

Aunty Beryl's Cookbook¹

Here I am, I'm a Gamilaroi woman, eighty-three years of age, and I have written a cookbook. That makes me feel really happy, I'm fulfilling a dream I have always had.²

Aunty Beryl's Cookbook is the latest cookbook from an Aboriginal cook and a welcome addition to them. It's a combination of her life story as a Gamilaroi woman and her community, the story of her decades-long work as a cook, educator, and business woman.

Gingie Mission, Walgett

Aunty Beryl was born and lived at the Gingie Mission about 30 kilometres from Walgett.³ She writes of living off the land:

We'd fish for freshwater cod and yellowbelly, and tie a piece of meat onto a little stick with cotton to catch crayfish. We'd build a fire and cook the crayfish in hot water ... Sometimes Aunty would make johnny cakes and put the cooked fish on them.⁴

We grew up with plenty of love., and we were healthy because we lived off the land and the river.⁵

Cook

Aunty Beryl was the eldest of ten children who began cooking for her family at eight years old. She credits her father, Arthur Walford, and her mother Doreen Peters Walford and her Aunty Rose with teaching her how to cook.

She came to Sydney when she was sixteen and was soon cooking with a friend of hers for Elders in Ashfield. 'That's how I first learned to cook in a commercial kitchen.'⁶

She takes a position as a nanny for a Hungarian couple and cooks for the two children in the family.

Usually the food I prepared for the boys was very simple; they were the basic meals I learned at home, but the food was always fresh. I had no knowledge of recipes then - I cooked what was available.⁷

It was also here she learned to cook Hungarian meals as she still does. She gives her recipe for Kangaroo goulash in the book.⁸

¹ Van-Oploo, Aunty Beryl, Aunty Beryl's Cookbook, Murdoch Books, 2026 p.11

² Aunty Beryl, 2026 p.11

³ Gingie like other missions was established by the Aboriginal Protection Board. The harmful practices of Managers of Missions have come under investigation over the last 20 years

⁴ Aunty Beryl, 2026 p.50

⁵ Aunty Beryl, 2026 p.11

⁶ Aunty Beryl, 2026 p.76

⁷ Aunty Beryl, 2026 p.77

⁸ Aunty Beryl, 2026 p.24

In 1973 she became cook at a pre-school for Aboriginal children in Redfern. While there she began attending night classes in East Sydney TAFE where she studied nutrition and commercial cooking.

I must have had three or four dictionaries at home. Sitting on my dining room table because I had to spell words I was not familiar with and find out their meanings.⁹

While there she trained as an Aboriginal educator. She was awarded a Bachelor of Education from the University of Technology. She began working for TAFE and continued as an educator for 20 years.

While there Reverend Bill Crews of the Exodus Foundation gave her a caravan to use as a kitchen for the homeless.

Educator

In 2006 she was approached by Denny Hall, project manager for the Redfern-Waterloo Authority to develop a hospitality training centre for young Indigenous people as part of the Job Ready program. She established the Yaama Dhiyaan Hospitality Training College.

The food philosophy I brought to the college was all about fresh, healthy meals and about bush foods. We'd develop recipes using Indigenous ingredients and teach simple basic cooking, like making damper.¹⁰

Business woman

In 2012 Aunty Beryl and her nephew Colin Gordon opened the Gardener's Lodge Café at Victoria Park off Broadway in Sydney.

Customers loved our food. We'd use kangaroo, crocodile, warrigal greens, Illawarra plums and lots more. I'd encourage people to try the cakes we made using lemon myrtle and Indigenous fruits. The tourists came by the busload.¹¹

She moved to the National Indigenous Centre of Excellence (NICE) where she continues to run her business in the canteen.

Slow Food

The Slow Food movement began in Italy in 1986 with a motto of 'good, clean, and fair food for all'. Some members dined at Yaama Dhiyaan. Aunty Beryl served them kangaroo done in a bush tomato sauce and chicken cooked with lemon myrtle. She was invited to head up an Indigenous delegation to its annual conference 'Terra Madre'.

I gave a talk to the gathering about our Aboriginal culture and who we are, the food we eat and what our food is all about – we lived off the land and that's why we were so healthy. Our group cooked some bush food ...¹²

⁹ Aunty Beryl, 2026 p.12

¹⁰ Aunty Beryl, 2026 p.148

¹¹ Aunty Beryl, 2026 p.148

¹² Aunty Beryl, 2026 p.172

In 2011 she was invited to the Indigenous Terra Madre.

When I talked with other First Nations people about their food I found that we all had something in common: we all lived off the land; we all ate whatever we grew on the land.¹³

She has been invited to attend every Terra Madre since then.

Healthy food practice

Fresh healthy foods are contrasted with fast foods and processed foods which 'are full of preservatives and other chemicals'.

Many in our community have problems with diabetes and other illnesses, and that's one reason why I teach about the importance of health, good nutrition and looking after yourself.¹⁴

The recipes

There are 65 recipes ranging from Easy Dinners - like Kangaroo Goulash - to Cakes and Desserts – like Chocolate wattleseed butter cake.

Fifty-three of them have bush foods as ingredients. Among them are 53 recipes with bush foods. Among those used are bush tomato, finger limes, lemon myrtle, macadamia, river mint, saltbush, strawberry gum, warrigal greens, wattle seed among them.

Each recipe has notes either about the ingredients or biographical.

Wattleseed, yoghurt and ricotta cake

This cheesecake has equal quantities of cream cheese, yoghurt, and ricotta making it both creamy and rich. That richness is balanced by both the wattleseed and finger lime, which give this cake a nutty and zesty flavour. I've decorated it with edible Geraldton wax flowers.¹⁵

Strawberry gum muffins

The Reconciliation Women's Network is a group of First Nation and non-indigenous women. which started in the mid-90s around a kitchen table. I would often make muffins to bring a plate for everyone to enjoy with a cup of tea. I've been part of the group since the beginning and go to the meetings when I can. It's a way for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to get together and support one another.¹⁶

The book lists Bush food stockists identifying which are Indigenous owned and which aren't.

My niece Priscilla's story

In a generous gesture typical of Aunty Beryl, she asked her niece to write a piece for the cookbook.

¹³ Aunty Beryl, 2026 p.172

¹⁴ Aunty Beryl, 2026 p.186

¹⁵ Aunty Beryl, 2026 p.154

¹⁶ Aunty Beryl, 2026 p.140

Priscilla writes about making dhuwarr (bread). She charts the course of a recipe handed down through the generations

We have always been dhuwarr maramaldanha (breadmakers). My little gunii (mother) taught me to make dhuwarr, and she learned it from her sister, Aunty Beryl, and their aunties. The aunties learned from their mother, Mum's grandmother. I've passed skill on, I've taught my children, and now my daughter Sarah and son James are dhuwarr maramaldanha.¹⁷

She writes of collecting native grains on Country and making dhuwarr of johnnycakes.

Native grains are high in protein and they are of this land, an ancestral foodway.

She worked with Aunty Beryl selecting the recipes in the cookbook.

Aunty Beryl and I have been looking through her recipes to pick the ones that will go in the book, and I love how she will often say, 'I learned that on the riverbank' or 'We cooked that on the riverbank'. It's a reminder of our place, of our Country. It's a reminder that we are freshwater women of the grasslands'.¹⁸

Return to the river

Which is a good place to halt this article. I leave the final words to Aunty Beryl.

The people in that area (Walgett) can't fish there any more, because of the algae in the water and because the river has been blocked up by the dams. The farmers wanted to grow cotton, but Australia hasn't got the water capacity to grow it. That's what has destroyed all our rivers in the country, and it's destroyed a lot of people too. It's so sad when I go home and see it like that. Rivers are meant to be free flowing. Lots of little tadpoles that would grow into frogs used to live in the water. There are still creatures living in it today, and they are surviving as best they can. They're like people - - they survive off the waterways.¹⁹

¹⁷ Aunty Beryl, 2026 p.203

¹⁸ Aunty Beryl, 2026 p.207

¹⁹ Aunty Beryl, 2026 p.50