Some ambitious people try emu. 50 Years of bush camp meals

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'Cooking in the bush is no longer just damper made from water and flour accompanied by a rabbit or kangaroo stew' writes Cathy Savage in *Australian Bush Cooking*.[1] The book is a primer for camping and the meals associated with that not, as one might think, about domestic cooking in the bush.

The subject of food when camping has a long history and has over that time been more than damper and roo stew.

One of the first references to it I found was this in 1901 which may have been placed by a camper with a vested interest.

> We know of nothing sweeter or more health-giving than sleeping in the bush in fine, clear weather, except, perhaps, eating Arnott's Milk Arrowroot Biscuits, and those, we know, are the greatest health-givers of the Southern Hemisphere, especially for children. Camping out and eating those biscuits! Well if you do both, you will be as hale, strong, and hearty as any man or woman can be. Take my tip for it.[2]

Meals
Camping was often for recreational fishing or birding with the prey being eaten around the fire.

> You can broil a fish in camp without cooking utensils. After cleaning and seasoning it, place it on a flat rock which has been made blistering hot. There will be enough heat in the average stone to cook both sides without again heating. A well-seasoned fish covered with a mud batter made from deep clay and water, if cooked in hot ashes for 20 minutes, will be about as tasty as though it were broiled in an oven. Potatoes, eggs, and other foods also can be baked in clay coverings.[3]

> For those who like variety, nature has filled the bush with many kinds of edible birds. First and best are the wild turkeys, great big birds that may weigh 14 lbs. when ready for the pot ... There are also ducks, parrots, quail, and galahs — all welcome additions In the pot.[4]

There were recipes for stew.

> Cut the meat into small cubes, add vegetable; such as potatoes, carrots, onions, and turnips a hand full of barley, and a rasher or two of bacon. Roll some dough into balls and pop them In. (Some of us call these balls, puff-loomis. Goodness knows why.) Well cover with water and bring to a boil. Allow the stew just to simmer for about an hour. Result-the perfect stew. A couple of small pieces of bread boiled with the stew thicken it up a bit. Don't get worried if the meat is extremely red. The bacon causes this.[5]

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[1] Savage, Cathy in *Australian Bush Cooking* Woodslane Press 2022 p.vi
[2] Camping Out. A Night In The Bush, *Lithgow Mercury* 1901 p.6
[3] Camp Cooking, *The World's News* 6 September 1941 p.24
[4] Terry, Michael, Bush Cooking in Australia, Experiences in Australia, *The Telegraph* 10 June 1927 p, 15
[5] Camp Cooking, *Queensland Times* 6 July 1934 p.10

Bush food apart from kangaroo was eaten.

> Some ambitious people try emu. Which is coarse and fishy, while others do not turn up their nose at certain snakes. Properly stewed, snake may be mistaken for chicken! Sometimes wo find a few emu eggs laid In a hollow In the ground. Although too rich for eating In the regular, way, when mixed with flour and fried as a sort of omelette they are, Indeed, a delicacy.[6]

> There are few good substitutes for vegetables amongst Australian wild plants. The very young fronds of bracken or tree ferns may be boiled like asparagus, and the soft heart near the crown, baked. The ordinary nettle makes very good spinach, and there is a weed known as “fat hen” which can be used in the same way, The nettle, however, is the more reliable. Milk thistle, or “sow thistles”, when young, makes a first-rate spinach. I have known them to be specially cultivated in Melbourne.[7]

Damper was a standard food when camping.

> First on the list comes our "damper," the Australian variety of bread. On to a bag spread on the ground we measure, say, ton large mugfuls of lour, ten teaspoonfuls of cream of tartar, five of baking soda, and three of salt. Having mixed this up careJ fully, we add water till, by patient kneading with knuckles, we have made a large lump of light dough. This is burled In the heap of warm ashes previously prepared and left to bake for 40 minutes. Then we take a shovel and dig out the damper, brush off the ashes, scrape the crust where It may have been burnt, and find inside a lovely aerated scone that is preferred by many to bread.[8]

But damper wasn’t the only flour based food when camping.

> Bush Scones.
> Get an iron plate of some sort; a bit of galvanised iron, beaten flat, would do, if heated red-hot beforehand make it hot over the fire, but not too hot. Mix flour, baking powder, and salt, as for damper. Cut into small pieces, and flatten a little, and bake on the iron plate. When brown underneath, turn over. They should rise at once, and prove a nice change on damper. [9]

Dessert was also possible.

> Tapioca Cream
> Into one of the two small billies put the fruit to be stewed, and in the other put the tapioca cream, close them tightly, and stand side by side in the water in which the beef is boiling, and allow them to cook slowly till tender.[10]

[6] Terry, Michael, Bush Cooking in Australia, Experiences in Australia, *The Telegraph* 10 June 1927 p, 15
[7] Macdonald 1911 pp.50 - 51
[8] Terry, Michael, Bush Cooking in Australia, Experiences in Australia, *The Telegraph* 10 June 1927 p, 15
[9] Bush Scones, Bush Cooking, Western Mail 3 June 1911 p.40
[10] Tapioca Cream, Camp Cooking, Mrs G Vassal Cox, *The Australasian* 12 December p.63

Equipment – The Camp Oven

Views as to what equipment the camper needs for cooking differed.

> With the camper out bent on sport, cooking is simplified as much as possible, and one tin or enamelled plate, a knife, fork, spoon, and pannikin suffice for the two or three courses, and often only one course, served...[11]

> Usually a frypan and one or more billies will serve. I like a frying pan better than a grill because it serves so many purposes. You need it to cook fish as well as flesh, and there are only a few fishes that can successfully boiled.[12]

> A canteen of aluminium cooking utensil is available, consisting of two 10-pint. saucepans and frying-pan which, when not in use, can be used as a lid to either of the saucepans, the whole lot provided with detachable wire handles, weighing 10 lbs.[13]

> For plates, two metal, tins that nest into each other, and can fit together as a dish and cover, are useful. Have tucker bags of different sizes in calico or japara.[14]

The most commonly mentioned equipment was the camp oven.

> This is a thin circular cast-iron pot about 14 Inches in diameter, with a flat bottom and straight, tapering sides. We put the damper in this, stand It on the ashes, put on the lid and pile ashes on top as well. Unhampered by the weight of ashes, as In the open fire, the dough rises much easier.[15]

It was not only for cooking meat, vegetables and damper.

> Some of the writers were writing recently about camp oven cooking. I've not done very much of it, but I find the best way is to put the cake in a tin as you would for a stove and cover the camp oven over with hot ashes after placing it in the hole. I cooked my Christmas cake that way, and it cooked very well. I thought it was the best cake I ever made— a lovely brown and no sign of burn.[16]

An alternative to the camp oven was a ground oven.

> To make the oven you lay down a foundation of large stones, build a good fire on top of it and cover the stones immediately, and keep it burning until the stones have become thoroughly hot. Sweep away the fire and cover the stones immediately with a packing of leaves. Wrap your fish, meat or whatever you want to cook in separate cloths and put them on the leafy bed. Cover with more leaves and throw a couple of bags of whatever kind of or any other convenient covering over the lot, fastening it down with stones or logs. It takes about an hour and a half to cook a meal in that way.[17]

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[11] Camping out, *The Mercury* 9 October 1909 p.11
[12] Macdonald, Donald, *The Bush Boys Book* Sydney Endicott 1911 p. 34
[13] Camping Equipment, *The Sydney Morning Herald* 11 June 1947 p.5
[14] Camping Equipment ... 1947 p.5
[15] Terrey ...1927 p. 15
[16] More About Camp Oven Cooking, *Chronicle* 11 June 1942 p. 7
[17] Macdonald 1911 p.43

Repurposed kerosene tins were useful also.

> Cooking Chops In The Bush
> Put a few pages of a newspaper (rolled up into a ball) in a kerosene tin, placing a griller over the top of the tin. When the paper is set alight, it is kept burning by the grease dropping from the cooking chops. This way only takes half the time to cook and there are no greasy frying-pans, & to clean afterwards.[18]

There was a reference to ant-bed ovens which did not describe them.[19] Studies I have read indicate that clay from termites nest was used as a heat retying element in an earth pit in which food was cooked.

Food Related Camp Rules

> Here are a few simple rules to adopt on your next camping out tour:—
> Clear as you go. Muddle makes more muddle.
> Use soda and hot water for washing up greasy plates and dishes.
> Cook boiled fish slowly. Add a little vinegar to the cooling water.
> A spoonful of vinegar will set a poached egg.
> Salt brings out flavours.
> Dirty saucepans filled with clean water begin to clean themselves.
> Burn all waste food and greasy papers.
> A small camp oven soon pays for itself.
> An empty petrol tin, with ends knocked out. and covered with mosquito net, makes a passable cool chamber.[20]

Sanitation
A part of camping not usually talked about was raised in one article.

> Pay particular attention to sanitary arrangements. Should no public conveniences be available, dig a shallow trench at least 50 yards from the tent and well clear of the nearest running water. Cover all excreta with dry earth. Before breaking camp fill in this latrine and tidy up the camping
> area.[21]

Decamping
That's probably a good place to end this look into fifty years of camp cookery in Australia. It was more than damper and roo ranging from Bush Scones to Tapioca Crean via Emu Eggs. I leave with these salutary words.

> Bad cooking is a crime In camp. And it is doubly a crime because It's entirely unnecessary. Any man who has ambition enough to go into camp and gumption enough to get under canvas when it rains has the wherewithal to master the first principles of camp cooking and avoid the mistakes of the amateur camper. Camp cooking requires no heaven-born genius or sleight of hand; all that is necessary Is a fair amount of brains and pains.[22]

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[18] Cooking Chops In The Bush, *The Albury Banner Wodonga Express* 5 March 1938 p.33
[19] Bush Ovens, *Daily Advertiser* 20 June 1938 p.4
[20] Some Useful Hints, Camp Cooking, *Evening News* 13 January 1928 p.18
[21] Camping Hints, *The St George Call* 11 June 1953 p.9
[22] Cooking In Camp, *The Herald* 30 December 1911 p.5