

Bidgee, fish paste and mutton stew. Food in Fiona Kelly McGregor's novels *Iris* and *The Trap*

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I'm always on the lookout for Australian writers for whom food is an essential part of their narratives. Fiona Kelly McGregor is one such. Two linked novels of theirs - *Iris*¹ covering 1932 – 1937, and *The Trap*² covering 1942 - 1943 - are rich with descriptions of the foodscapes of the characters. Set in the working-class inner Sydney suburbs of Darlinghurst, Surry Hills and Woolloomooloo the novels are peopled by prostitutes (prossies)³, violent criminals carrying guns and razors, nightclub owners/managers, corrupt police, homosexual men (royalties) and lesbians. They are in and out of prison charged with theft, consorting, vagrancy, begging alms, assault, and so on.

Many of the individuals in the novels were actual people. *Iris* is Iris Eileen Mary Webber. McGregor uses multiple sources – fiction, non-fiction, newspaper stories and advertisements, biographies, autobiographies, on-site visits, and museums in country towns to build their foodscape. They describes the process:

I take the dates, places, times and events as they are on the public record and then I fill them out with the food. I put the food on the table. I choose the menu. I think it's organic – I'm just sitting at a table in the room with my characters and after all the research I've done, I know what food they have access to depending on their class. I know what's in their cupboard and I know what the occasion is and what they would make for that. I did take care with the food. Food is not a minor detail because it matters.⁴

In this article I look at the domestic table McGregor creates for their characters, and sources other than the home that also form part of their table – food outlets, tea rooms, night clubs.

The wider social context

When *Iris* first comes to Sydney at Central Station she sees 'All along the gangplank men held signs asking for work'.⁵ She has just left Glen Innes where 'Fellas are humping their blueys⁶ into town everyday looking for work'. It's the middle of the Depression in Australia 1930 – 1933. Home gardens that mitigated the impact of the Depression on others were not available to them. The dole was available, but the prossies and criminals don't apply for it.⁷ At that time, a woman could only access the dole via her husband. Others got the dole but were critical of it.

Down the quay they keep us doleys queuein all day for a couple of measly tokens.⁸

Factory jobs had long queues looking for work.

¹ McGregor, Fiona Kelly, *Iris*, Picador, 2022

² McGregor, Fiona Kelly, *The Trap*, Picador, 2026

³ McGregor uses this term not the term 'sex-worker' because the books are written in the language of the day, much of which is offensive now.

⁴ McGregor interviewed by Paul van Reyk 27 August 2026

⁵ McGregor, 2022 p.8

⁶ Blueys are cover for bed rolls of itinerant individuals.

⁷ McGregor, 2022 p.178

⁸ McGregor, 2022 p.194

I lined up outside that many factories in my first weeks living with Margaret but nuthin ever came of it.⁹

The ending of the Depression was the subject of discussion with a twist.

They reckon the economy's gunna pick up.
Who reckons? said Maybe.
What, said Nellie, more mugs picking up tarts?
The newspapers. They say it's gunna improve. There'll be more work.
Do they count a working girl's work? said Nellie.
Course. The more jobs there are for blokes the more money they'll have for whores.¹⁰

The economy turned and the Depression was over.

In the War years covered by *The Trap* some foodstuffs were rationed. Tea: Gazetted 3 July 1942, Sugar: Gazetted 29 August 1942, Butter: Gazetted 7 June 1943, Meat: Gazetted 14 January 1944. There were people rorting the rations and getting charged for it.¹¹

The war was seen as an excuse for police harassment.

The coppers said they were there to enforce the brownout, but everyone involved in the nightclub business reckoned it was just an excuse for the State to flex power.¹²

But war was good for business.

This bloody war, the bloody brownouts. The city plunged into darkness as soon as the sun set, everybody scurrying home though most back streets in Darlo and Surro had always been unlit and business for many people was pretty much as usual, in fact it was better, it was positively booming, brothels and groggeries buzzing till the early hours.¹³

Carney, a corrupt policeman, thought:

Down here on the street, the real war was as ever with vice and immorality.¹⁴

The home table

Preparing food at home was a gendered activity. Women bought and prepared the food, men consumed it. Their role at the table was to bring beer and home brew/bidgee, and 'angie', cocaine. The food on the table is of necessity simple. But there is variety in it.

Mutton is cheap and on the table often.

After a lunch of mutton with mashed potatoes, chokos and more beer...¹⁵

⁹ McGregor, 2022 p.140

¹⁰ McGregor, 2022 p.165

¹¹ McGregor, 2026 p.63

¹² McGregor, 2026 p.9

¹³ McGregor, 2026 p.45

¹⁴ McGregor, 2026 p.67

¹⁵ McGregor, 2022 p.93

My first night there she made mutton chops with peas and mash.¹⁶

... blue sky, sunshine mutton in our stew.¹⁷

Occasionally stew was less plain. As in this scene where it is cooked by Kate Leigh, another Surry Hills criminal ascending to rule the sly-grog trade.

She chucked a bouquet garni into the stew giving it a kink beforehand to release the flavour then fitted the lid over the pot.¹⁸

Cheaper cuts of lamb and sheep were affordable.

At tea on Friday night, I'd made lamb's fry with mash and peas.¹⁹

Annie made excellent brains and this was her butcher. Ray felt hungry at the thought of their greasy, salty crumbed chewy goodness ...²⁰

Sausages were also eaten.

Ticker unpeeled two sausages and laid them on the grill ... When the sausages began to bubble, Ticker turned them and added steak.²¹

Rabbit was a common meal at these times, sold on the streets by 'rabbitohs'.

Kath brought a bag of lettuce and tomatoes from her family's garden as well as a bottle of home brew. I borrowed a bowl from Lila's to make a salad in. It was a lovely mild afternoon, so I took a packing crate out to the porch and spread newspaper on it then brought out the rabbit stew.²²

Chicken was expensive and only those with a good income could eat it, like SP²³ bookies.

I hear they run a good business ... Roast chook on their table once a month...²⁴

Fish could be had, especially if you lived by the harbour in places like Woolloomooloo, or Glebe. Other seafood was also available:

Ray, who has worked as a professional cook, cooks a meal for his lover. It's a special occasion, hence the whole snapper and vegetables.

Ray took the snapper from the oven, steaming in its paper, and placed it in the centre of the table²⁵.

¹⁶ McGregor, 2022 p.137

¹⁷ McGregor 2022 p.217

¹⁸ McGregor 2022 p.395

¹⁹ McGregor 2022 p.178

²⁰ McGregor, 2026 p.42

²¹ McGregor, 2026 p.7

²² McGregor 2022 p.339

²³ McGregor 2022 p.339. SP – Short Price

²⁴ McGregor 2022 p.84

²⁵ McGregor, 2026 p.319

Sardines luv, caught in the bay this mornin by me old man. Can't get fresher.²⁶

There was a small range of vegetables, but often preserved:

I heated a tin of peas and toasted some bread on the stove, then spread newspaper on a crate and laid out our meal. We sprinkled salt and vinegar on the peas and tucked in.²⁷

Iris would collect from barrows on the way home: tomatoes, chokos and lettuce from the Chinaman who balanced baskets on a pole across his shoulders.^{28, 29}

There were sandwiches: treacle, fish paste, tomato, corned-beef; beetroot; egg and lettuce. Bread was spread with dripping collected from earlier meals.

Smallgoods could be bought, if you had a bit of money:

Ray went up to the Cross to find a delicatessen that was still open. He loved these places with their smallgoods and cheeses, the spread and the caviars, the ziggurats of sweet biscuit in packets printed with Slavic names. He bought a loaf of black bread, olives, capers, cream and a piece of edam.³⁰

There were cakes: sponge cakes, rock cakes, tea cakes, butterfly cakes with little yellow wings in dollops of cream, fruit cake, fruit buns, scones with cream and jam and trifle. They were baked in stoves like the Early Kooka range.³¹

In stark contrast, McGregor has Iris Webber describe 'a Roman feast in the middle of the depression' for New Year, hosted by Tilly Devine who controlled sex work in the area³²:

In the middle of the dining room was a huge table piled with the biggest feast I'd ever seen. A suckling pig lay in the centre complete with an apple in its mouth so help me God. There was a ham too, with a white blanket of fat peeled back from the pink flesh and two chickens, a turkey and sardines, herrings, mushrooms and beans. There were biscuits and pastes, olives and bottled oysters, glace cherries, potato salad and coleslaw. There were fresh oysters too and prawns and lobster and a giant fruit salad in a glass bowl with designs cut into it so you could see all the different fruits in there. At the end of the table was a pavlova and a cake with four layers, next to them Tillie in a mink stole and drinking champagne ... She was filling another glass from a bottle of Moet for the sandy-haired man. I tried the turkey with mustard, then pickles and beans then bottled oysters.³³

²⁶ McGregor, 2022 p.146

²⁷ McGregor, 2022 p.238

²⁸ McGregor, 2026 p.196.

²⁹ 'Much of this produce was grown by Chinese market gardeners. Newling 2015 p.77

³⁰ McGregor, 2026 p.317. Delicatessen had originally meant the goods on sale. By 1930 it meant the premises.

³¹ McGregor, 2022 p.266. The Early Kooka Range of gas stoves was released by Metters in 1917, Australia Food Timeline.

³² At this time, in Darlinghurst, Phil Davies (aka 'Phil "the Jew" Jeffs') also ran a lot of the sex worker establishments in Darlinghurst. But he kept a lower profile, intent on gaining legitimacy as a businessman. McGregor interviewed by Paul van Reyk 27 August 2026

³³ McGregor, 2022 pp. 85-86

Eating out

Dinners at home were supplemented by eating out, but here again what was eaten was affordable. You could get a pot of tea, pies and peas at Sargent's café³⁴; chips at Hole in the Wall; a corned beef sandwich with beetroot and lettuce from the Ham and Beef; curried sausages at Mason's; roast lamb and suet pudding at the Railway Hotel; bacon and eggs and a pot of tea at the Hasty Tasty; Devon sandwiches with tomato sauce, biscuits with fish paste, wilted cucumber at Black Ada's nightclub³⁵; sausages and peas, pies, pasties, cream buns, jam tarts, a custard tart and a pot of tea at Grace Brothers cafeteria. Sargent's was a pie factory in Palmer Street, Darlinghurst, right in the middle of the area where a lot of the crims congregated. Sargent's also had pie shops franchised all over the city, which in appear in other scenes in *Iris*.

We went down to Eizabeth Street and went into the Tea Rooms I'd gone into with Maybe the day I arrived in Sydney. I hardly ever went into Tea Rooms now here I was for the second time today. Even though I'd eaten Hilda's neenish tart as well as my own I ordered Devonshire tea and scones. ... The food calmed me so ordered an apple pie.³⁶

Newspaper mogul Frank Packer 'was a modern man, leading the call for outdoor cafes and beer gardens, for theatres and concert venues where people could eat and drink in a civilised manner'.³⁷

On the street people could buy hot dogs, pluto pups, beef pies, steak and kidney pies, and a frankfurt on a roll.

But dining out was changing.

(At Potts Point) The patchwork of poverty and old money began to fill with Jewish and Eastern European refugees, and more artists ... New restaurants appeared serving goulash, quiche, dishes you'd never heard of.³⁸ ... coffee shops gleaming with nickel and enamel.³⁹

Alcohol, soft drinks, tea

Gin, brandy, rum, cheap wine, claret, hock, shiraz, fortified wine and champagne were drunk. Women drank sherry. Usher's Hotel specialised in cocktails: Moon Mist, Magic Notes, Widow's Kiss.⁴⁰

In pubs, alcohol was gendered. Men drank beer; women drank lemonade, lemon squashes, sherry or shandies. Women were not allowed into public bars; they were quarantined in either the Parlour, or Ladies' Lounges.

³⁴ Sargents were pie makers with a factory in the inner city.

³⁵ McGregor, 2022 p.180. 'Black Ada's was quite blatantly a homosexual meeting place.' Wotherspoon, Gary, *Gay Sydney . A History*, NewSouth 2016 pp. 45-46

³⁶ McGregor, 2022 p.391. Griffith's Tea Rooms was one of the better known ones. '(Tearooms) became very popular with those who did not wish to entertain at home or wanted to treat themselves while on a day out in town'. Newling, Jacqui, *Eat Your History, Stories & Recipes from Australian Kitchens*, Sydney Living Museums, The Mint 2015 p.229

³⁷ McGregor, 2026 p.139

³⁸ McGregor, 2026 p.272

³⁹ McGregor, 2026 p.273

⁴⁰ McGregor, 2026 p.180

Schwob asked for a bottle of Black Label and the waiter brought Nellie and me ginger ales.⁴¹

Pubs had to close at 6p.m. The hour before was called swill time⁴² as men crowded the bar and tried to drink as much as they could before the pub closed. After the Swill 'the streets and alleys were full of men reeling and vomiting'⁴³. At Swill time the prossies got customers.⁴⁴ Police remained drinking after hours in certain pubs where they had leeway.

The barmaid called last drinks and Carney looked over the crowd at her winking. She nodded briefly in reply.⁴⁵

Tea was a universal drink: A pot of tea on its doily, jug of milk; morning fortified by cups of strong black tea; white with two sugars.

American influence

American servicemen on R & R in Sydney 1941 – 1945 were influencing Australian foodways.

Ticker fetched a pot from the stove. He was cooking those beans the Yanks liked. Small, white, pasty, not bad when paired with tomatoes.⁴⁶

They introduced a new food item that would enter the foodscape of Australia.

Carney opened his mouth wide to fit the hamburger and lifted his elbows to prevent juice running into his cuffs. The burger was tender and he wolfed it down.⁴⁷

Summation

It's rare that an Australian author gives an account of the food of their characters. Yet, 'Food,' Fiona Kelly McGregor has said, 'is not a minor detail because it matters'.⁴⁸ In their two linked novels *Iris*⁴⁹ and *The Trap*⁵⁰ they give rich foodscapes for sex workers, petty criminals, night club owners and corrupt police living and working in inner Sydney 1932 - 1943. McGregor doesn't psychologise food, linking a type of food to explain the behaviour of a particular character. Instead, food, often shared, is a necessary part of the books' characters as a whole. They come alive because of it. Informed by multiple sources, McGregor has sat at the tables of the people they write about, and given us a variety of menus completely and vividly.

⁴¹ McGregor, 2022 p.105

⁴² McGregor, 2022 p.19

⁴³ McGregor, 2022 p.270

⁴⁴ McGregor, 2022 p.113

⁴⁵ McGregor, 2026 p.64

⁴⁶ McGregor, 2026 p.8

⁴⁷ McGregor, 2026 p.168

⁴⁸ McGregor interviewed by Paul van Reyk 27 August 2026

⁴⁹ McGregor, Fiona Kelly, *Iris*, Picador, 2022

⁵⁰ McGregor, Fiona Kelly, *The Trap*, Picador, 2026