

To-day, the kitchen has a war job to do. World War 2 food rationing in Australia.

June 2026

Foods were rationed in Australia during World War 2 and for five years after to manage shortages and control civilian consumption.¹ Householders were given Ration Books with coupons. Rationed food could then be obtained according to a number of coupons for each rationed food which were handed over to the retailer.

The rationing schedule was:

Tea: Gazetted 3 July 1942	Abolished July 1950	Qty per adult ½ lb per 5 weeks
Sugar: Gazetted 29 August 1942	Abolished 3 July 1947	Qty per adult 2lb per fortnight
Butter: Gazetted 7 June 1943	Abolished June 1950	Qty per adult 1lb per fortnight
Meat: Gazetted 14 January 1944	Abolished 24 June 1948	Qty per adult 2 ¼ lb per week ²

This article reviews cooking practice and recipes published between 1941 – 1945 in:

- Wartime Cookery - Sarah Dunne, The Herald, Melbourne 1945
- Planning Meat Ration Meals - Commonwealth Rationing Commission and Commonwealth Department of Health 1944
- Recipes in the Australian Women's Weekly, 1941 – 1945

Wartime Cookery³

This was a 96-page booklet authored by Sarah Dunne and published by The Herald, Melbourne in 1945, falling in the middle of the rationing period.

In her Introduction she situates the housewife at the centre of the war life of the family.

Twenty years in journalism have shown me the vital part played in the life of the community by a good housewife. Without praise or glamor (sic) medal or uniform, she holds the morale and the health of the nation in her hands. Lacking her cooperation and loyalty no war can be won and no peace can be permanent. If this little book can solve a few of her wartime cookery problems I shall be well content.

The booklet is in two sections. The first is a short section giving advice on shopping and cooking healthily and without waste. The second gives recipes targeted at the foods being rationed – tea, sugar, butter and meat.

In the first section she links what in other cookery books would be standard advice on the health benefits of good food to the health impacts of war.

What type of food do we – you and I – bring home each day or each week', she asks, 'Is it food that merely satisfies hunger or food that also creates vitality and builds resistance to disease? These questions are of vital importance in war-time when we all have to face emotional and physical strain.'⁴

¹ Rationing of clothing and food during the Second World War, Australian War Memorial

² Rationing of clothing and food during the Second World War, Australian War Memorial

³ Dunne, Sarah, Wartime Cookery, The Herald, Melbourne 1945

⁴ Dunne ... Wartime 1945 p.3

To help select she describes the health benefits of the main 'essential foods' – protein, fats, carbohydrates vitamins.⁵ She describes the 'test for freshness' of ingredients – eggs, fish poultry, meat, vegetables.⁶ 'So many wartime brides have said to me "Oh if only we had proper kitchen scales and accurate measures.' The solution she gives is to use a glass cup for measuring.⁷ Her suggestions for Cooking Without Waste also are the usual – controlling the oven giving temperatures for various cuts of meat, better gravy making, cooking vegetables in covered pans, turning stale bread into bread crumbs and so on.⁸

Never be discouraged', she begins her first chapter of recipes - Using Your Wits, 'because a familiar food is rationed or has temporarily vanished from the civilian market. A clever housewife can adapt her technique to meet any emergency. Cooking should not be stereotyped, unimaginative, dull. It is exciting to plan and save, to invent and camouflage.'⁹ (Note the use of a term used in war). Over the next six chapters Dunne gives recipes for dishes that meet both these criteria.

For dealing with tea rationing, she gives two recipes - a Tea Essence and Tea Without Tea substituting wheat for tea.¹⁰ Among Sugar Substitutes are honey, molasses and golden syrup. In Why Worry About Butter gives a recipe for Butterless Scones.

Rub two level tablespoons of lard into a breakfast cup of self-raising flour. Add a quarter cup of grated well flavored cheese with a good pinch of salt and small pinch of pepper. Put four drops of worcestershire sauce in a cup of milk. Use to blend your mixture to a nice sticky dough with a fork. Don't overmix to make it stodgy. Add an extra teaspoon of milk if necessary (some flours absorb more moisture than others). Well grease some patty tins with clarified dripping. Fill two-thirds full. Bake in a hot oven about 15 minutes. Serve straight away.¹¹

Stretching the Meat Ration she suggests buying The Cheaper Cuts – chuck steak, neck of mutton, calf's head (as a broth), Pig's Cheek.

Pig's cheeks can be salted and boiled and makes an excellent brawn on combination with rabbit and knuckle of veal or shank of mutton.¹²

No Coupons (are) Required for fish, capsicums or a Quaint Vegetable Dish.

For a glorious golden curry to serve four, use one and a half cups (325g) each of knobby potatoes and yellow pumpkin chunks, half a cup (100g) of sliced onion, one sliced carrot and one cup of tomato puree (250ml). Cook onion and carrot in two tablespoons hot fat until tinted. Add potato and pumpkin with four level teaspoons of curry powder. Toss together. Add water to barely cover. Simmer until tender, but not mushy. Thicken with flour to a good curry consistency. Serve by itself or with a green vegetable.¹³

⁵ Dunne ... Wartime 1945 pp. 4,5

⁶ Dunne ... Wartime 1945 pp.6,7

⁷ Dunne ... Wartime 1945 pp.6 - 11

⁸ Dunne ... Wartime 1945 pp.13 - 17

⁹ Dunne ... Wartime 1945 p.18

¹⁰ Dunne ... Wartime 1945 p.19

¹¹ Dunne ... Wartime 1945 p.49

¹² Dunne ... Wartime 1945 p.55

¹³ Dunne ... Wartime 1945 p.70

Puddings Give Glamor (sic), 'and no cook has a more potent ally (another war term) than an attractive pudding'.¹⁴

She turns to the impact of war on children with deeply emotional language. 'Whatever you have to stint, don't let wartime shadows darken children's lives. Let the nursery folk have their parties and fun'¹⁵ with Nice Things for Children like Feather-soft Gingerbread.

Finally, she again looks at the impact of war on a common domestic practice with a cautionary note. 'Before expending your special sugar allowances, think very carefully what type of preserving is most suited to your housekeeping requirements' with Hints on Jams and Preserves.¹⁶

Overall the tone of the book is of a rallying call.

Planning Meat Ration Meals¹⁷

This 32-page booklet was produced in 1944 by the Commonwealth Rationing Commission and Commonwealth Department of Health.

Why ration meat? Introducing the booklet Prime Minister John Curtin said Australia was playing a role as a 'main food depot in the Fight for Democracy' and to ensure that on the vital home front there is a fair share for all'.¹⁸ To demonstrate the point a map of Australia Sharing Meat for Freedom was published showing Australia's supply of meat to Britain's population and forces, and the forces in the Mediterranean area, New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Pacific Islands.¹⁹ Senator Keane, the Minister in charge of Rationing said:

Even if our production reaches the greatest heights we can hope for ... even when man-power and transport bottlenecks unavoidably caused by the war are solved ... and even after allowing for rationing ... Australia will still be short by about a hundred thousand tons of the meat our own allied fighting men and the people for Britain urgently need from us ... If we are to play our part with honour ... then rationing is inescapable.²⁰

The first section of booklet gives two weekly Menus and What (meat) to Buy for A Family of Four with 4 adults and 2 adults and two children under 9, For Two, and For One. For example, the Menu for Tuesday of the First Week for a Family of Four Adults or Two Adults and Two Children under 9 is: French Fried Chops, Mashed Potatoes, Marrow (or Cauliflower), Cabbage, and a Steamed Apple Sponge. What to Buy for 4 Adults is 1 ½ lb (680g) Lamb Forequarter Chops, and for 2 Adults and 2 Children ¾ lb (113g) Lamb Forequarter Chops.²¹ The level of detail here continues throughout the book.

¹⁴ Dunne ... Wartime 1945 p.75

¹⁵ Dunne ... Wartime 1945 p.84

¹⁶ Dunne ... Wartime 1945 p.90

¹⁷ Planning Meat Ration Meals, Commonwealth Rationing Commission and Commonwealth Department of Health 1944

¹⁸ Planning ... 1944 p.2

¹⁹ Planning ... 1944 p.3

²⁰ Planning ... 1944 p.3

²¹ Planning ... 1944 pp. 5-9

The next section is Recipes to “Meet the Ration’ (the writer making a good pun on Meet/Meat). There are 20 recipes ranging across mince, steak, brisket, meat loaf, sausage meat, grilled. Most are firmly from the Australian table.

The recipe for Baked Apples stuffed with Sausage Meat or Minced Meat is

Apples	6 large
Breadcrumbs, soft	½ cup (125g)
Parsley, chopped	1 dessertspoon
Dripping	1 tablespoon
Salt	1 teaspoon
Minced Meat	½ lb (225g)
Onion, chopped	1 medium
Stock or vegetable water	1 cup (250ml)
Pepper	¼ teaspoon
Flour	

Method: Core apples then hollow tops and chopped the apple scooped out. Mix meat, breadcrumbs and chopped apples; place in a baking dish. Heat the dripping in a pan and fry onions and chopped apple. When lightly brown, add the stock and cook for 5 minutes. Pour over the stuffed apples and bake in a moderately hot oven (375F) for ½ - 1 hour, or until apples are tender; add more stock if necessary and thicken slightly with flour before pouring over the apples. Serve with mashed potatoes and cooked green vegetables. Six servings.²²

There are familiar recipes from other cuisines – Baked Spanish Steak, Italian Spaghetti and Meat Sauce and Turkish Pilau albeit with none of the spicing.

Pearl barley or polished wheat	8 ozs (236g)
Onions minced	1 medium
Tomatoes or Puree	½ lb (227g)
Minced, cooked meat	1 ½ cups (500g)
Salt	½ teaspoon
Celery, chopped	2 oz (56g)
Dripping	1 tablespoon

Method: Brown onion and celery in heated dripping, add tomato, and cook slowly until tender. Cook barley in boiling salted water, drain and add to the browned vegetables. Add meat, seasoning and heat thoroughly before serving. Six servings.

There is a Coupon Scale for Meat²³. For example:

Veal: Group A ¾ lb per coupon-Fillet (boned) Cutlets; Group B 1 lb per coupon – Loin (bone in), Loin chops; Group C 1 ½ lb per coupon – Forequarter (boned); Group D 2 lbs per coupon – Knuckle.

Here again the level of detail is notable. The booklet is something like a technical manual which perhaps could be expected given the agencies that produced it.

²² Planning ... 1944 p.12

²³ Planning ... 1944 p.16

There is a list of Non-Couponed Meats mainly offal: tripe, liver, brains, kidneys, hearts, cheeks, heels, tails, hocks.²⁴

Be Adventurous with Cheaper Cuts suggests types of dishes but no recipes: stews, soup, fricassee, grill, roast.²⁵

Table Talk is a conversation between 'Murgatroyd' and a Professor. Murgatroyd asks 'How can a man who is doing hard physical work obtain enough energy to do this work from 2 ¼ lbs of meat a week'. The Professor explains to Murgatroyd that 'meat is not needed for energy ... No, energy is provided by such foods as bread and potatoes.'²⁶ It's a long to and fro conversation again reading like a technical manual.

Start the Day Right gives breakfast recipes.

Fadge
Potatoes, mashed, 2 cups (250g)
Salt ½ teaspoon
Flour

Method: Combine mashed, cooled potatoes, salt and sufficient flour to make a soft dough. Knead in a floured board for 5 minutes. Roll out ¼ inch thick. Cut in wedge-shaped pieces. Cook on a hot plate, turn to brown on both sides or bake in a hot oven (400F) till brown, about 15 - 20 minutes. Serve with gravy or vegetable sauce for breakfast or lunch.²⁷

Lunch Hints are recipes.

Vegetarian Loaf
Dried pea pulp (sieved or minced) 4 cups (500g)
Cheese, grated 2 cups (250g)
Breadcrumbs 2 cups (250g)
Bacon, cooked and chopped ½ cup (50g)
Onion, grated 1 tablesp.
Parsley, chopped 2 tablesp.
Salt 1 teasp.
Pepper ¼ teasp.

Method:- Combine ingredients, using milk and vegetable stock to moisten; place in a greased baking dish and bake in a slow to moderate oven (340F) for half to three-quarter hour.

The cut's the thing has drawings showing the cuts for Beef (inside), Beef outside, Mutton or Lamb, Veal and Pork.²⁸

The final section Meat Ration Points details how G coupons, meat coupons, will operate.

- Two G coupons provide for a week's ration for each person
- Each Ratio Period will be a fortnight
- Thus *four* G coupons will be available in the same period

²⁴ Planning ... 1944 p.17

²⁵ Planning ... 1944 pp. 20,21

²⁶ Planning ... 1944 pp 26,27

²⁷ Planning ... 1944 p.29,30

²⁸ Planning ... 1944 pp.31

- Either a butcher or customer may cut out meat coupons *in the shop*.

Rabbit and chicken were not rationed as neither was an exported meat. However, there were targeted recipes for both.

War Time Recipe Fried Rabbits

Now that rabbits are plentiful mid coupon free a tasty way in which to serve them should appeal to housekeepers. The following recipe was sent by Joan Norris 21o Hume Street, Toowoomba. And wins today's competition.

Soak rabbit in salted water overnight. Next day dry well, disjoint, salt and roll in egg and bread crumbs. Put in pan and fry till golden brown. The pan must be covered with a lid. Rabbit takes about 25 minutes to cook.²⁹

Wartime Recipe Christmas Eve Pie

For her recipe for Christmas Eve pie, Mrs L. Theodore, 149 James Street, Kingsholme, has been awarded today's prize in the war-time competition. Here is the recipe; Take ¼lb rump steak, half-pint stock, one onion, two eggs, giblets from two chickens, pepper, salt, chopped apple. Cut steak in strips and place in piedish, put sliced onion over steak, then chopped apple and giblets. Season all with pepper and salt to taste. Add hard-boiled eggs (chopped), pour in the stock, cover with puff pastry and bake about an hour and a quarter in moderate oven.³⁰

Post war rabbit became associated with times of poverty and dearth and lost its reputation as a sought-after alternative to red meat for generations of Australians.³¹ Chicken didn't.

Recipes published in the Australian Women's Weekly

Recipes for war time dishes were regularly published in newspapers from 1939. For example, in that year the Courier Mail in its Wartime Housekeeping column published a recipe for an Economy Christmas Pudding.³² In 1940 The Telegraph published a reader's recipe for Aberdeen Roast, a 'good family dish for war-time economy'.³³ In 1941 the Courier Mail published a recipe for Homemade Sweets.³⁴

Since its first edition in 1933 The Australian Women's Weekly magazine (the Weekly from here on) has been a significant influencer at the Australian table. Recipes published over the war years between 1941 - 1945 show different approaches to engaging the housewife in the domestic war effort.

²⁹ Fried Rabbits, War Time Recipe, The Telegraph 12 July 1944 p.4

³⁰ Christmas Eve Pie, Wartime Recipe, The Telegraph, 7 December 1944 p.4

³¹ A moveable feast – peddlers, hawkers, and the Sydney rabbitoh, The Cook and the Curator 25 March 2013.

³² Economy Christmas Pudding, War-time Housekeeping, The Courier Mail 29 November 1941 p.7

³³ Aberdeen Roast, A family Dish for a War-time Economy, The Telegraph 20 June 1940 p.10

³⁴ Homemade Sweets, War-time Housekeeping, Courier Mail 6 December 1941 p.7

Its first foray into war time recipes was in 1941 for Patriotic Cakes, 'good money-raising'.

Lemon Seed Cake

Five ounces butter, 4oz. sugar, (115g), tablespoon lemon cheese, ½ teaspoon lemon rind, 3 eggs, 1 tablespoon caraway seeds, ¼ cup milk (50ml), 8oz. plain flour (275g), 2 teaspoons baking powder, pinch of salt.

Cream butter and sugar well, and gradually add well-beaten eggs. Add lemon cheese and lemon rind, and then caraway seeds. Lastly stir in sifted flour, baking powder, and salt alternately with milk. Cook in two greased bar tins in moderate oven (temp. 350 deg. F) for 30 minutes (325 deg. C)

In 1942 it took a unique approach. 'Many a woman these days is juggling with time' it said. 'Maybe she has a job in a munitions factory or an army hospital. But the family chores have to be done all the same. Household routine must be re-organised and menus adjusted to cope with lessened time, evening fatigue, and family health requirements.' It published recipes for Family buffet or Help-yourself meals. For example, Corned Beef Au Gratin.

(Some call it this or that, but everyone likes it. Brisket is cheap, but go easy on beef on the shopping list.) Two cups diced cooked corned beef (1 dessertspoon finely-chopped onion, 1 tablespoon chopped parsley, pinch of mixed spice, 2 cups white sauce (using half meat stock if not too salty and half milk), 2 tablespoons grated cheese, 2 tablespoons breadcrumbs. Combine the beef, onion, parsley, spice, and sauce, and place in greased ovenproof dish. Sprinkle top with breadcrumbs in cheese. Bake until hot and lightly browned in same oven with other dishes of menu.³⁵

In 1943 the Weekly published Living Well on Little. 'Begin at the beginning in planning this war-winning strategy of making the best of little ... Stress the seasonal varieties, the cheaper cuts of meat, the simpler foods if you want to get the most value for your money.'

Liver in Milk Gravy

One pound liver (450g), 2 tablespoons flour, 2 cups of milk (or milk and vegetable stock) (470ml), 1 tablespoon tomato sauce, pepper and salt, bacon fat. Slice liver thinly. Coat with seasoned flour, and brown in the bacon fat. Add milk, cover, and cook very slowly until liver is tender, about 20 minutes. Add the tomato sauce. Serve piping-hot with crisp, curled toast. Garnish with large sprigs of fresh parsley.³⁶

In 1944 the Weekly published Ration-Saving Recipes. 'It's a many-sided job, this business of stretching the food supply. There are two outstanding issues-the use of table left-overs and the duty of food salvage ... There are fat trimmings that must be rendered down for further use and the fat drippings from meat that must be strained into the dripping pot. It's a poor housewife who is ever short of dripping. By the way, dripping, especially from beef, can eke out the butter ration; try dripping toast and seasoned dripping sandwiches'.

Steamed Crumb Betty

One cup soft breadcrumbs (125g), 1 tablespoon sugar, 1 teaspoon grated lemon or orange rind, 1 tablespoon melted butter or margarine or good beef dripping, 1 egg, 1 cup milk (236ml), 1 cup water (236ml), 2 tablespoons marmalade, jam or jelly. Combine

³⁵ Corned Beef Au Gratin. Family buffet or Help-yourself meals, The Australian Women's Weekly 14 November p.27

³⁶ Liver in Milk Gravy, The Australian Women's Weekly 5 June 1943 p.33

breadcrumbs, sugar, orange or lemon rind, water, and milk, and stand for half an hour or longer. Beat in the whipped egg and fat. Pour into four small individual moulds and steam for 30 minutes. Turn out and top with jam or jelly. May be baked instead of steamed. For four.³⁷

Also, in 1944 the Weekly published Meal Planning. 'Planning daily menus is no longer the carefree affair of snatching an idea from the blue and saying "I'll have that and that and that." To-day, the kitchen has a war job to do . . . to keep the family fighting fit ... to conserve foods so that there are more supplies for the Fighting Services and our Allies, who can produce only part of their need.'

Casserole of Liver and Onions

One lamb's fry, 1 cup breadcrumbs, 2 onions, ½ teaspoon mixed herbs, 1 tablespoon vinegar, 1½ cups (350ml) stock or water, ½ teaspoon salt, ¼ teaspoon pepper, 1 tablespoon dripping. Wash liver, slice, brown lightly in fat. Mix liver, sliced onions, and all other ingredients, and place in greased casserole. Cover and if cook in a moderate oven (350 deg. F.) for 45 minutes. Serve hot surrounded by potato halves, baked in their shells. For four to six.³⁸

In 1945 the Weekly published Casserole Economy. 'This budget - stretching, this coupon manoeuvring, challenges the imagination, ingenuity, and culinary skill of every housewife among us. Casseroles easily keep dinner hot for meal-time. They are easily reheated for the latecomer'.

Colonial Sharp Steak with Vegetables

One and a half pounds beef steak (500g) (flank, chuck, round), 1 tablespoon dripping, 1 tablespoon flour, 1 pint water (473ml), 1 teaspoon salt, 1 dessertspoon chopped onion, 1 teaspoon brown sugar, pinch mixed spice, 1 tablespoon vinegar, 1 dessertspoon Worcestershire sauce, 2 cups (250ml) chopped vegetables (carrots, parsnips, turnips, celery), chopped parsley. Trim steak and cut into inch-sized cubes, brown lightly in fat. Stir in flour, and when lightly browned add water. Add salt, onion, sugar, spice, vinegar, and sauce. Pour into casserole and cook in moderate oven (325-350deg. F.) (175C.) for about 1 hour. Add vegetables, cover, and cook a further 30 minutes. Serve piping hot, sprinkled with chopped parsley. For four.³⁹

Readers sent in recipes to the magazine's weekly recipe competition.

Baked Lamb Loaf

Two pounds (1 kg) minced lean lamb from the shoulder or ribs, 2 sheep's kidneys cut up very small, 1 cup (236ml) meat broth (made from the bones), salt and pepper, 1 large tablespoon minced onion, 2 tablespoons very finely chopped parsley, 1 tablespoon chopped mint or green pepper, 1 cup fresh white breadcrumbs (225g). Mix the breadcrumbs in the broth and allow them to stand for at least ½ hour. Then add minced meat and all other ingredients. Mix all well and turn the mixture into a well-greased loaf-tin. Bake in a moderate oven (375 deg. F.) (175 deg. C.) for 1½ hours. Makes a delicious filling for sandwiches for lunches of munitions workers. Spread a little bit of chutney or tomato sauce over the butter, as there is

³⁷ Steamed Crumb Betty, The Australian Women's Weekly 29 January 1944 p.27

³⁸ Casserole of Liver and Onions, The Australian Women's Weekly 22 January 1944 p.22

³⁹ Colonial Sharp Steak with Vegetables, The Australian Women's Weekly 24 March 1945 p.33

not too much butter, then slices of the lamb loaf. Consolation Prize of 2/6 to Miss Daisy Rash.⁴⁰

Appetising Savoury

Combine 1lb. (450) minced meat (balance of joint) with 2 cups (250g) breadcrumbs, 1 cup (236ml) sauce, onion, parsley, herbs, salt. Bake ½hour in tin. Skin brains and soak in salted water. Simmer 10 minutes, drain and dice. Place half diced brains in greased piedish. Cover with rashers of bacon which have soaked 10 minutes in hot water. Cover with balance of brains, then layer of peeled and sliced tomatoes. Sprinkle with chopped onion and cover with breadcrumbs and cheese. Bake in moderate oven 20 minutes. First Prize of £1 to Mrs. T. Car

Closing comments

War time rationing began in Australia in 1942. Guides to the foods rationed with recipes were published by newspapers, the Commonwealth Rationing Commission, and popular magazines. Each took a different style using an established cookery book format, a government publication style, and recipes in popular magazines. These drew on existing home cooking practices and foods. They made clear in the domestic setting the exigencies of war and the part housewives could play.

My thanks to Jacqui Newling who lent me her copy of Wartime Cookery without which this article would not have been possible and for her comments on earlier drafts.

⁴⁰ Baked Lamb Loaf, Rationing Doesn't Daunt Them, The Australian Women's Weekly 24 July 1943 p. 23