

Eat History

Eat History:
Food and Drink in Australia and Beyond

Edited by

Sofia Eriksson, Madeleine Hastie and Tom Roberts

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P U B L I S H I N G

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CONTENTS

Chapter One.....	1
History Through the Lens of Food	
Barbara Santich	
Chapter Two	19
Identity, Tradition and Imagination: Rethinking the History	
of ‘Ethnic’ Food in Australia using Community Cookbooks	
Sarah Black	
Chapter Three	42
Food, Fascism and Forward Thinking:	
Australia’s First Italo-Australian Cookbook	
Tania Cammarano	
Chapter Four	76
From Patty Cake to Cup Cake: The Treatment of Little Cakes	
in Australian Cookbooks Since the Late Nineteenth Century	
Beverley Kingston	
Chapter Five	88
Sweet Tea, Drank Universally?	
A Gastronomic Study of the First Fleeters’ Native Tea Alternative	
Jacqueline Newling	
Chapter Six	105
Billy Tea, Damper and Mutton Strips:	
British Travellers’ Encounters with Colonial Foodways in 1870s Australia	
Sofia Eriksson	
Chapter Seven.....	120
Drinking History: Enjoying Wine in Early Colonial New South Wales	
Julie McIntyre and John Germov	
Chapter Eight.....	143
The Green Serpent: Vodka, Marx and Primitive Accumulation	
David Christian	

Chapter Nine.....	163
‘Everything Pertaining to the House’: Cookbooks, Domestic Science and Ideology in Australia Blake Singley	

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORY THROUGH THE LENS OF FOOD

BARBARA SANTICH

“Only some years ago”, wrote historian Peter Scholliers in a review article in 2007, “many food historians felt the need to start their papers and books by apologizing for their subject”. “Today,” he continued, “food historians no longer seek to legitimate their scientific interest”.¹ Like many of today’s food historians, Peter Scholliers started as a general historian, specifically a social historian, who, through his research on Belgium’s standard of living between the wars, came to realise the significance of the role of food in history and the insights and contributions that a focus on food and eating yielded.

Food and shelter were once the exclusive territory of the anthropologist and ethnographer, who investigated, described and compared the ways people and societies live, the ways they protect and sustain themselves. These are basic human needs; how groups of people house and feed themselves are, together with language, fundamental to their culture. Understanding how people sustain and shelter themselves, and understanding the way they communicate, are therefore key to understanding a culture.

But what and how – and why – people eat is incredibly complex, dependent on so many different variables. Unless the people are hunter-gathers with a relatively restricted food supply, the availability of food – its quality, quantity and variety – is influenced by geography and climate; by trade opportunities and the politics of trade; by economics; by law and religion; by technology; by theories of health and diet; and these themselves have further implications and ramifications. Studying how societies and cultures have sustained themselves draws in an incredibly diverse web of influences. Traditionally, history has focused on events of the past; in particular, it has recorded and interpreted significant events of

¹ Peter Scholliers, “Twenty-five Years of Studying *un Phénomène Social Total*,” *Food, Culture and Society*, 10, No. 3 (2007): 450.

the past. Changing the focus from events to the way a society, a civilisation, a culture has sustained itself brings a new perspective to history, a view from the inside, as opposed to the view of the outsider.

What is encompassed by food history, including its subsidiary branch, culinary history? Paradoxically, food history is not exclusively focused on food – not on bread, or apples, or salmon. Food history is not the history of food in isolation. To begin with, food depends on people classifying it as such. Food is dependent on humans for its definition and identity. An apple is just a fruit, in the botanical sense, until we deem it food (and of course, the understanding of what is food varies from culture to culture). So it is important – indeed, essential – to understand and take into account the human agency. And having been categorised as food, as edible, any ‘food’ only fulfils the function of food – that is, to sustain –once it is eaten. Certainly, products we consider foods have a history in a biological and evolutionary sense: a salmon, for example, or an apple. But that is almost extraneous to what we understand as food history.

Food history is as much about people as about food. Indeed, the history of food cannot be studied without reference to the people who defined it, who hunted and gathered it, who collaborated with the environment to produce it and subsequently, in some cases, processed and traded it. Through these practices they gave meaning to food, and food sustained them. The human appetite for food, whether for need or pleasure, is at the base of food history. Perhaps more than any other branch of history, food history focuses on people, societies and cultures. Food history considers the relationships between people and food, the interactions of people and food, the impact of particular kinds of food, or the absence of food in general, on human societies, and the role of food in human societies. As the French scholar Roland Barthes has noted, while ‘food is an immediate reality (necessity or pleasure), ... this does not prevent it from carrying a system of communication’. Indeed, according to Roland Barthes, food is ‘polysemic’, capable of carrying or conveying a diversity of meanings and messages.² The values and attributes societies and cultures give to food and eating can be studied within the context of food history.

Food history can therefore be seen as belonging to the general categories of both social history, which looks at the lives and experiences of ordinary people as well as the classes holding power and control, and of cultural history, the history of cultures. The subtitle of Flandrin and Montanari’s classic food history text *Food* is ‘*A Cultural History from*

² Roland Barthes, “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,” in *Food and Drink in History*, ed. Robert Forster and Orest Ranum (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 168 (166-173).

Antiquity to the Present'.³ Incidentally, the original French title is *Histoire de l'Alimentation*; English lacks an exact counterpart of 'alimentation', which is why we resort to the closest approximation, 'food'. But 'alimentation' in French is much more than just food; to quote *Le Petit Robert*, 'alimentation' is:

Action ou manière d'alimenter, de s'alimenter
Action d'approvisionner (en fournitures nécessaires au fonctionnement)⁴

'Alimentation' therefore is the action or way of nourishing someone, or oneself, or of providing the necessary nourishment. The French term automatically implicates people; so that 'histoire de l'alimentation' coincides exactly with my understanding of food history. Perhaps if I had to suggest an alternative to 'food history' in the English language, I would propose 'gastronomic history', gastronomy referring to the what, why, where, how, when and with whom of consumption.... what might be called modes of consumption.

We will continue to refer to it as 'food history', but remembering its wider implications and that 'food' in this context refers not simply to the material substance but, just as importantly, to the eaters and the eating. Food history is concerned with the role of food in human cultures and societies, the ways food is – or was – produced, prepared, cooked, served and consumed, and the values (religious, celebratory, health) associated with foods. It is also concerned with the origins and migrations of foods, the means of migration and the forms in which the foods migrate, all of which are again dependent on human agency. It is concerned with food supply and the policies which govern the distribution and sharing of foods – and, of course, with failings in these systems and with the consequences on populations of food shortages. And – to get back to events – it is concerned with the consequences of the need or demand of a society for particular foods or for sustenance in general.

Researching food history involves understanding what people ate at some time in the past and why they ate what they did, how they obtained and prepared their food, how their food choices affected their life and the implications and consequences of these choices, the role of food in the society and the exchange of foods. It involves studying tastes – not so much individual food preferences, but the tastes or preferences of social

³ Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari, *Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Penguin, 2000).

⁴ *Le Petit Robert: Dictionnaire Alphabétique & Analogique de la Langue Française* (Paris: Société du Nouveau Littré, 1979).

groups, whether the population of a region or a nation or pan-national groups such as Buddhists. Culinary history, while including much of the same, focuses more on the preparation and cookery and their development and evolution.

Because of its vast scope and multifarious strands, food history is necessarily multidisciplinary; it incorporates and relies on insights from a range of other disciplines/fields of study and research: sociology, anthropology, psychology, agriculture, agricultural economics, international economics, politics, geography, medicine, dietetics, technology, religion, ethics, law, archeology, even physics and chemistry.

In addition, the resources studied by food historians are incredibly diverse. Cookbooks and menus might seem the most obvious, but these are typically supplemented by medical and dietetic texts, gardening and agricultural manuals, dietary regimes, household accounts, market lists and regulations, domestic diaries and travellers' journals, statistics of agricultural production and international trade, contracts for the supply of foods to hospitals and army troops and rural labourers, and many other previously overlooked documents, as well as artefacts and images, a diversity of incredibly rich resources which yield different and deeper insights into the past, which offer a different way of understanding the past. These histories of housing and of architecture have not (yet) attracted the same interest.

As a consequence, there are many different ways of studying food history – and of using food as a vehicle for understanding changes in world history – and the following examples illustrate the role of food in world history. At the same time it should be acknowledged that underlying this role is the need for food or taste for particular foods and that this has its own history, in this first example the history of spice consumption.

In the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Venice was an enormously wealthy and powerful city state and the capital of a far-reaching empire. It exerted a significant influence on the history of the Mediterranean region. It owed its wealth largely to trade, in particular the lucrative spice trade; importers could realise a dividend of about 1000 per cent on cargoes of spices from the eastern Mediterranean, and further profits of 100 per cent as the goods were sold in the markets of Europe.⁵ It might have been a risky business, but the risks were worth taking. For the merchants the spices might have represented potential profit rather than

⁵ Barbara Santich, "Two Languages, Two Cultures, Two Cuisines: A Comparative Study of the Cuisines of Northern and Southern France, Italy and Catalonia in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries" (PhD thesis, Flinders University of South Australia, 1988), 136.

food, but the demand for spices derived from their culinary use, their value as a food. It was this profit potential from these particular foods, rather than the demand for food-as-sustenance, that stimulated trade but the end result was the same. The decline of Venice in the sixteenth century is, in part, a consequence of the shift in international trade as Portugal pioneered a sea route to India and the source of the precious spices.

So the history of spices – how and why Europeans used spices – is central to the history of mediaeval Venice and the Mediterranean as a whole. In a nutritional sense, spices might not qualify as food, but they were certainly deemed to be foods by mediaeval society. And why the demand for spices, for pepper and ginger and cinnamon and nutmeg? For their culinary value, dietetic value, for their prestige value – and because people liked their flavours. Understanding the role of spices in mediaeval society illuminates the history of Venice.

Another example of demand for food stimulating trade and bringing prosperity is cod, specifically salted and dried cod, or bacala, which is the subject of Mark Kurlansky's book, *Cod: A Biography*.⁶ Incidentally, this book is an excellent example of the multidisciplinary nature of food history. Cod brought wealth to Basque ports in the mediaeval era; its importance as a food and hence as a valuable commodity led to maritime exploration and the discovery of the huge stocks of cod off the North American coast and subsequently to the exploration and settlement of Newfoundland. In the sixteenth century the cod fishing industry contributed to the development and prosperity of French Atlantic ports such as La Rochelle. Even in the twentieth century, trade in cod was so valuable that it led to the First and Second 'Cod Wars' in the 1950s and 1970s, disputes between Iceland and the United Kingdom over fishing rights to this lucrative commodity.

While Kurlansky's book is, to a certain extent, about cod itself – the life cycle and characteristics and habitats of the fish – the story has momentum and relevance only because of the importance of cod to people and societies, sustaining them in both a nutritional and economic sense. Kurlansky explains why cod was such an important food – first of all, because of the dominance of the Catholic church in Europe from the tenth century, or earlier, and the Church's requirement that people abstain from meat and other animal foods (eggs, milk) on Fridays, during Lent and on other nominated days (in total, around a third of the year). Fish was therefore an important commodity; and if fresh fish, from the sea or from

⁶ Mark Kurlansky, *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* (New York: Walker Publishing Company, 1997).

rivers and lakes, was not available, dried fish, such as dried or dried-and-salted cod took its place. Why the Church imposed this restriction is yet another story, another separate strand of food history, but what began as an obligation developed into a preference, a taste for salt cod in countries such as Portugal, Spain and Italy, a taste which migrants from these countries took with them to new countries where they settled, such as Brazil – and even Australia.

The widespread taste for cod only enhanced its economic importance. And with no realisation that it might be a finite resource, technological innovations were introduced in order to make it possible to fish larger quantities more cheaply and more easily. In the twentieth century the combination of high-powered ships, dragging nets and freezing eventually led to overfishing, and such a depletion of stocks that other similar species are now salted and dried in the same way and sold as salt cod. It also caused social changes; the collapse of the cod fishery in Newfoundland in the 1990s meant that some 30,000 fishermen were out of work, leading to migration from coastal ports and rural settlements to the larger urban centres, and many inhabitants left the island permanently. This represented a turning point in the history of Newfoundland.⁷

The story of cod, about the role of cod as a food for certain populations and the consequences of the developed taste for the food, is fascinating, and well illustrates the significance of one particular food in world history. Perhaps even more influential in world history than cod is the potato. In Sydney's Hyde Park Barracks the poignant Australian Famine Monument, with its empty table and simple three-legged stool, commemorates a period in Irish history in which a large proportion of the population died and even more fled the country, some to Australia. Between 1841 and 1850, some 23,000 Irish, men and women, arrived in Australia, including over 4000 famine orphans.⁸ Irish migration to Australia at that time was miniscule compared with the flow to North America, but more important than the destination is the combination of circumstances that brought about this mass exodus and the beginnings of an Irish diaspora.⁹ And here, food history, through its insights into the relationship between people and food, can contribute immensely to our understanding of the past.

⁷ Kurlansky, *Cod*, 186.

⁸ Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia: 1788 to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000), 63. Joseph Robins, "The Emigration of Irish Workhouse children to Australia in the 19th Century," in John O'Brien and Pauric Travers, ed. *The Irish Emigrant Experience in Australia* (Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1991), 43.

⁹ O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, 63.

The simple reason for the influx of Irish at this time, and the inspiration for the monument, was the Irish Famine of the late 1840s. But why was there a famine, a scarcity of food? The cause, quite simply, was the potato blight which arrived in 1845 and destroyed more than one-third of that year's harvest, then affected subsequent harvests for the next five or more years, at a time when the Irish had become increasingly reliant on the potato for sustenance. But why this dependency?

The history of the potato itself starts thousands of years ago in Peru and Chile, where the tuber was a staple for the Andean people of South America who developed sophisticated ways of cultivating the plant and processing their harvest. But for present purposes, the history can be said to start when the potato was taken back to Europe at the start of the sixteenth century by the Spanish. By the early seventeenth century the potato had been introduced to Ireland and was reasonably widespread by the middle of the century.¹⁰

One of the fascinating aspects of the history of the potato is why some societies – the Irish and Dutch, for example – happily accepted the potato from a very early time while others – southern French, Italians – were most reluctant to eat it until the end of the eighteenth century. Understanding why the Irish were among the most enthusiastic accepters is fundamental to understanding the impact of the famine.

The answers are partly to be found in climate and geography. The cool, damp climate of Ireland was not suitable for wheat. The most common grain crop was oats, eaten as porridge or as a kind of bread, like an oatcake. Before the introduction of the potato, the dietary staples were oats and dairy products, milk, butter, buttermilk, whey, curds.¹¹ In addition, in the early seventeenth century when the potato made its appearance, a restructuring of political, agricultural and social systems had occurred and many of the agrarian population, in particular the Irish Catholics, became dispossessed. Instead of owning their own land, many rented small plots of land to cultivate or were allocated small plots of land as a form of payment for their work on the farm.

Small plots demanded maximum productivity and potatoes filled the bill; in energy terms potatoes can yield two-to-four times as much as wheat per acre. Even a small plot of land could provide enough potatoes and some to spare for poultry and pigs. One acre of potatoes could feed a family of six for a year, even assuming daily consumption of 5.5 pounds –

¹⁰ Alice D'Arcy, "The Potato in Ireland's Evolving Agrarian Landscape and Agri-Food System," *Irish Geography* 43, no. 2 (2010): 119-134 (121)

¹¹ Bríd Mahon, *Land of Milk and Honey: The Story of Traditional Irish Food and Drink* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1998), 5.

2.5 kg – per person.¹² In addition, potatoes fitted into the existing pattern of rural life and work in Ireland. They relied on spades rather than ploughs, human labour rather than horses or oxen. They could be grown in land that could not produce other crops. Furthermore, they were easy to cook, (boiled, or roasted in the fire – not even a pot was required) and needed little preparation, simply washing. To a certain extent they could remain in the ground until they were needed, then dug.¹³ In this context, potatoes represented an ideal food.

This does not necessarily explain why the Irish, more than any other nationality, adopted the potato so readily. Evidence suggests the Irish actually liked potatoes – unlike other cultures which rejected the new vegetable and which had to be persuaded, reluctantly, to accept them. Even if they were initially distrustful, they developed a taste for potatoes.

Humans are often wary of new foods – the concept of neophobia – and typically only adopt them if they observe these products being eaten by other societies, or if the new product presents some advantage. Why did Australians change from cooking in dripping or butter to cooking in oil, especially olive oil? Because they were persuaded there was a health advantage; it also had status value in terms of cultural capital. Neither the French nor the Italians immediately embraced the potato because they already enjoyed a varied and satisfying diet.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the potato was a new food in many European countries but not all populations embraced it with the same rapidity as the Irish. The explanation for this might lie in the relative monotony and precariousness of the Irish diet, pre-potato, which meant, at least for the poorer classes, that any variation was welcome, especially if food supply and demand were finely balanced. In France and Italy, popular acceptance of the potato did not occur until the eighteenth century. The high productivity of the potato might have also been persuasive in Ireland. Like the third leg of the stool, potatoes provided an additional source of food and a back-up if the oats harvest failed. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu might have described this fondness for potatoes as a ‘taste of necessity’, the Irish learning to like and to prefer this food virtually imposed upon them by necessity.¹⁴

As the potato became more widespread, so the dependence of the Irish on the potato increased. The Irish population had expanded dramatically from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century and while the high-

¹² Larry Zuckerman, *The Potato* (London: Macmillan 1999), 30.

¹³ D’Arcy, 121.

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 372-384.

yielding potato helped feed this increased population it also increased the dependency on a single source of food. It has been estimated that the potato was the sole food for a large proportion of the population in the early nineteenth century. Adult males might eat as much as 12-14 pounds every day. By 1845, according to Donnelly, more than half the population – 4.7 m out of 8.5 m – ‘depended on the potato as the predominant item in their diet’, and of the 4.7 m, 3.3m had a diet almost exclusively of potatoes, with milk or buttermilk and fish as the only other sources of nourishment; although potatoes and milk made a nourishing and relatively balanced diet.¹⁵

Against this background it is now easy to realise the magnitude of the disaster when the potato blight struck and potato crops failed year after year, starting in 1845. Other countries in Europe and Scandinavia were also affected by the blight, but their populations were not so dependent on a single source of food, and they were not affected to the same extent. Potato blight acts quickly – crops start to rot almost within a matter of days – and none of the varieties of that time had any resistance to the disease. The blight was all-destructive: 40% of harvest lost in 1845, 90% lost in 1846, 1848 as bad as 1846.¹⁶

Consequent on malnutrition and starvation came diseases – dysentery, typhus and, in 1848, cholera. The poorest classes were hit first, and hardest. In total the potato blight resulted in the deaths of as many as one million people and the emigration of even more than this, around 2.1 million adults and children between 1845 and 1855.¹⁷ Less than 2% of those who left Ireland in the decade 1841-1850 came to Australia – America was closer, the voyage cost less (five times as much to travel to Australia), and for many there was an already established network of family and friends – and the convict taint of Australia might have acted as a disincentive.¹⁸ Among the 23,000 Irish who came to Australia were 4,175 orphan girls. As the famine worsened, more and more orphaned and deserted children were entering the poorhouse, and the Irish government introduced a scheme to encourage young female orphans, 14-18 years of age, to emigrate to Australia.¹⁹

Although other motivations – the lure of gold, for example – stimulated Irish emigration to Australia, the Great Famine was responsible

¹⁵ James S. Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Thrupp, Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2001), 1.

¹⁶ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 57-59.

¹⁷ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 171-178.

¹⁸ O’Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, 63.

¹⁹ Robins, 35-43.

for a significant flow. The history of the Irish and the potato is therefore interconnected with Australian history in the nineteenth century, and helps explain the popular nineteenth-century portrayal of ‘Mary’ in the Australian kitchen, totally incompetent at any form of cooking.

In these three examples, examining history through the lens of food – spices, salted cod (*bacala*), potatoes – allows a deeper understanding of a series of historical events. To record that millions of Irish emigrated in the mid-nineteenth century is correct but at the same time superficial; to fully understand the phenomenon it is necessary to appreciate the role of the potato in Irish life and culture. Indeed, I suspect that a focus on food might elucidate many of the ‘why’ questions in history.

In addition, each of these examples includes a history of the role of that food in a certain population – the imposition of ‘fast’ days and its impact on fish consumption; the desire for and role of spices in mediaeval Europe; the relationship of the Irish with the potato. Each presents a complex history encompassing geography, politics, economics, technology, but each is a parallel history in its own right, a story concerning people and their eating habits, the evolution of their tastes, and the consequences of these. These particular examples were chosen as a way of showing the centrality of food to general history. Many others could have been selected – such as vanilla, a native of Mexico, which was included in chocolate beverages in Spain in the late sixteenth century as it was in its country of origin. Later it was used to flavour tablets of chocolate in France in the eighteenth century, long before it became a standard flavouring of cakes and pastries and ice creams. Today, world demand for vanilla has stimulated its introduction as a lucrative cash crop in Pacific islands such as Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea, where it indirectly influences the eating habits of these populations (reducing the reliance on subsistence farming) as well as their social and political structures, all of which will be reflected in the subsequent history. Again, there are two intertwined histories, one following the story of vanilla consumption and the other tracing the consequences of this on the stage of world history.

These examples make it clear that human needs and desires for food, and interactions with food not only have a history of their own but also a role in general history. Shifting the focus from events to people, by studying what and how they eat, makes history more immediate, more meaningful. For example, an insufficiency of food can lead to mass migrations, as in Ireland in the mid-eighteenth century; or in southern Italy in the twentieth century. It can also lead to political upheaval, as in France on the eve of the Revolution when an increase in the price of bread, after a

series of poor harvests – and bread was then a staple for the poor, if not to the extent of the potato in Ireland – led to popular uprising and riots.²⁰

And sometimes, movements of people across the globe, from one country to another, can be the consequence of a desire for food – often a particular food – in a totally different country. British demand for sugar escalated in the eighteenth century – imports rose from 10,000 tons in 1700 to 150,000 tons by 1800 – largely a result of increased demand for tea and the change from green to black tea with milk (and sugar).²¹ This in turn led to the establishment of sugar plantations in the British West Indies, and to the inhuman slave trade from West Africa, to provide a cheap source of labour.²² Perhaps it is time to modify the well-worn cliché: sometimes the destiny of nations depends on the way other nations eat.

Whether we consider diet in a general sense, and its role in sustaining a population, or specific foods and the qualities attributed to them in particular societies, it is obvious that food history adds to and enriches our understanding of the past. It offers new paradigms, new perspectives, new avenues of understanding. Studying history through the lens of food reveals that contact between early Europeans in Australia and the indigenous inhabitants was not always hostile. Europeans did not systematically ignore indigenous food resources and, more importantly, their knowledge of what was edible and when was often learned from Aboriginal people.²³ This leads to a new way of studying relationships between indigenous and settler populations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

A focus on food also leads to a deeper understanding of particular societies and their evolution, since food is significant not only in its material aspects but in its symbolic aspects. Studying the meanings attached to eating particular foods and to particular methods of food preparation and distribution, and investigating why certain foods were not eaten, can provide much information about the beliefs, attitudes and values of past societies – for the beliefs, attitudes and values that relate to food also relate to other aspects of the society or culture. In the words of John Super, ‘food is the ideal cultural symbol that allows the historian to

²⁰ William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 159-162, 198-199.

²¹ Roy Moxham, *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation and Empire* (London: Constable, 2003), 31.

²² Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 52-55.

²³ Barbara Santich, *Bold Palates: Australia's Gastronomic Heritage* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2102), 28-70.

uncover hidden levels of meaning in social relationships and arrive at new understandings of the human experience.’²⁴

The significance of food to culture, through its expressive, symbolic qualities, provides yet another role for food history. Not only does it enrich and amplify the past, it can also illuminate the present by contributing to a better understanding of national identity. Indeed, food ‘may indeed be as potent a medium of communicating an idea of nation as words and pictures’.²⁵ As Parasecoli notes, ‘Food is not only central to ethnic consciousness, it is also paramount to the formation of national identities.’²⁶ It is part of the ‘interconnected networks of meaning, practices, concepts and ideals’ that allow us ‘to comprehend our cultural environment and to act within its rules and boundaries’.²⁷

The idea of a national cuisine in Australia has been long discussed and debated, with different dishes being proposed at different times – from kangaroo steamer in the early nineteenth century to salt-and-pepper squid today.²⁸ Although the only indigenous food traditions are those of the First Australians, many others have been introduced by those who, from the end of the eighteenth century, arrived and settled in Australia. More importantly, these imported traditions were adapted, modified and reinvented in a new and different environment. From the earliest days of settlement, but perhaps particularly in the nineteenth century, a gradual transition occurred as the customs, practices and way of living of a predominantly British population were Australianised. This century saw the gradual development of distinctly Australian styles of architecture and building, of a distinctly Australian vocabulary, of an Australian voice in literature and an Australian perspective in art. Referring to Australian architectural tradition, Craig McGregor writes:

And yet, over a period of time, some recognisable Australian idioms have emerged from the chaos. Idioms, plural. In the course of almost two centuries white Australians have constructed a cultural history which is

²⁴ John C. Super, “Food and History,” *Journal of Social History*, 36, no. 1 (2002): 165-178 (165)

²⁵ Anne Murcott, “Food as an Expression of Identity,” In *The Future of the Nation State: Essays on Cultural Pluralism and Political Integration*, eds. Sverker Gustavsson and Leif Lewin (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 63.

²⁶ Fabio Parasecoli, “Introduction – Food: Identity and Diversity,” in *Culinary Cultures of Europe: Identity, Diversity and Dialogue*, ed. Darra Goldstein and Kathrin Merkle (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2005), 11.

²⁷ Parasecoli, 13.

²⁸ Santich, *Bold Palates*, 15-28.

embodied in the different architectural traditions, especially vernacular traditions, which have been handed down to contemporary architects.²⁹

These idioms represent ‘characteristic Australian responses to unique Australian situations’.³⁰ Even if it is too difficult to define and pin down a repertoire of dishes that might meet with general approval as a national cuisine, there is general agreement on a number of gastronomic traditions that are distinctly Australian and that similarly reflect ‘characteristic Australian responses to unique Australian situations’. One of these is the Australian barbecue, continually nominated as a national dish of Australia, despite little justification for this.³¹ Cynically, one could say it was all a result of the advertising industry in the 1980s, the image of the ‘shrimp on the barbie’. Yet by harnessing food history to uncover, untangle and explain the evolution of the barbecue in Australia, its significance and legitimacy as a genuinely Australian tradition are revealed.

Like the story of cod, the beginnings of the barbecue are associated with necessity rather than preference. There were no inns or caf  s in unexplored Australia, and pioneers had to make their own meals as they travelled. These meals might have been based on the resources of the bush – wild ducks or kangaroos – or on foods carried with them, such as chops, cooked over a quickly lit fire. Louisa Meredith, travelling in the early nineteenth century, described one of these improvised meals:

Here I was initiated into the bush art of ‘sticker-up’ cookery, and for the benefit of all who ‘go a-gipsying’ I will expound the mystery. The orthodox material here is of course kangaroo, a piece of which is divided neatly into cutlets two or three inches broad and a third of an inch thick. The next prerequisite is a straight clean stick, about four feet long, sharpened at both ends. On the narrow part of this, for the space of a foot or more, the cutlets are spitted at intervals, and on the end is placed a piece of delicately rosy fat bacon. The strong end of the stick-spit is now stuck fast and erect in the ground, close by the fire, to leeward; care being taken that it does not burn. The bacon on the summit of the spit, speedily softening in the genial blaze, drops a lubricating shower of rich and savoury tears on the leaner kangaroo cutlets below, which forthwith frizzle and steam and sputter with as much ado as if they were illustrious

²⁹ Craig McGregor, “Responding to the Place,” in *Australian Built: A Photographic Exhibition of Recent Australian Architecture*, ed. Michael Griggs and Craig McGregor (North Sydney: Design Arts Board of the Australia Council, 1985), 8.

³⁰ McGregor, 8.

³¹ Santich, *Bold Palates*, 25-26.

Christmas beef grilling in some London chop-house under the gratified nose of the expectant consumer.³²

From the 1830s-1840s, mutton became the meat of choice as the rapidly expanding sheep flocks yielded more meat than the population could cope with; throughout the century mutton chops remained cheap and plentiful. In a textbook illustration of Bourdieu's theory, grilling chops over the coals came to represent preference as much as necessity. Tom Roberts' 1886 painting of *The Artists' Camp at Box Hill*, the site of the artists' first plein-air camp, shows fellow artist Louis Abrahams grilling chops over a fire of gum twigs while Frederick McCubbin savours his pannikin of billy tea.³³ In a letter to Roberts, McCubbin nostalgically recalled the grilled chops and the happy times they'd enjoyed: 'You remember the evenings we sat at the Camp, the last light of the sun on the ti-tree in the creek – the smell of the chop – & gum twigs – the mopoke, a happy time.'³⁴

Nineteenth-century Australians were also keen picnickers. The weather encouraged outdoor activities, and the picnic offered a means of exploring the bush and the waterways. Picnic fare in the nineteenth century automatically meant sandwiches, often supplemented with pies, cakes, tarts and other baked goods. But in the early twentieth century a new picnic variant was introduced. Instead of packing prepared sandwiches, some Australian picnickers lit a fire and grilled their chops, just as Louisa Meredith had done many years earlier. And they called this picnic-with-chops variant a chop picnic.

Then, in the 1920s, the 'barbecue' was introduced – not the barbecue as we know it today, but a large public spectacle around a whole spit-roast ox or sheep. This style of barbecue was borrowed from America, and it was often organised for fund-raising purposes. For example, a whole bullock was roasted at a public event to raise money for the Second Peace Loan in Sydney in 1920. 'Barbecue', at this time, was generally understood as 'a mode of cooking (roasting) an animal whole; generally, out of doors', to quote the definition of the *West Australian* in 1928.³⁵ There were many such barbecues in the next couple of decades, with sheep

³² Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania, During a Residence of Nine Years* (London: John Murray, 1852), 54.

³³ Santich, *Bold Palates*, 116-117.

³⁴ Leigh Astbury, "Memory and Desire: Box Hill 1885-88," in *Australian Impressionism*, ed. Terence Lane (Melbourne: Council of Trustees of the National Gallery of Victoria, 2007), 49-56 (49).

³⁵ Santich, *Bold Palates*, 122.

gradually becoming the carcase of choice – cheaper and easier to cook than a steer – although the meat rationing introduced in 1944 (and in place until 1948) meant that special permission sometimes had to be obtained.

So in the 1930s-1940s there were two parallel strands to the barbecue, both outdoors, both featuring meat – often mutton or lamb – cooked over an open fire. One was small-scale: the chop picnic, while the other was large-scale: the barbecue. And gradually these two streams merged. As the chop picnic became more domesticated, and with growing realisation of practical difficulties associated with feeding the masses spit-roast mutton or beef, the term ‘barbecue’ transferred to what previously had been known as ‘chop picnic’. This is clear from a report of a community event in 1940 in the grounds of Forest Hill Kindergarten Holiday Home, where ‘sausages and chops sizzled over an open fire’. In the report in the social pages this was described as a ‘modified barbecue’.³⁶

The new barbecue still consisted of meat – typically lamb chops – cooked outdoors on a piece of equipment known as a barbecue. The concept of the domestic barbecue had been introduced almost immediately after the war, and as early as 1948 *Australian Home Beautiful* was providing ideas and plans for avid home handymen, with stylish outdoor barbecues gracing its front covers. What differentiated this new barbecue from the chop picnic was that it was firmly anchored to the home. Far removed from the rudimentary bush setting, the barbecue was now domesticated, a permanent installation in the formerly utilitarian space of the backyard which, especially during the war, had largely been given over to food production: fruit trees, a vegetable patch, a chicken run. Although public barbecues began to be installed in nature reserves and picnic areas, they were generally used by family groups and therefore these barbecues were still essentially private.

Initially the domestic barbecue retained some of the primitive nature of the chop picnic – people did not necessarily sit at a table to enjoy the food and often ate with their fingers. This informality and lack of rules surrounding the barbecue made it perfectly adaptable to a variety of situations and functions, from a family lunch on Sunday to an evening reception for visiting royalty. Its chameleon-like character meant that the Australian barbecue could be shaped and moulded to become part of a distinctively Australian culture and to represent Australian identity.

This brief summary of the history of the Australian barbecue not only demonstrates its particular – and respectable – ancestry and lineage, but also establishes its credentials to be regarded as distinctively and

³⁶ “Sausages and Chops in the Moonlight,” *Argus*, April 23, 1940.

characteristically Australian. The history of the barbecue not only traces the evolution of a way of eating, illustrating yet another facet of food history but also provides further evidence of the lessons to be learned from food history and the value of food history. It offers yet another justification for food history, if one were needed. Researching and narrating the history of the barbecue allows us to answer the ‘why’ question; why is the Australian barbecue considered characteristically Australian? and thereby legitimises its claim to demonstrate national identity.

This overview of food history, together with the examples discussed, demonstrates how the study of food history can shed new light on aspects of the past and encourage both new interpretations of history and new ways of making sense of the present. Further, not only does it offer a new avenue to explore cultures and societies, food history also contributes to the understanding of national identity. As Peter Scholliers and Kyri Claflin write, ‘The history of food is a source of knowledge about how and why food, cultures and societies have changed over time. ... Knowledge of past foods, foodways and food crises will help ensure that those decisions [the critical food decisions societies today must make] are wise ones.’³⁷

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³⁷ Peter Scholliers and Kyri W. Claflin, “Introduction: Surveying Global World Historiography,” in *Writing Food History: A Global Perspective*, ed. Peter Scholliers and Kyri W. Claflin (London and New York: Berg, 2012), 1.

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CHAPTER TWO

IDENTITY, TRADITION AND IMAGINATION: RETHINKING THE HISTORY OF ‘ETHNIC’ FOOD IN AUSTRALIA USING COMMUNITY COOKBOOKS

SARAH BLACK

During eight years in Australia I seem to have spent a great deal of my time thinking about food – either trying to recall some of those popular dishes of my Malayan boyhood or copying down recipes my friends have recalled for me.¹

Mr Azhar Ilias Abbas’ reflection on the role of food in his life as a foreigner in 1960s Australia is testimony to the importance of food and cooking in negotiating ethnic aspects of identity. If we take as a starting point Laura Gvion’s contention that food is “a cultural product through which ethnicity is constructed, reproduced, negotiated and realised” and that “cookery books narrate a story about ethnicity”,² it is clear why ethnicity is an important leitmotif of the community cookbook genre. This intriguing variety of cookbook, produced since the 1890s in Australia but longer in the Americas, is based on the compiled recipes and culinary lore of community groups. Community cookbooks are generally used to raise money for community causes.³ Culinary historian Jeffrey Pilcher comments that community cookbooks were quietly seminal in the formation of the modern Mexican creole or “mestizo” national identity, as

¹ *Recipes of the Orient*, comp. Azhar Ilias Abbas. (Adelaide: Rigby, 1962), 7.

² Laura Gvion, “What’s Cooking in America? Cookbooks Narrate Ethnicity: 1850-1990”, *Food, Culture and Society* 12:1 (2009), 56-58.

³ For a useful outline see Elizabeth Driver, “Cookbooks as Primary Sources for Writing History”, *Food, Culture and Society*, 12:3 (2009), 268-271. Also Anne Lieberman Bower, ed, *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997).

they provided “the first genuine forum for a national cuisine”, through which “women began to imagine their own national community in the familiar terms of the kitchen”.⁴ This process of *imagining* change is really the coalface of change itself. An idea – any idea – must germinate in the mind: it must literally be imagined into being.

The idea of ethnicity cuts to the core of who we perceive ourselves and others to be, yet as an analytical category it can be problematic. Philosopher Max Weber saw it as deeply ambiguous and “unsuitable for a really rigorous analysis”, but nonetheless it remains an important way to define some key aspects of identity in a globalised society.⁵ In contemporary use, ethnicity is typically investigated through de-essentialised approaches that allow for “the ambiguities of commitments and identifications” which characterise a multi-ethnic society.⁶

In the modern understanding, one can be ethnically English just as one can be ethnically Vietnamese,⁷ so that, in the words of Thomas Hylland Eriksen, “majorities and dominant peoples are no less ‘ethnic’ than minorities”.⁸ It is in this sense that I use the word. Food reflects identity for everyone, whether mainstream or not. In Hendon Primary School’s 1978 *International Recipe Book*, for example, families were invited to showcase “their” cuisines and their knowledge of other cuisines. Anglo-British-Australian food was included alongside Greek, Italian, German, Polish and other food traditions. Mrs Day offered traditional British recipes such as Welsh Rarebit, Old Fashioned Bread Pudding and Yorkshire Pudding and Mrs Jeffery gave her recipe for Pavlova, just as Mrs Njegovan contributed her recipe for Fashirano (“Yugoslavian Meat Patties”) and Mrs Martucci her Vitello Arrosto in Casseruola.⁹ This approach foregrounds cultural specificity rather than any notion of a cultural hierarchy.

⁴ Pilcher, “Recipes for *Patria*”, in *Recipes for Reading*, ed. Bower, 211-14. See also Jeffrey M Pilcher, *Que Vivan Los Tamales!: Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1999).

⁵ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 393-95.

⁶ Gerd Baumann and Thijl Sunier, *Postmigration Ethnicity: Cohesion, Commitments, Comparison* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1995), 4.

⁷ Robert JC Young, *The Idea of English Ethnicity* (London: Blackwell, 2008), 241.

⁸ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, ed. Eriksen, et al., 2nd ed., *Anthropology, Culture and Society* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 4.

⁹ Groome, *International Recipe Book* (1978), 23, 51-52, 60-62.

Identity is a field of often conflicting imperatives: the desire to be the same versus the desire to be different, for example.¹⁰ Rina Benmayor and Andor Skotnes argue that “in specific situations and moments, people strategically foreground different dimensions of their individual and collective memories to construct who they are and what they are fighting for”.¹¹ Identity is, then, anything but monolithic. However, Elizabeth and Paul Rozin, in discussing the structure of cuisine and its relationship to culture, find remarkable stability over time in the flavour principles of particular nations and ethnic groups.

[T]heir psychological importance is evidenced by the fact that emigrant groups characteristically continue to use their traditional flavourings, in spite of limited availability and high prices.... These flavourings are among the last remnants of the ‘old culture’ to disappear, if they do disappear, among the descendants of immigrants.¹²

Foreignness and ethnicity in Australian history

European settlement of Australia was dominated by the British, most especially the English. In the colonial nineteenth century, the cultural parameters of such a project were not open to negotiation; Anglo-British culture became the norm and standard. Migrants from elsewhere, whether German migrants to the Barossa Valley, Chinese to the gold rushes, the Afghan cameleers or the South Sea Islanders (“Kanakas”) who worked in the sugar plantations, were foreigners in a way that the English, and to a lesser extent the Scots and Irish, were not. The path into the mainstream (and it was only open to some, principally those with white skin) was by unequivocal assimilation.

Marilyn Lake points out that, just as the colonial project required “the construction of a culture and the constitution of new identities”, so did the

¹⁰ Claude Grignon, “Commensality and Social Morphology: An Essay of Typology”, in *Food, Drink and Identity: Cooking, Eating and Drinking in Europe since the Middle Ages*, ed. Scholliers (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001), 23-33. See also Donna R Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 8.

¹¹ Rina Benmayor and Andor Skotnes, “Some Reflections on Migration and Identity”, in *International Yearbook of Oral History: Migration and Identity*, ed. Benmayor and Skotnes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 9.

¹² Elizabeth Rozin and Paul Rozin, “Some Surprisingly Unique Characteristics of Human Food Preferences”, in *Food in Perspective: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Ethnological Food Research, Cardiff, Wales, 1977*, ed. Fenton and Owen (Edinburgh: Donald, 1981), 246.

twentieth-century project of Federation.¹³ This was a matter for much debate, but the prevailing mood was fundamentally xenophobic. The *Immigration Restriction Act* (1901), which became the cornerstone of the White Australia Policy, was a strong statement of intent that the new nation should be essentially mono-cultural. Many in the community supported this aim. Nobody put it more clearly than the New Settlers' League of Australia in the 1926 foreword to their cookbook *Queensland Fruit and How to Use It*: "We aim to keep a whole continent all white and all British".¹⁴

1901 census data immediately complicates this picture, however. "White", as a category, included those from non-British countries including Germany, the Scandinavian nations, British India, the United States and Italy. Germans, the largest of these groups, comprised more than 1% of the total population.¹⁵ The Chinese, by contrast, constituted a mere 0.793% and the Japanese only 0.095%, yet even these tiny percentages were far more perturbing than any number of Europeans. In raw numbers 90,000 people of non-white origin were found to be resident in Australia at the time of Federation, including, parliament noted, "Afghans, Asiatics, Assyrians, Chinese, Cingalese, Hindoos, Japanese, Kanakas, Malays and Manilamen".¹⁶ Their impact on the cultural consciousness, however unwelcome, was undeniable.

The Aboriginal population was barely taken into consideration. The Commonwealth Statistician commented that numbers were "practically negligible", making a rough national estimate of 150,000.¹⁷ Though this was many more than the 90,000 non-white foreigners, it caused far less anxiety within the Anglo-Australian population. Perhaps this was due to the invisibility of most Aboriginal people on missions and in distant

¹³ Marilyn Lake, "On Being a White Man, Australia, Circa 1900", in *Cultural History in Australia*, ed. Teo and White (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2003), 101.

¹⁴ *Queensland Fruit and How to Use It*, (Brisbane: New Settlers League of Australia in conjunction with Committee of Direction of Fruit Marketing, 1926), 16.

¹⁵ GH Knibbs, *Official Yearbook of the Commonwealth of Australia, Containing Authoritative Statistics for the Period 1901-1907 and Corrected Statistics for the Period 1788-1900* (Melbourne: Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1908), 145.

¹⁶ Cited in Lake, 100.

¹⁷ GH Knibbs, *Official Yearbook of the Commonwealth of Australia*, (1908), 44.

corners of the nation and the general perception that they were, anyway, a dying race.¹⁸

The New Settlers' League may have wished for Australia to be "all white and all British" but in reality it never was, never would be and never could be. In the early twentieth century this challenge was met with a racist immigration plan in the form of the White Australia policy, racist policies for control of the Aboriginal population, and a correspondingly narrow ethnic definition of the Self and the Other.

The Second World War and its aftermath comprised the seismic event that ultimately broke this cultural compact. The population in 1947 was 90.2% Australian-born, but the nation was poised for a massive post-war migration surge. Jim Howe defines three phases of post-World War Two immigration policy: "assimilation" in the 1940s and 1950s, "integration" in the 1960s and early 1970s, and the "multicultural" years of the later 1970s to end of the century.¹⁹ Officials initially favoured blue-eyed, blonde-haired Baltic migrants as having better prospects of successful assimilation, but even these conspicuously white Europeans still faced ethnic denigration as "wogs" and "dagos". It was even less easy for the Mediterranean migrants who followed them. However, by the 1960s a new phenomenon was underway. In 1962 the four thousandth Asian student arrived in Australia under the auspices of the Colombo Plan. The gradual acceptance of a wide variety of migrant groups through the 1960s to 1980s eventually produced a fundamental change in community perceptions of the ethnic makeup of the nation. The abolition, in 1973, of the White Australia Policy was acknowledgment that the idea of a mono-cultural Australia was a misbegotten mission. The fabric of the nation was by now indisputably woven of many different strands.

Food, ethnicity and identity in Australian community cookbooks

Throughout Australia's colonial and federal history, underneath the often xenophobic public policy and popular sentiment, food consumption has reflected on going intrigue with the idea of ethnicity and the flavour of "otherness". A survey of community cookbooks, in reflecting the

¹⁸ Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1997).

¹⁹ Jim Howe, *Early Childhood, Family and Society in Australia: A Reassessment* (Katoomba: Social Science Press, 1999), 223-30.

overarching sociocultural trends, reveals much about prevailing social attitudes towards the idea of ethnicity and the tastes which represented it.

Culinarily, British cultural hegemony remained strong at the time of Federation. The broad-brushstroke picture painted at successive Symposiums of Australian Gastronomy recalls a generally monotonous British-Australian cuisine, reliant on the dripping pot (remembered for its penetrating aroma) and comprising overcooked meat, not much fish, boring vegetables and a lot of plain, sweet baked goods – including (on the plus side) some quite elaborate and rather delicious cakes.²⁰ A range of sweet and savoury condiments and preserves represented the main ways of ringing the changes and getting some stronger flavour onto the plate. It is telling that the adjectives typically used in community cookbooks of this era were very modest in scope: “tried”, “tested”, “proven”, “wholesome”, “simple” and “economical”.²¹ This bland, plain food can be seen as the culinary expression of the “white nationalistic settler consciousness” of the era.²² Plainness was a valorised cultural and culinary quality; the *Presbyterian Cookery Book*, from the beginning, staked its claim as providing “good, plain cookery”.²³ Even as late as 1978 a community cookbook intoned the traditional wisdom:

O’ Lady Fair, pray heed my words;
Though charming how you look,
If you would keep your husband’s love,
Become a good plain cook.²⁴

²⁰ Don Dunstan, “Tradition and Renewal in Australian Gastronomy”, in *Food in Festivity: Proceedings of the Fourth Symposium of Australian Gastronomy*, ed. Corones, et al. (Sydney: 1990), 31-33.

²¹ For example, *Cookery Book of Good and Tried Receipts*, 12th ed. (1912). *Coronation Cookery Book*, 1st ed. (1936). *Hobart Cookery Book. Busy Woman’s Home Companion*. Agnes KB Barnes, *The CWA Cookery Book and Household Hints / Compiled by a Committee Led by Mrs Agnes KB Barnes*, 2nd ed. (Perth: Wigg, 1936). *Cookery Book of Tested Recipes / the Echuca Branch of the Country Women’s Association*, (Echuca, VIC: Country Women’s Association, 1939).

²² Ann Curthoys, “Cultural History and the Nation”, in *Cultural History in Australia*, ed. Teo and White, 26. Nadia Postiglione’s work on food in migrant hostels of the 1950s reflects this food culture, in its lowest form, being presented to new arrivals as Australian cookery. “‘It was just horrible’: The food experience of immigrants in 1950s Australia.” *History Australia* 7.1 (June 2010).

²³ *Cookery Book of Good and Tried Receipts*, 3rd ed (1896), preface.

²⁴ *College Cuisine* (Queenscliff, VIC: Queenscliff College, 1978), np.