

Have you ever heard of zucchini? Zucchini, Capsicums, Eggplants, Globe Artichokes, Olive Oil and Garlic at the Australian table before 1947.

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Australian Geographic published *The Classic Australian Cookbook* in 2021.¹ In its introduction is said:

Significant change to our eating habits came after WWII when southern European immigrants introduced foods such as zucchinis, capsicums, eggplants, globe artichokes, olive oil and garlic.²

This is simply not correct.

Where to start? Let's begin with the immigrants.

Immigration 1945 - 1953

At the end of WWII Australia was faced with two problems: the Australian fertility rate had fallen below replacement level and Australia needed labour to ensure the continuation of the growth in industry during the war. This the basis of then Immigration Minister was Arthur Calwell's famous call that Australia must 'Populate or Perish'.

The first post-war migrants were in fact the '£10 Poms' from England under the 1945 Assisted Passage Migration Scheme whereby they agreed to live and work in Australia for two years. Of the estimated 1 million who came under the Scheme a quarter returned to Britain after the two years. What their impact was on Australian food is hard to measure as their diet and that of many Australians of the time were the same.

The next migrants were refugees from middle Europe, the result of Calwell's visit there in 1947. He saw the refugees as providing a large immediate workforce. In the six years between 1947 and 1963 170,000 refugees came to Australia. They came from Poland, Yugoslavia, Latvia, Ukraine, Hungary, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia and Estonia. These migrants are entirely missing from the book's introduction. Yet arguably they had more of an influence in the Australian table than Italian migrants of the time.

Between 1946 and 1954 an estimated 17,000 Jews from Europe and Shanghai migrated assisted by Jewish organisations in Australia. These migrants too are entirely missing from the book's introduction.

Between 1941 – 1961 the largest group of migrants were Italian, some 300,000 of them. Where earlier Italian migrants came from the North of Italy, post-war migrants were mostly single men from Southern Italy. Many worked on the Snowy Mountains Scheme, others settled in the Riverina where they resumed their work as orchardists, vegetable growers and vigneron. But to

¹ *The Classic Australian Cookbook* Australian Geographic 2021.

² *Cookbook* Australian Geographic 2021 p. 07

characterise them as bringers of zucchinis, capsicums, eggplants, globe artichokes, olive oil and garlic to the Australian table is wrong.

Foodstuffs

Zucchinis, capsicums, eggplants, globe artichokes, olive oil and garlic were already here and being grown and eaten or in the case of olive oil being used as a cooking medium at the Australian table. Below I give the earliest reference I found for the foodstuff and an early recipe for using it.

Zucchini

The earliest mention is also the earliest recipe from 1937. It happens to be ascribed to Italian cuisine.

An Italian Recipe

Have you ever heard of zucchini? It is a small green squash of Italian origin, the size and shape of a cucumber, and is available- in most city markets. If you can find it, be sure to try it, prepared in accordance with this recipe, which combines it with tomatoes; otherwise use squash.

1 cup chopped peeled onions; 4 tablespoons butter or margarine; 1 cup tomato sauce; 1 teaspoon salt; speck pepper; 1/4 teaspoon granulated sugar; 6 small or 3 medium zucchinis; 4 tablespoons salad or olive oil; grated cheese.

Cook the onions in a saucepan with the butter until tender. Add the tomato sauce, salt, pepper and sugar. While this is simmering, wash the zucchinis carefully and cut in '1/2 inch rings without paring. Fry these rings in the oil until golden brown and tender. Place on a hot platter and pour the tomato sauce over all. Sprinkle with grated cheese and serve. Serves 6. To serve 2 or 3 make half this recipe.³

Capsicums

The earliest mention of capsicums I came across was this from 1874.

The fruit of the capsicum is used in several ways. In making pickles, seasonings, or for Chili vinegar, it is employed both in a green and ripe state, and in the manufacture of Cayenne pepper, which is the hottest of all condiments, it is used only when ripe.⁴

An early recipe I found was this from 1907.

Capsicum Chutney

To every pound of capsicum pulp allow 1lb. sugar, and 1/2 pint of vinegar.

Mode.— Boil the capsicums in a lot of water till tender, then strain and pound up to a pulp, add the sugar and vinegar, and boil till thick.⁵

Eggplants

The earliest reference to eggplants in Australia I found was them being listed the 1836 'Catalogue of Seeds and Plants, indigenous and exotic, cultivated and on sale' from Denmark Hill Nursery in Tasmania.⁶ They were regularly sold for home cultivation over the next decades.

³ An Italian Recipe, Fashions Through The Ages *The Sun News-Pictorial* 26 August 1937 p.37

⁴ The Capsicum *Weekly Times* 24 October 1874 p.7

⁵ Capsicum Chutney *The Daily News* 28 September 1907 p.4

⁶ Catalogue of seeds and plants... *The Hobart Town Courier* (Tasmania), 15 July 1836, p.1

The earliest recipe for eggplant I found was this from 1887.

It is used generally as a flavouring for soups, gravies, &c., but is a most delicious, rich, marrowy vegetable when dressed with gravy, butter, &c. Cut in thin slices, removing all the seeds, they are a delicious accompaniment to a sweetbread, a cutlet, or a tender steak. The slices should be fried brown in fresh butter, and be flavoured with a sliced lemon and cayenne pepper.⁷

Globe artichokes

In 1881 the *Darling Downs Gazette* published an article Cultivation of the Artichoke.⁸ The earliest recipe I found for it was from 1906.

Here is a recipe for an artichoke entree easily prepared and not too expensive: Cut half a dozen thin slices of ham or any other meat fancied. Mix some minced mushrooms, parsley, bread crumbs, salt, and pepper. Make a sandwich of the two meats, with a layer of the mixture between, roll and tie firmly. Brown in stewpan with a little butter. Then stew gently for three hours. While the meat is cooking prepare your artichokes. Cook in salted water until three-quarters done. Take out, drain, and open up the centre of the artichokes well. Remove the string from the savoury rolls of meat, place one in each of the artichokes. Return to the stewpan and cook until the artichokes are quite done.⁹

Olive oil

Olive oil was being imported into the colony as early as 1804. Twenty six gallons of it were auctioned from the Commissary Office in 1804.¹⁰

Sometimes referred to by its source name (Lucca or Florence oil, for example) or simply as 'salad oil', references to olive oil appear in journals, household accounts, newspapers and recipes throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.¹¹

The Stonyfell Olive Company was the first large-scale commercial olive enterprise, established by Sydney Clark and William Mair at Magill in 1873.¹²

The first recipe for the culinary use of it I found was in a 1909 recipe which happens to be attributed to an Italian town.

Milanese Salad Sauce.—Three tablespoonsful of the best olive oil; one tablespoonful of honey or sugar, one of vinegar, salt and pepper to taste, and a very finely chopped shallot, all mixed together in a china basin. To be poured over the salad just before serving.¹³

Garlic

In 1832 garlic was imported into the colony by the chemist W. Eldridge.

⁷ Aubergines of Egg Fruits, *Adelaide Observer* (South Australia), 25 June 1887, p.10

⁸ Cultivation of the Artichoke *Darling Downs Gazette* 29 April 1881 p.1

⁹ A Neglected Vegetable *The Sunday Sun* 21 October 1906 p.10

¹⁰ To be Sold by Auction *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 12 February 1804 p.1

¹¹ Newling, Jacqui, *Eat Your History: stories and recipes from Australian kitchens*, Sydney Living Museums and NewSouth Publishing 2015 p86

¹² Reichel Karen and Burr, Michael *Extra Virgin: An Australian Companion to Olives and Olive Oil* Wakefield Press 1997 p.11

¹³ Milanese Salad Sauce From Boudoir to Kitchen *Table Talk* 2 December 1909 p.20

In 1861 a recipe for Tomato Sauce was the first recipe I found using garlic.

To every six pounds of tomatos (sic) add one pound of onions, and half an ounce of garlic. Boil them until quite soft, and strain through a cullender until you have the skins clear of the tomatos. Then add a pint of vinegar, half an ounce of ginger, two teaspoonfuls of cayenne pepper, quarter-pound of salt, and a few cloves. Boil them until sufficiently thick, and be sure to keep it well stirred. If it is to be preserved put it into small jars, and keep well corked.¹⁴

Summing Up

It is incorrect to credit Italian post-WWII migrants to Australia with introducing zucchinis, capsicums, eggplants, globe artichokes, olive oil and garlic to the Australian table. As shown above these foodstuffs were known and used in recipes from at least the mid 1800's. It is worthy to note that most of the recipes made no claims to be Italian.

¹⁴ Tomato Sauce, The Victorian Farmers Journal and Gardeners Chronicle 23 March 1861 p.22