 2nd ed. rev and with supplement, 1925

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

Maclurcan, Hannah, Mrs Maclurcan's Cookery Book. A collection of practical recipes specially suited for Australia, George Robertson and Co, Melbourne, 1898

Rawson, Mrs. Lance (Mina) *The Queensland Cookery and Poultry Book*, William Hopkins, Rockhampton, 1890 (Facsimile edition 2023)

Wicken, H.F. *The Kingswood Cookery Book*, George Robertson and Company, Melbourne and Sydney, 1888.

Wylie, Margaret A, Yewers, Mabel E, Reeves, Margaret H, Gray, Doris S, McKinnon, Maria A, *The Golden Wattle Cookery Book*, E. S. Wigg & Son Pty Ltd 1926

Appendix 2 Coconut recipe list with coconut in their titles: first reference in Trove

Cake 1877³⁷ Pudding 1878³⁸ Pie 1883³⁹ Cheese-cake 1887⁴⁰; Cream 1887⁴¹ Gingerbread 1887⁴²: Poundcake 1887⁴³ Macaroons 188744 With Oranges 1889⁴⁵ Pyramid 1889⁴⁶ Bread Pudding 1889⁴⁷ Tart 1889⁴⁸ Loaf Cake 1889⁴⁹ Filling for Cake 1889⁵⁰ Tablets 1890⁵¹ Drops 1890⁵² Ice 1891⁵³ Rings 1892⁵⁴ Balls 1893⁵⁵ Meringue 1893⁵⁶ Biscuits 1898⁵⁷ Flavouring 1906⁵⁸ Toffee 1907⁵⁹ Cones 1907⁶⁰ Sponge 1911⁶¹

³⁷ 'Cocoanut Cake' Domestic Economy. The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser 28 July 1877 p.7

³⁸ 'Cocoanut Pudding' Recipes, *Leader* 20 April 1878 p.5

³⁹ 'Cocoanut Pie' The North East Ensign 2 March 1883 p.2

⁴⁰ 'Cocoanut Recipes', Morning Bulletin 12 September 1887 p.3

⁴¹ 'Cocoanut Recipes', Morning Bulletin 12 September 1887 p.3

^{42 &#}x27;Cocoanut Recipes', Morning Bulletin 12 September 1887 p.3

⁴³ 'Cocoanut Recipes', *Morning Bulletin* 12 September 1887 p.3

^{44 &#}x27;Cocoanut Recipes', Morning Bulletin 12 September 1887 p.3

⁴⁵ 'Cocoanuts', Portland Guardian 13 September 1889 p.3

⁴⁶ 'Cocoanuts', Portland Guardian 13 September 1889 p.3

⁴⁷ 'Cocoanuts', Portland Guardian 13 September 1889 p.3

⁴⁸ 'Cocoanuts', Portland Guardian 13 September 1889 p.3

⁴⁹ 'Loaf Cocoanut Cake', Cooking Recipes, *Macleay Argus* 30 March 1889 p.2

⁵⁰ 'Cocoanut Filling for Cake' The Household, *The Colac Herald* 31 January 1890 p.4

⁵¹ 'Cocoanut Tablets' The Household, Albury Banner and Wodonga Express 31 October 1890 p.

⁵² Rawson, Mrs. Lance (Mina) *The Queensland Cookery and Poultry Book*, William Hopkins, Rockhampton, 1890 p.85

⁵³ 'Cocoanut Ice' Home and Fireside, *Shepparton Advertiser* 2 October 1891 p.53

⁵⁴ 'Cocoanut Rings' The Housekeeper, Glen Innes Examiner and General Advertiser 28 June 1892 p.1

⁵⁵ 'Coconut Balls' Recipes, *The Capricornian* 28 January 1893 p.6

⁵⁶ 'Cocoanut Meringues' Answers, Weekly Times 21 October 1893 p.10

⁵⁷ 'Cocoanut Biscuits' Social Items Western Mail 18 February 1898 p.42

⁵⁸ 'Cocoanut Flavouring' The *Burrowa News* 7 December 1906 p.2

⁵⁹ 'Cocoanut Toffee' Home Notes, The Bundaberg Mail and Barnett Advertiser 14 June 1907 p.1

⁶⁰ 'Cocoanut Cones' Home Cookery, *The Telegraph* 19 October 1907 p.5

⁶¹ 'Cocoanut Sponge' The Housewife, *Globe* 20 September 1911 p.11

Jungles 1912⁶² Bun 191363 Custard 1914⁶⁴ Jumbles 1914⁶⁵ Bars 1915⁶⁶ Rock 1915⁶⁷ Chip Tarts 1915⁶⁸ Caramels 1916⁶⁹ Sandwich 1917⁷⁰ Date Sweets 1918⁷¹ Drop Cakes 1922⁷² Snowballs 1923⁷³ Fingers 192374 Puffs 192375 Pound Cakes 1923⁷⁶ Rice and Cocoanut Pudding 1924⁷⁷ Fruit Cakes 1924⁷⁸ Chocolate Cakes 1924⁷⁹ Cocoa Cake 1925⁸⁰ Almond Balls⁸¹ Raisin Pudding 1925⁸² Lamingtons 1925⁸³ Roughs 1925⁸⁴ Souffle 192685 Apples 1926⁸⁶

- ⁶⁴ "Cocoanut Custard' Useful Recipes, Maryborough and Dunolly Advertiser 8 July 1914 p.4
- ⁶⁵ 'Cocoanut Jumbles' Cookery, The Midlands Advertiser 4 September 1914 p.2

⁷² 'Cocoanut Drop Cakes' Recipes That Help, The World's News 18 November 1922 p.17

⁶² 'Cocoanut Jungles' Recipes, Manilla Express 20 July 1912 p.7

^{63 &#}x27;Cocoanut Bun' Cocoanut "Cookies", The Farmer and Settler 31 October 1913 p.8

⁶⁶ 'Cocoanut Bars' Household Hints, *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser* 13 February 1915 p.2

⁶⁷ 'Cocoanut Rock' Useful Recipes, The Yarrawonga Mercury and Southern Riverina Advertiser 9 April 1915 p.5

⁶⁸ 'Cocoanut Chip Tarts', Housekeeper, Narrandera Argus and Riverina Advertiser 19 November 1915 p.3

⁶⁹ 'Cocoanut Caramels' *Port Melbourne Standard* 18 November 1916 p.2

⁷⁰ 'Cocoanut Sandwich' Useful Recipes, *Guyra Argus* April 12 1917 p.4

⁷¹ 'Date and Cocoanut Sweets' Useful Recipes, *Dungog Chronicle Durham and Gloucester Advertiser* 18 January 1918 p.5

⁷³ 'Cocoanut Snowballs' The Kitchen, *The Week* 17 August 1923 p.4

⁷⁴ 'Cocoanut Fingers' The Kitchen, *The Week* 17 August 1923 p.4

⁷⁵ 'Cocoanut Puffs' Recipe Contest, *Sunday Times* 10 June 1923 p.12

⁷⁶ 'Cocoanut Pound Cakes' Useful Recipes, *The Yalgoo Observer and Murchison Chronicle* 27 September 1923 p.4

⁷⁷ 'Rice and Cocoanut Pudding' For the Home Keeper, *Sunday Times* 9 March 1924 p.14

⁷⁸ 'Cocoanut Fruit Cakes' What's What, *Observer* 1 November 1921 p.51

⁷⁹ 'Chocolate Cocoanut Cakes' Recipe Contest, *Sunday Times* 23 November 1924 p.32

⁸⁰ 'Cocoa and Cocoanut Cake' Cookery, The Propeller 20 March 1925 p.7

⁸¹ 'Almond and Cocoanut Balls' The Daily Mail 22 May 1925 p.13

⁸² 'Raisin Cocoanut Pudding' Useful Recipes, The Mullewa Mail 25 January 1925 p.6

⁸³ 'Lamingtons', Kitchen and Pantry, *The Argus* 15 July 1925 p.10

⁸⁴ 'Cocoanut Roughs' Geelong Advertiser 29 October 1925 p.3

⁸⁵ 'Cocoanut Souffle', Townsville Daily Bulletin 13 March 1926 p.2

⁸⁶ 'Cocoanut Apples', Over the Kitchen Fire, *The Register* 28 September 1926 p.4

Candy 1927⁸⁷ Shortbread 1927⁸⁸

 ⁸⁷ 'Cocoanut Candy' Recipes That Help, The World's News 2 April 1927 p.17
⁸⁸ 'Cocoanut Shortbread' Today's Recipe, Townsville Daily 26 October 1927 p.6