

Know how to Cook a Plain Dinner. A review of advertisements for employment of men as household cooks 1803 - 1853.

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It has never occurred to me that a household cook in Australian colonial days could have been a man. Well, I do now. I came across an advertisement for one in 1807.

Wanted, as Cook in a genteel family, a Man
tolerably versed in his Business, and whose
character will bear enquiry — Apply to G. Howe.¹

I have an abiding interest in looking at men as cooks and this advertisement piqued that interest.

To my knowledge, while immigrant and convict records list 'cook' as a trade, there are no first-hand accounts of being a male cook in the colonies. What there are is advertisements from householders for a man/male cook which give an idea of how they were viewed and conditions under which they gave service.

I went to Trove, the digital repository for newspapers, magazines and journals managed by the National Library of Australia. My search term was 'cook' and I asked to see the material from the earliest record. This was the earliest advertisement I found in 1803,

A MAN COOK. He must understand
Pastry and Made Dishes, as liberal
Wages will be given.
None need apply but those perfectly conversant with their Business.
A Reference for Sobriety and Honesty will
be required²

I chose to sample 250 advertisements between 1803 – 1853. I was rewarded by the insight into the variety of positions that were wanted which have not been documented before.

Demographics of men wanted by the householder

Specific ages were not given in the advertisement. Thirteen were described as a Young Man. Five were described as Middle Aged. None of the others were described as of a particular age or cohort. Thirteen were married.

The nature of the prospective employers

Sometimes the size of the family the Cook will be serving is given – 'small family', 'large family', 'a family of three',

Sometimes they are described as 'respectable', 'genteel', a 'Gentleman's family', a private family, 'a family where there are only four persons', 'a family where there are no children'.

One said the cook will be cooking for 'Two Single Gentlemen'.

¹ The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser 13 April 1809 p.2

² Wanted, The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser 8 May 1803 p.4

Status of the applicant

The applicant could be a free man or a ticket-of-leave man.

A ticket of leave allowed convicts to work for themselves on condition that they remained in a specified area, reported regularly to local authorities and if at all possible, attend divine worship every Sunday.³

Character of the cook being looked for

Sobriety is a common character wanted in the potential cook. Industriousness and honesty aren't far behind.

A GOOD CLEAN COOK, who thoroughly understands his business in all its branches. Liberal wages, will be given, and testimonials of character will be required for sobriety, industry, and honesty.⁴

Cleanliness was mentioned in a couple of instances. Two prospective employers wanted a man who would not 'rove'.

Prior cooking experience

Most generally, the applicants should 'thoroughly understand their business'.

One wanted a cook with specific experience.

A MAN COOK and a Person who has either lived as Waiter at a Tavern, or as Servant in a Gentleman's Family.⁵

Some wanted a 'professed' cook meaning one who had been apprenticed. Evidence of this may have been one of the documents the cook had to produce.

Dishes to cook

The most common requirement was that the prospective cook should know how to Cook a Plain Dinner – roasts, sauces, vegetables, simple desserts. A few others are looking for a cook who can prepare Made dishes those compromising a dish that bring together several ingredients. There are a few advertisements that stipulate that in addition to general cooking they should be a Pastry cook or Baker the latter baking bread for the family. One wanted a cook who could make good soups.

Other work

They are expected to make themselves 'generally useful'. Some were described as 'House Servant'. Some were expected to Wait at Table. One was to 'keep a small garden in cultivation and make himself useful in other respects'⁶. Another was

³ Museum of History New South Wales

⁴ The Sydney Monitor 1 December 1832 p.1

⁵ Wanted, The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser 31 July 1803

⁶ The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser December 1822 p. 1

WANTED, a careful steady Man Servant, who understands plain Cooking, and the Care of Horses.⁷

Accommodation

None of advertisements mentioned accommodation. Given the nature of the work I assume it was on the premises.

Work outside town

There were advertisement specifying that the position was for a cook prepared to work at a distance from town.

AS COOK and general domestic Servant, with a Family in the country, a Free Man. or with a Ticket of Leave.⁸

Work in a hotel/inn

There were advertisements for cooks to work in hotels and inns.

WANTED, a COOK at the Rose Inn, Penrith, who understands his business, and can give respectable references.⁹

Married couple

Married couples were often asked for with the husband a cook and the wife a laundress and other domestic tasks or the reverse with the wife being the cook and the husband doing other work around the house and the garden or with horses and carriage.

COOK AND WIFE
WANTED to go up the country, a Man and his Wife, the man to cook and the wife to wash and iron. None but a sober couple will be treated with, and they must bring a good character for civility and industry from respectable persons.¹⁰

References

The applicant had to provide references, usually unspecified, but 'undeniable'

WANTED, a COOK, in the Chief Justice's Family, who understands his business, and can give respectable references¹¹.

Other prospective employers wanted a reference from a former employer

WANTED, a Steady and sober MAN, to cook

⁷ The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser 6 May 1815 p.2

⁸ The Hobart Town Courier 123 April 1928 p.2

⁹ The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser 15 September 18

¹⁰ Cook and Wife, The Sydney Monitor 19 February 1831 p.12

¹¹ Wanted a Cook, The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales 8 September 1831 p.1

and wait on a small family. —None need apply but such as can bring a Recommendation from their last place, of their honesty, industry, and cleanliness, as liberal Wages will be given.¹²

Wages

Wages were usually not specified. They were 'liberal, 'fair', 'good', or 'handsome'. They were provisional:

Liberal wages will be given to a Man of this description, whose character will bear the strictest enquiry.¹³

Some advertisements included wages.

A COOK who thoroughly understands his business. Wages at the rate of Sixty-five pounds a year will be given.¹⁴

This was less than was recommended in the Melbourne Labour Market that year: £2 - £3 per week.¹⁵

Reward for good service

Two advertisements included a reward for good service both of which concerned passage to England.

A Single Man as COOK and to wait at Table occasionally.
Liberal Wages will be given, and if his Conduct merits approbation, after serving a certain time, a Passage to England will be procured for him.¹⁶

WANTED,
AN EXPERIENCED MAN OR WOMAN COOK. Good wages will be given, and if his or her Conduct merits Approbation they may afterwards accompany the Family to India or England.
A Free Person will be preferred.¹⁷

Situation wanted

Men looking for employment took out advertisements.

¹² The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser 11 January 1822 p.2

¹³ Hobart Town Gazette and Van Diemen's Land Advertiser 29 April 1825 p.1

¹⁴ Moreton Bay Free Press 18 January 1853 p.2

¹⁵ Melbourne Labour Market, The Argus 19 January p.4

¹⁶ Wanted, The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser 23 October 1803 p.4

¹⁷ The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser 14 August 1803 p.1

A SITUATION as COOK, BUTLER, or general HOUSE-SERVANT, a free man in middle age and steady habits, who can give the most satisfactory references as to character and qualifications, and who is anxious to obtain a good service where he will make himself generally useful and strive to give constant satisfaction.¹⁸

Ship's cook

There were advertisements for cooks on ships.

WANTED, for the Ship Harriet, a CABIN COOK perfectly master of his business, and capable of baking bread, &c.¹⁹

Racism

This 1828 advertisement was the only one I came across to express the racism of that time.

COOK WANTED
Wanted at the Rose and Crown Inn Castle – reagh-street, an active Man, as Cook, who can bring character as to honesty. If *fire proof*, he would meet a preference; no Black need apply.²⁰

Non-Anglo cooks

In contrast to the advertisement above, these two were not shy of stating that they were from non-Anglo individuals.

AS COOK OR BUTLER
IN WANT OF A SITUATION,
A YOUNG MAN OF COLOUR, AS COOK OR Butler in a respectable family; can have undeniable references with respect to character and qualifications from those he formerly resided with. Good wages are required.²¹

IN WANT of a situation as Cook, or Steward on board of ship, or to wait on a single gentleman as servant a native of China. Testimonials of character and abilities, can be produced. No objection to any part of the world.²²

¹⁸ Wanted a Situation, The Australian 23 September 1931 p.1

¹⁹ The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser 18 October 1817 p.4

²⁰ The Monitor 7 February 1828 p.2

²¹ Cook or Butler, The Australian 12 March 1828 p.2

²² Wants a situation, Morning Star and Commercial Advertiser 19 September 1834 p.3

Summary

This has been a review of advertisements for household men cooks in 1805 – 1835. It has described a range of positions advertised, looked at the kinds of household in which they would be employed, descriptions of the work, kinds of evidence the applicants were required to furnish of their capacity to do the work, the behaviour expected of them when hired – sobriety, honesty, industriousness, and cleanliness - and their wages.

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