

Notes on an Australian Cooking Style. The Don Dunstan Cookery Book 1976

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In 1976 Don Dunstan, Premier of South Australia, published *Don Dunstan's Cookbook*.¹ It was a phenomenon. No other Australian of such high degree had published a book, let alone a cookbook, while still in office. More than that it profiled an Australian Cooking Style.

First published in October 1976 a reprint was published in November 1976. A revised second revised edition with additional recipes was published in 1998. 'It has now been out of print for many years but not a week goes by without someone telling me they still use it.'²

The centrepiece of both books is his chapter *Towards an Australian Cooking style* by which he means an Australian cuisine. This article looks at whether the Cookbook demonstrates the cuisine.

I use the 1976 edition as the main source. The 1998 edition did not revise any of the non-recipe text from what I can see.

An Australian Cooking style

Dunstan gives a potted history of Australian cooking.

'The Australian cooking tradition before the end of the Second World War', Duncan wrote, 'was meat and vegetable cookery which was not good, cake-making which was excellent'.³

He credits post World War Two migrants - Baltic people, Italians, Greeks, Hungarians, German, Dutch and Poles for changing Australian food traditions by introducing 'multiculturalism' ... This produced better standards of cooking of meat and vegetables and a greater variety in the resources themselves.'⁴

'In later years, vastly increased travel by Australians in Asia, together with the growth of Asian migration and the influx of Vietnamese refugees, have brought an appreciation of new foods and flavourings. The technique of stir-frying is now understood and used in a large number of Australian homes'.⁵

He hopes for a 'second considerable awakening of food consciousness, and that there will develop an Australian cuisine which is inevitably derivative, but which will take the best from elsewhere; which will use our resources to the full and adapt to Australian kitchens and social conditions the cooking techniques of our Asian neighbours, incorporating them with European traditions which are more familiar to us' ⁶.

¹ Dunstan, Don, *Don Dunstan's Cookbook* Rigby 1976

² Dunstan, Don, *Don Dunstan's Cookbook* Calypso 1998 p.4

³ Dunstan, Don *Tradition and Renewal in Australian Gastronomy*, a paper presented at the Fourth Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 1988 Proceedings p.33

⁴ Dunstan ... *Tradition* 1988 pp.33 – 34

⁵ Dunstan ... *Tradition* 1988 pp.33

⁶ Dunstan ... 1976 p.38

As a model he describes what he calls The Malaysian Synthesis. Drawing on Malay, Chinese, Indian and Arabic cuisines 'They have been able to combine these so that they have made the cooking techniques consistent and provided us with the best example of how to take advantage of the Asian cultures which dominate our region'.⁷

Does his cookbook show what an Australian cuisine would look like ?

Taking the best from elsewhere

The recipes are certainly from a range of cuisines. French – Cassoulet, Blanquette de Veau, Vichyssoise. Italian – Osso Bucco. Slavic – Borshch. Greek – Avgolemono, Moussaka. Spanish – Paella. Hungarian – Gulyas. There is a section on Indian Cookery which includes Lamb with Spinach, and Mhaans Turcarri Sadah (a lamb shoulder stewed in spices). Malaysian – Pineapple Patchry, Lamb Taib, Rendang Daging, Japanese – Ichiban Dasi Soup. He gives recipes for three Kebabs ascribed to the Middle East – Sis Kebabs, Hussein Kebabs, and Mogli Kebabs.

This isn't an unusual practice. Other cookery books and magazines published dishes from different cuisines. *The Australian Women's Weekly Cookbook* published in 1970 had a chapter on International Cookery with recipes from Germany, Hawaii, China, Scandinavia, Italy, India, and Indonesia. Other recipes for these and different cuisines were scattered throughout the book - France and Spain among them.⁸

He nominates Chicken, Bamboo Shoots & Mushrooms and Chicken & Almonds as classic Australian dishes. 'That they are not is remarkable commentary on the Anglo-Saxon failure to assimilate what it has grown to appreciate.'⁹

Use Australian resources to the full

Native foods/ bush tucker was an untapped resource. Dunstan was opposed to using it.

Naturally there will be 'greenies' who regard the introduction of exotic fruits and vegetables as destructive and undesirable in the Australian environment . We should concentrate, they say, on native plants. What a nonsense! I don't intend to offer my guests feasts of the native peach and quandong.¹⁰ Before European settlement there was no agriculture or horticulture and no fauna which could be herded. The Aborigines *had* to be Nomadic.¹¹ No spores were developed in plants, allowing for their cultivation in settled existence. Apart from the macadamia nut, few indigenous Australian plants have contributed anything to the world's food resources. It is true we have some fish which is distinctive. Kangaroo-tail soup is good, and it is reported that wombat tastes like a cross between chicken and pork.¹²

This was said in 1976 when native foods / bush tucker were to all intents and purposes nowhere in the multiculinary Australian table at that time but for quandong, rosellas, fish and occasionally kangaroo.

⁷ Dunstan ... 1976 p.88

⁸ Sinclair, Ellen, *The Australian Women's Weekly Cookbook* Golden Press 1970

⁹ Dunstan ... 1976 p.64

¹⁰ Dunstan ... 1976 p.12

¹¹ This view was challenged by Bruce Pascoe in *Dark Emu* in 2014 and has remained a cause of disagreement since then with most commentators agreeing that Aboriginal peoples were the first agriculturists in Australia.

¹² Dunstan ... 1976 p. 27

When it was repeated again in 1998 however the situation had changed. Chefs had embraced native food. Raymond and Jennice Kersh established *Edna's Table* in the early 1980s. Jean-Paul Bruneteau established *Rowantrees The Australian Restaurant* in 1984. Andrew Fielke established *Red Ochre Grill* in 1992. Vic Cherikoff had published *The Bushfood Handbook* in 1989 and *Uniquely Australian A Wild Food Cookbook* in 1992.

Dunstan acknowledges that fish are an exception to his argument. Australians had embraced indigenous foods through fish and crustaceans from the colonies earliest days..

Dunstan also acknowledges kangaroo, or at least its tail, as a native food. Abbott in 1864 gave 10 recipes for kangaroo. Here also subsequent recipes for kangaroo continued to be given.

Incorporating Asian cooking technique

The main Asian equipment and technique Dunstan discussed was using a wok.

The great Chinese contribution to cooking techniques is the wok, and you should have one ... The principal and distinctive use of the wok is to cook meat, fish, and vegetables quickly over a high heat using the whole area of the wok sides as well as bottom to transmit the heat to the food. The food is chopped or sliced so that it can cook thoroughly quickly ... The stir-fried method enhances the natural flavour of the food and allows it to remain and not over-cooked ... Another constant use for the wok is in deep-frying.¹³

He uses the wok in Scrambled Eggs, Eggs Foo Yung, Minestrone Soup, Crab in Chilli Sauce.

It's interesting that in the same year of the first edition of Dunstan's Cookbook, 1976, Charmaine Solomon published *The Complete Asian Cookbook* in which she also sang the praises of the wok.

Another technique discussed is using an electric rice cooker to make slightly glutinous rice suitable for Chinese, Japanese, and Indian dishes.¹⁴

Discussion

Did Dunstan's Cookbook show what an Australian cuisine could look like? In a small way yes. It certainly came some way to meeting his criteria for it. It took the best from elsewhere. It didn't use the full resources available particularly not using native food in both the 1976 and 1998 editions. It used just two Asian equipment and techniques.¹⁵

It would be a good twenty years later that the fusion of the Australian table and Asian dishes would occur.

In the Foreword to the second edition Dunstan wrote:

' ... since the book played some small part in the history of the development of today's Australian cuisine (it) should remain as a period piece.'¹⁶

That's a fair assessment.

¹³ Dunstan ... 1976 pp. 30 - 31

¹⁴ Dunstan ... 1976 pp. 30 - 31

¹⁵ Dunstan ... 1976 p.38

¹⁶ Dunstan ... 1998 p.4