

‘Barbara Santich—author, historian,  
all-round font of food wisdom.’

John Lethlean, *The Australian*

# Bold. Palates.

AUSTRALIA'S  
GASTRONOMIC  
HERITAGE

# Barbara. Santich.



**Bold Palates**  
**Barbara Santich**

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GASTRONOMIC  
HERITAGE

# **Barbara Santich**



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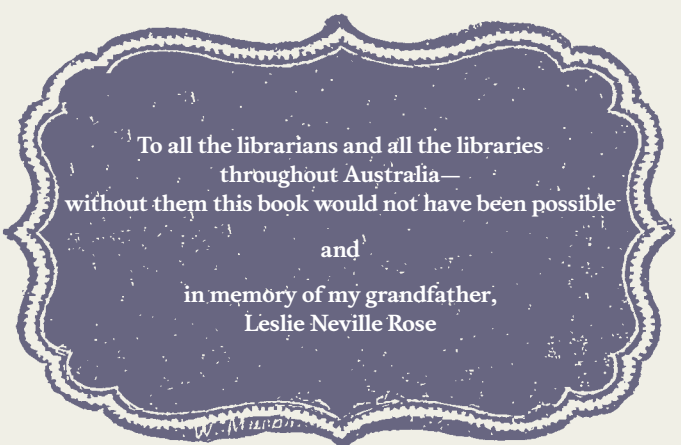
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To all the librarians and all the libraries  
throughout Australia—  
without them this book would not have been possible  
and  
in memory of my grandfather,  
Leslie Neville Rose

W. MURDO

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# Introduction

Australia is an island continent, a very sparsely populated island that is home to just 23 million people of whom less than half a million represent the indigenous population, the original inhabitants of the land. In its homes, over two hundred different languages are spoken and more than one hundred different religions practised. At the time of the last census in 2006 almost a third of the population was born outside Australia, and about half of these came from southern and eastern Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa. In addition, 18 per cent of the total had one or both parents born overseas, predominantly in the United Kingdom, but also in New Zealand, Europe, Mediterranean countries such as Greece and Italy and, increasingly, in Asia—China, Vietnam, India, Malaysia, Hong Kong. Australia is indeed a multicultural nation where 16 per cent of the population speak a language other than English at home, including the 0.3 per cent who keep alive around 130 Aboriginal languages.

Yet in spite of this diversity, contemporary Australia is built on a foundation that is solidly British—English, Scottish, Irish and Welsh, and combinations of all of these. Almost half the population claimed British ancestry in the 2006 census, with a further 37 per cent nominating Australian. Notwithstanding the polyglot—and very welcome—additions in the last half century, the predominant source of Australia's population has been Britain. Not unexpectedly, much of our culture also derives from Britain.

Derives from—but is distinctly different. British traditions were not simply imported and implanted in the Antipodes but rather, almost as soon as they touched these shores, they were adapted to suit a new environment, a different outlook, a more independently-minded people. Just as the Australian-born children of British parents in the early 19th century were noticeably dissimilar to their pale-complexioned cousins—taller, stronger, more robust—so, too, were their social customs, their way of life, and the foods of this colonial generation. Their language featured new idioms such as boiling the billy, new words such as swag and swaggie, billabong, brownie and damper.

Nevertheless, despite their pervasiveness, British traditions were not the only ones to have been drawn upon in the 19th century; America, China and India were also influential. In later years Australians borrowed ideas and ingredients from countless other countries, adopting and modifying a multiplicity of dishes. Greek souvlaki and spag bol—that uniquely Australian variant of the Italian *Tagliatelle al ragù bolognese*—are dishes that have been accepted and Australianised to such an extent that they have even been nominated as our national dish.

This process of adaptation can be seen as a kind of bricolage or ‘making-do’, using whatever resources are available in a new environment in imaginatively different ways. It is evident not only in things to do with food and cooking but also in building and architecture. In 1987, while researching medieval Mediterranean cuisines at Flinders University and pondering questions of food and identity, I allowed myself to be diverted by signs for an architecture exhibition on the other side of the courtyard, beyond the magnificent walnut trees. It was the time of heated debates on the question of an Australian cuisine: Do we have one? Do we need one? Can we develop one, and how?

Perusing the images and reading the catalogue, *Australian Built: Responding to Place*, co-edited by sociologist Craig McGregor, I realised that exactly the same debates were happening among architects. Some, such as Philip Cox, were adamant that there was such a thing as Australian architecture, and that it had existed since the early 19th century. Others, such as Philip Drew, believed that Australia would eventually develop distinctively regional styles of architecture.

Shelter and sustenance: the two fundamental needs of humans—to which I would like to add books, or perhaps more importantly, language and words for communication. All are integral to human culture. And if our choice of shelter, and the way we design and construct it, represent a response to place so, too, is our choice of food and the way we cook and eat it. McGregor’s conclusions make just as much sense if the words *culinary*, *cuisine* and *cooks* are substituted for ‘architecture’ and ‘architects’:

And yet ... 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 embodied in the different *culinary* traditions, especially vernacular traditions, which have been handed down to contemporary cooks and which have had a profound influence on the current generation.

There is no such thing, therefore, as a certifiable ‘Australianess’ about our *cuisine*—and it is questionable whether that is something to pursue at a time when we all quite clearly belong to an international culture—but there are characteristic Australian responses to unique Australian situations. Some of these have been formalised into traditions. A characteristic of cultural traditions in a free-wheeling, fairly sophisticated society such as our own is that artists/designers/cooks can work within them, or choose to ignore them, or try for cultural crossover.

These idioms—the forms of culinary expression particular to Australia—form the subject of this book. It tells the stories of their invention and evolution and discusses their place in the totality of Australian culture. It identifies ‘characteristic Australian responses to unique Australian situations’—and in the gastronomic realm these are myriad. From the earliest days, Australian cooks improvised and substituted, invented and innovated. Sometimes from necessity, sometimes by serendipity and occasionally by using unorthodox methods, they adopted and domesticated indigenous ingredients and transformed foods and recipes from other countries, along the way establishing the basis of an Australian tradition.

As the chapter on domestic baking shows, Australian home cooks were not constrained by the weight of imported tradition but rather, as if it no longer held the same authority, they varied, adapted, substituted, took part of one recipe and mixed it with another, and created anew. They took the pumpkins that flourished in the Australian environment and transformed them into jars of jam and American-inspired pumpkin pies and tarts. While acknowledging tradition they felt no obligation to perpetuate it in a precise and particular form. They were

ingenious, innovative, and adept at making do, understanding that in a new and different environment anything was possible.

The same free-spirited urge to reshape and reinvent was shared by farmers and gardeners who bred new varieties of fruits and vegetables—or who, like ‘Granny’ Smith, discovered them by chance. In 1868 she recognised the value of a neglected seedling growing near the creek on her farm in the present-day Sydney suburb of Denistone East, and began cultivating it. By 1892 Granny Smith apples were being exported to London, and it is now one of the most widely grown apple varieties worldwide. And the same motivation also inspired the members of the 19th century Acclimatisation societies who, with bright-eyed optimism and irrepressible determination, introduced Indian mangoes to Queensland and Australian wonga wonga pigeons to England.

These attitudes, these stories, are all part of our gastronomic heritage. They underpin what I would like to call Australian food culture, a term that encompasses not only what we eat and why, but also how we eat and cook, our beliefs and values concerning food, cooking and

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eating practices. As part of the shared ‘values, traditions, attitudes and expressions’ which, in the Australian Government’s discussion paper, ‘Towards a national cultural policy’, represent the foundations of culture, our food culture contributes to our identity. Believing that Christmas isn’t Christmas without mangoes and cherries in the fruit bowl is as much a part of our food culture as a meat-pie-with-sauce at the footie, the smell of sausages and fried onions from the Main Street sausage sizzle on a Saturday morning, or the entrancing kaleidoscope of fairy bread—brightly coloured hundreds and thousands on buttered bread—at a child’s birthday party.

Sharing ‘values, traditions, attitudes and expressions’ implies talking about them and writing about them, contributing to both their continuity and their evolution. In the public sphere debate and discussion take place in the media, on television screens, in newspapers and via blogs, and at a more personal level in supermarket queues, in university common rooms, and around the dinner table. And it’s not just about last night’s Masterchef challenge or the ratings in the latest Good Food Guide, or the merits of French versus Tasmanian truffles—it also concerns everyday eating and the foods that have personal significance. I remember listening with fascination to a deep and serious dialogue on the respective merits of meat pies from bakeries in the old coal-mining towns of Fassifern, Teralba and Cockle Creek, as my train-replacement bus slowly meandered towards Newcastle.

Fortuitously, past generations of Australians have also discussed and documented their ‘values, traditions, attitudes and expressions’ concerning what and how they cooked and ate, and their writings are at the heart of this book. Addressing Australia’s gastronomic heritage, it tells the stories of many of the foods and dishes that we have made our own, not only at our tables but also by incorporating them into our art and literature. It identifies a long tradition of adopting the ingredients and cooking practices of other cultures and altering or modifying them, in the process Australianising them. And most importantly, it honours the people who gathered the ingredients, transformed them, cooked them and ate them and talked about them, in the process laying the foundations of a distinctive food culture.

In many ways, the theme of this book is epitomised by the prosaic pumpkin, one of many fruits and vegetables—including passionfruit and chokoes—that have become so naturalised here that they are seen as quintessentially Australian. A native of America, imported via England, the pumpkin discovered in Australia a most felicitous environment and thrived, particularly in northern New South Wales and Queensland. It was shared with the original inhabitants of this land; according to Dr Peter Cunningham in the early 1820s, it was the favourite fruit of Aboriginal children. Selections from the early plants gave rise to new and distinctly Australian varieties that were eventually exported to other countries. Its place in Australian food culture was well and truly established when pumpkin scones, first recorded in *Australian Home Cookery* (1922), became a feature of the cookery

R.W. STUART,  
*Cooking pumpkin in  
an earth oven*, 1884.  
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sections of Queensland rural shows two years later. By the 1930s the Australianisation of pumpkin was complete, evident in a unique and original repertoire of shared recipes.

Pumpkin seeds arrived with the First Fleet in 1788. Five years later Watkin Tench could report that ‘Vines of every sort seem to flourish. Melons, cucumbers and pumpkins run with unbounded luxuriance.’ After so many farming disappointments, pumpkin was one of the success stories of the first European settlement, very early proving its compatibility with Australian conditions. In Hobart in March 1806, Robert Knopwood bought ‘a large pumkion for which I paid 9 shillings’ and the following spring planted seeds in his own garden.

Although pumpkin was a common crop in Britain from the mid-17th century, it was mainly fed to cattle. In its American homeland it was used for both cattle and humans, especially in the form of pumpkin pie. In Australia, however, whether because cattle had year-round access to good pastures, or because pumpkins could survive where other vegetable crops abandoned all hope, it quickly became a common addition to the Australian domestic table. Out of necessity and curiosity, early Australians ate and enjoyed pumpkin in a variety of ways. Dr Peter Cunningham reported that ‘the pumpkin makes an excellent substitute for the apple in a pie, when soured and sweetened to a proper temper by lemons and sugar’. The resourceful Mrs Lance Rawson, author of several cookbooks in the late 19th century, contributed her personal innovations—fritters of cooked sliced pumpkin, a cheese-topped pumpkin gratin and boiled young pumpkin vine shoots served as a green vegetable.

Seeds from other countries contributed to the progress of the pumpkin in 19th century Australia; American varieties such as Turk’s Cap and Gramma pumpkins—favoured for pies—were recommended by gardening guides. Nevertheless, the pumpkin’s propensity for

A Pumpkin was some short time since cut at the Hawkesbury which measured 35 inches in length. Its species is a native of Rio de Janeiro, sometimes yields abundantly, but generally tender and difficult to rear.

*Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser, 14 August 1803*

In time should he thrive, and the station prove good,  
A cottage will rise where the bark gunya stood; . . .  
And the pumpkin and melon, the garden will share  
With the orange, banana, peach, apple, and pear;

From ‘The Bushman’s Ride’,  
*Sydney Morning Herald, 29 July 1850*



### **PUMPKINS FOR TABLE OR FIELD.**

There is no country in the world where Pumpkins are so extensively used as Australia—while there are sorts of Pumpkins grown in other parts, they DO NOT APPROACH THE AUSTRALIAN TYPES for UTILITY or FLAVOUR—good old Pumpkins. Pumpkins always find a good sale on the Sydney market, and they are also excellent for feeding Pigs or other Stock.

#### **CHOICE PUMPKIN SEED.**

ANDERSON'S CROWN Pumpkin—Small, but good.

ANDERSON'S DUTTON Pumpkin.—Very hard.

IRONBARK Pumpkin.—First-class sort.

TRIAMBLE—A very popular variety.

TURK'S CAP—Good keeper.

GRAMMA—Excellent Pie Pumpkin.

All the above in 6d and 3d packets. Also by the pound.

#### **FIELD PUMPKIN.**

ANDERSON'S MAMMOTH.—A first-class, large-growing, oblong shaped variety.

5/6 per Pound, post free.

ANDERSON AND CO., LTD.,

Seedsmen, 399 George-street, Sydney.

THE ABOVE IS OUR ONLY ADDRESS.

*Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 October 1918

Every season there are more varieties to choose from among the big vegetable family of cucurbits. The *Cucurbita maxima* type includes the hard-shelled pumpkins, the Triamble pumpkin, Beadesert pumpkin, and the Hubbard squashes; also the early Turk's Cap. The sugar pumpkins, Gramma, or Trombone pumpkins are grown extensively for stock, for jam pulp, pies, and winter use.

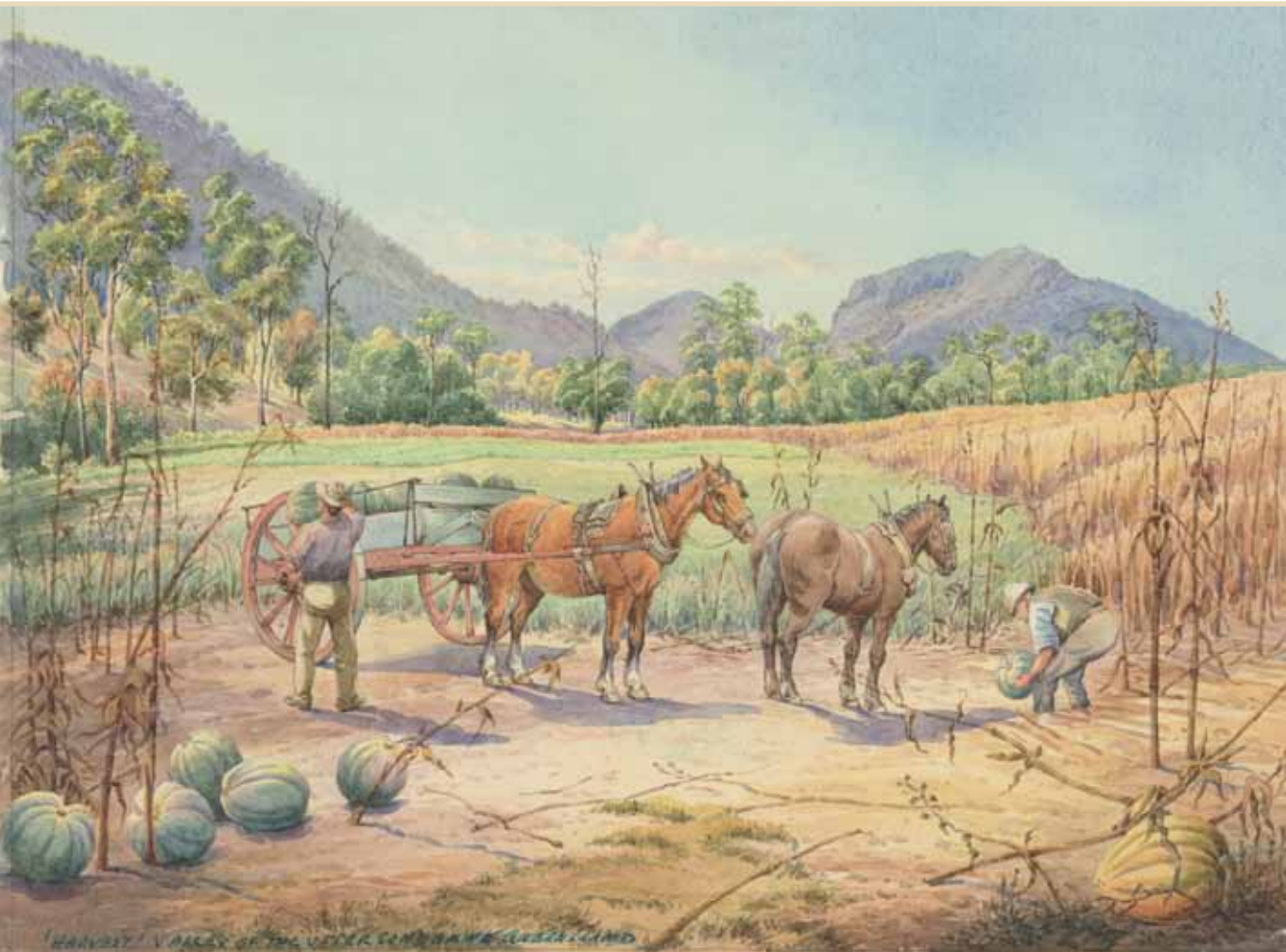
*Queenslander*, 21 September 1933

At the present time, the most popular variety of pumpkin grown in New South Wales is the Queensland Blue, or, as it is sometimes called, Beadesert. This variety has been evolved from a Crown-Ironbark cross. It has achieved popularity because of its general suitability for commercial purposes. The size, mostly 7lb to 8lb in weight, the firm orange-coloured flesh and the excellent cooking and keeping qualities of the variety have appealed to grower and consumer alike.

*Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 May 1938

promiscuous interbreeding soon led to specifically Australian varieties, the tough-skinned Ironbark becoming popular in the second half of the century. The Ironbark was one of the ancestors of the characteristically Australian Queensland Blue (also known as Beaudesert Blue), developed in the 1920s, around the same time as the three-lobed Triamble. The Jarrahdale, a Western Australian cross between the Blue Hubbard and Cinderella varieties, arrived towards the end of the 20th century. Botanically, these pumpkins are all *Cucurbita maxima* while Gramma pumpkins, which include Butternut and Trombone, are classified as *Cucurbita moschata*.

*Harvesting  
pumpkins on the  
Upper Condamine,  
Queensland, 1894.*  
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OF AUSTRALIA



‘There is no country in the world where Pumpkins are so extensively used as Australia’, claimed seed suppliers Anderson and Co. in 1918, and despite their likely reliance on sheer optimism, they were probably justified. Consumption statistics for individual foods are shamefully scarce in Australia, but available data indicate that Australians eat significantly more pumpkin, on average, than Americans. According to the 1983 Australian National Dietary Survey, adults aged 25 and over consumed, on average, around 17 grams of pumpkin per day or about six kilograms per year; in USA average pumpkin consumption in 2008 was a little over two kilograms. What is more relevant is that Australians have developed more diverse and varied ways to prepare and cook pumpkin—including the legendary ‘rabbit in a pumpkin’.

#### Queensland, 1888

... after the meeting I had my first bush dinner. They cut a large Turk’s head, a vegetable something like a pumpkin. The top was sliced off, all the pips scooped out; some rabbits were shot, skinned, cleaned, cut up and put inside with onions.

A hole was dug and a pile of wood shoved in. When it was well alight a lot of stones were thrown in, then more wood, next the Turk’s head which was covered and left till cooked. ... Altogether, it was great fun ...

Helen Vellacott, *A Girl at Government House* (1982)

However extensively pumpkin was used, it was still near the bottom of the vegetable hierarchy. Regarded as a low status, eat-out-of-necessity food in the 19th and early 20th century, pumpkin hardly featured in recipe books, not even in the general instructions for boiling vegetables. Towards the end of the 19th century it was commonly used in American-inspired pumpkin pies and tarts that

quickly became simplified and Australianised, the eggs and cream often omitted. The introduction of Queensland Blue and Triamble coincided with a burst of culinary inventiveness, women varying and elaborating the basic recipes they knew, and looking for more which in turn were modified and adapted. They invented new uses for the pumpkin, transforming it from a savoury vegetable to a sweetmeat, and absorbed it into their domestic baking.

In newspapers of the 1920s and 1930s, women’s pages are full of contributors’ savoury and sweet recipes for pumpkin soup, fritters, pancakes, scones and cakes, for pumpkin mashed with potato or combined with tomato or even, occasionally, added to the filling for Cornish pasties. At a time when thriftiness was seen as a virtue, pumpkin was able to benefit from a waste-not-want-not attitude and

rise to the implicit challenge of silk purses from sows' ears. Flavoured with oranges and/or lemons, with ginger or passionfruit, it was made into a thick, economical jam. In the 1930s, perhaps as a response to the lean Depression years, pumpkin fruit cake was invented. Eventually its very cheapness became its redeeming feature, its *raison d'être*; in the 1960s and 1970s, pumpkin soup was the default *soupe de jour* on countless Australian café and restaurant menus. Its transformation was complete when Lady Flo Bjelke-Petersen, wife of the Queensland premier and National Party senator from 1981 to 1993, made the humble pumpkin scone into an Australian icon.

QUEENSLAND, 1860s. Long tables ran along the woolshed, upon which were piled huge massive joints of beef and mutton that appeared to laugh at the company and defy demolition. Mighty dampers, baked in separate fires and looking more like edible cartwheels than bread, savoury pumpkins, vegetable marrows, and sweet potatoes asserted their claim to notice. Nor did one course prove the only one that a Queensland table could produce, for the time-honoured plum pudding was there, and pumpkin pies, pancakes, and jam tarts spoke feelingly and in persuasive accents, to the palate of the bush gourmand.

John Clavering Wood, *Tom Hurstbourne, or A Squatter's Life* (2010)

MYALL RIVER, NOVEMBER 26TH, 1866. I constantly make cornflour blancmange, and very nice it is. I once tried custards, but failed signally. . . . So I added some sago and made a pudding. Plum pudding, roley puddings made of gramah-jam, beefsteak pies and puddings I am quite clever at. I also make tarts of wild raspberries and dried apples.

Rachel Henning, *The Letters of Rachel Henning* (1988)

WIMMERA DISTRICT, VICTORIA, 1920s–1930s. We'd felt for some time that Mother must be tired of peeling, cooking and mashing pumpkin, pumpkin, pumpkin, day after day; and I know we were very tired of eating it. But pumpkin, being easily grown anywhere on the fallow, was always a certainty on the menu—a certainty we were most anxious to do away with.

Elizabeth Lane, *Mad as Rabbits* (1962)

In more recent years, Australian chefs, taking inspiration from European and Asian cuisines, have re-valued the pumpkin, taking advantage of its gastronomic potential (as well as its low cost) and developing dishes which contrast the sweetness of pumpkin with the saltiness of black olives, feta cheese and capers, the spiciness of cumin and coriander, and the sharp tang of sage and ginger. They have recognised the affinities of pumpkin with pasta and with pulses such as chick peas and lentils. Today Australians can justifiably claim to do more with pumpkin, with more ingenuity, than any other nationality. *The Plentiful Pumpkin*, a book compiled for the Mudgeeraba Pumpkin Festival in 2002, contains over one hundred recipes for this most commonplace vegetable, from cakes and biscuits to a yeast-raised bread in the shape of a pumpkin, from jams and chutneys to puddings and cheesecake, from soups and soufflés to stews and succotash, even glazed and crystallized slivers of pumpkin.

### A Simple Story of a Pumpkin

A farmer told his son one day, in my presence, to get his axe and chop a four-horse-load off the pumpkin for market. I said, 'If there's more than one load in a pumpkin it must be a big one.'

'Rather,' says the farmer, with a broad grin. 'I shoved the ladder against it and got on top to chop a load off last week. At the first lick I dropped the axe into the hole, so I lowered the ladder and went inside to look for it.'

'While walking about I lost my way and met a man who asked me what I was doing. I said, "Looking for my axe." "No use, ole feller," he replied; "I lost my team of bullocks here yesterday, and I bin looking for 'em ever since."'

'Aboriginalities', *Bulletin*, 1905

This openness to new ingredients and new flavours, this willingness to experiment and discover new taste experiences, remains a characteristic and defining feature of Australian food culture. Inventiveness is an essential quality for all Masterchef contestants. In an environment where innovation and bold experimentation are valued, contemporary Australian chefs have the opportunity to display their originality and individuality. Many—for example, Tetsuya Wakuda, Peter Gilmore, Ben Shewry and Cheong Liew—are recognised worldwide for their skill and imagination.

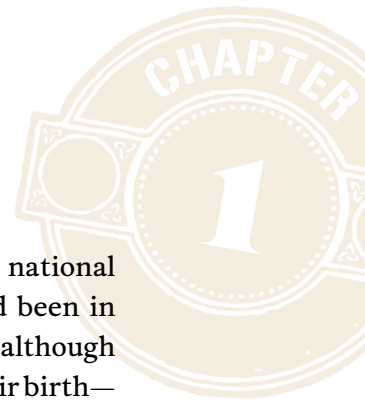
The chapters that follow, starting with the concept of a national dish or national cuisine, describe the origins and history of some of the most distinctively Australian foods and traditions, the everyday foods and meals that represent the foundation of Australia's gastronomic heritage—from picnics and barbecues to lamb chops and lamingtons. In documenting their evolution and transformations, this book contributes to a deeper understanding of Australian identity and its expression through the way we eat.







# A national dish?



The belief that food—what and how people ate—is central to national identity, is hardly new. Once the 19th century pioneers had been in Australia long enough to develop a sense of being Australian—although some still clung to the customs and traditions of the land of their birth—they began to discuss the qualities associated with Australianness, including the idea of a national dish. The kangaroo steamer would probably have been a good choice; in 1843 Charles Rowcroft considered it, perhaps incongruously, ‘the national dish of the Van Diemen’s Land bush’. And the 19th century ubiquity of mutton, damper and tea surely favoured this combination as typifying Australian eating.

As early as 1874, nearly three decades before Australia became a single nation, the author Marcus Clarke proposed curry ‘as the base of our regenerated Australian food system . . . a curry of kid, mixed with three eggs, the white of a cocoanut scraped to a powder, two chilis, and half a dozen slices of pineapple’. He also favoured ‘small river crayfish’, and recommended ‘young wombat treated with coriander seeds, turmeric, green mango and dry ginger’.

Constantly since then, journalists, commentators, food writers, international visitors and various others have pondered the question of a national dish or an Australian cuisine, often decrying its absence. Some have elaborated on the concept, and proposed particular candidates. In 1893, with the idea of Federation of the separate colonies well and truly in the air, Sydney doctor Philip Muskett asked: ‘Is it not strange that ingenuity, universal approval, or general consensus of opinion . . . has not up till the present given us an Australian national dish?’

Muskett’s ideas for a national dish—‘a *macédoine* of vegetables, or a vegetable curry, or some well-concocted salad’—would hardly have met with popular approval, with most nominations for the honour in the next hundred years being solidly flesh-focused. But Muskett’s rationale was based on his ideal of climatically and environmentally appropriate dishes for Australia, less weighty than a diet of meat. Anticipating his crusade, already in 1884 the *Argus* argued that ‘many

Opposite page:  
FREDERICK GROSSE,  
*Jumping to a conclusion*,  
1855. PICTURES  
COLLECTION, STATE  
LIBRARY OF VICTORIA

men, brain-workers especially, would be the better for lunching simply on a vegetable diet, abstaining from animal food until the day's work is over'. Like Muskett, the *Argus* editorial writer believed 'an Australian school of cookery is needed, which would teach how the fruits of the earth may be made palatable in a hundred different ways; how flesh, and fish, and fowl may be served in a manner suitable to the requirements of our Australian jaded appetites, without leaving this result to the sauce of Worcester as at present'.

### A Lady's letter from Sydney

How long will it take our 'advancing Australia' to arrive at a Christmas confection that shall supersede plum pudding and become our national dish? A confection that is not a close, heavy conglomeration of raisins and almonds and flour and suet, and other things that sentiment bids us mix together year after year, but some delicate, delicious, fairly-like [sic] masterpiece, some wondrous cunning blending of choicest fruits and meringued trifle and exquisite jelly.

And in lieu of the smoking hot roast beef of Old England, cool salads, in which white slices of chicken breast or turkey hide temptingly? And in place of the mince pies, fruit salads and fruit compotes, and fruit *au naturel*?

*Mercury*, 29 December 1891

Such utopian visions, reflecting what-might-be rather than what-is, are characteristic of many of the bids to create an Australian culinary identity based on a national dish or a national menu—even when they express different or personal perspectives as to what constitutes 'national' when it arrives on the dinner table. For some, national is automatically synonymous with indigenous, while others take a broader perspective; any dish or menu based on ingredients produced in the nation qualifies as national. The first interpretation seemed to dominate in the 19th century. When the Acclimatisation Society of the United Kingdom held its first public dinner in 1862, with the aim of presenting exotic dishes representative of the various countries that might provide new species of plants and animals to be 'acclimatised', the Australian selections were kangaroo steamer, kangaroo ham, rosella jelly and 'meat biscuits'. Even in the early 20th century indigenous ingredients were commonly considered essential to Australianness. Parrot pie and kangaroo tail soup, recipes for which

were included in the *Kookaburra Cookery Book* (1911), were identified as ‘purely Australian dishes’ in a *Sydney Morning Herald* review of the book—together with ‘brownie—the shearer’s loaf’. Writing in the *West Australian* in 1928, ‘Polygon’ claimed kangaroo tail soup as ‘a national dish if there is one’, justified by its particular blend of nature and culture not conceivable in any other country.

The idea of a national dish gradually extended to a national menu. In 1925 the anonymous contributor to *Melbourne Punch* who proposed ‘A Christmas Dinner, All Australian from Cocktails to Coffee’ clearly preferred to interpret ‘Australian’ as meaning dishes based on ingredients produced anywhere on this vast island continent. His oysters came from Queensland, blackfish from Victoria, oil and vinegar for the salad from South Australia, cherries and apples from Tasmania. His coffee was sourced from the foothills behind Cairns and the cognac from South Australia or Victoria. Finally, an Australian cigar, though the writer was honest enough to admit that ‘There need be no false patriotism on this question’.

### **A Christmas Dinner, All-Australian from Cocktails to Coffee**

Now that America has gone dry, and theoretically anyhow, is producing no wine or spirits, Australia may claim to be the only country on earth that can supply itself with a first-class dinner complete from cocktails to coffee. . . . I now come to my ideal dinner—a poor thing, perhaps, in the opinion of many critics, but my own.

Salted almonds, Olives  
Oysters on the shell  
Beche de Mer soup  
Fresh water Blackfish. Maitre d’Hotel  
Fillet of Beef, Pique: Sauce Bearnaise  
Roast Teal, Port Wine Sauce, Orange Salad  
Ice Pudding  
Devilled Prawns  
Dessert  
Coffee  
Sauterne or Chablis, Burgundy  
Champagne, Cognac

*Melbourne Punch*, 10 December 1925

At least the *Punch* writer was confident that an all-Australian menu could be presented, though it did not necessarily respond to the call for a national dish. Yet while certain ingredients were commonly acknowledged as essentially Australian, culinary imagination failed to transform them into a distinctive dish. As a visiting American commented in 1940: ‘Murray River cod, Sydney oysters, the whiting, and Australian lamb are unrivalled in flavour and quality, but no hotel seems to serve them in any way that may be considered characteristically Australian.’ A decade or so later the lack of dishes representative of Australia and symbolising Australian identity was still being deplored. ‘Without a national dish how can Australia ever be a great nation?’ lamented Grace Villiers in the *Argus*. ‘Lyn’, writing in the *West Australian*, was more forthright. ‘Where is our national cookery?’ she demanded. ‘When roast beef is synonymous for “England” and frogs’ legs for France, and Maryland Chicken for America and olla podrida for Spain, and macaroni for—and so on, what famous national delicacy have we?’ While Villiers saw the answer in a roll-call of the most popular dishes cooked in Australia, ‘Lyn’ boldly offered her own suggestions—such as spit-roast native snipe—and at the same time identified the source of the problem as excessive modesty. ‘The trouble is, as we were told a few weeks ago by a visiting American, we are too modest; we despise the products of our own land. They are never marketed and never popularised.’

But despite their exhortations, no one took up the cause and nothing changed, though the debate on national dishes continued as an undercurrent, occasionally bubbling to the surface. Ten years after Grace Villiers asked ‘What is Australia’s national dish?’ another *Argus* journalist, Helen Seager, was faced with the same conundrum. Seager sought help from readers of the *Argus*. One common answer, from many ex-servicemen, was steak and eggs; until they arrived in the Middle East and demanded it, they reported, the combination was unknown there although it had long been popular in Australia. With his tongue firmly in his cheek, artist Bernard Hesling endorsed steak and eggs as Australia’s national dish in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1953, adding: ‘This dish should immediately be known to the world as Australian Steak, and, when served with three or more eggs, Dinkum

## HAS AUSTRALIA A NATIONAL DISH?

THE ANSWER, IT SEEMS, IS 'NO'. By Grace Villiers.

What is Australia's national dish?

The Italian has spaghetti, the German sauerkraut, the Scotsman haggis, the Englishman bacon and eggs, and roast beef, the Frenchman onion soup . . .

'What,' I ask hopefully, 'is Australia's national dish?'

'National dish! What do you mean?'

'I mean the particular dish that all Australians—men, women, and children, babies and grandfathers, spinsters and men-about-town—all eat, or crave for, the dish that appears most often on the table of the nation, the dish that you can produce for breakfast, dinner, or supper, and be sure of a ready reception, the dish that builds Australia's manhood and welds her together to make her a nation.'

. . . I have ruled out tea, the Strong Cup of Tea, for which we are famous abroad, because that belongs to the Chinese. I have ruled out roast beef because that belongs to Old England. I have ruled out the eternal mutton . . . I have also ruled out caviare and oysters, and damper and kangaroo-tail soup on the ground that, although they are popular in restricted circles, we cannot accuse the nation of such delicately discriminating tastes.

So I have been forced to the unhappy conclusion that, alas, Australia has no national dish.

The situation is desperate. For without a national dish how can Australia ever become a great nation? . . . We eat beef today and lamb tomorrow, bread for breakfast and scones for tea. There is no standardisation and hence no nationalisation. Indeed the country is faced with a dilemma.

A solution presents itself which only desperation could inspire—a national referendum. . . . with the referendum an opportunity presented itself, as never before, to consult the voice of the nation on this momentous matter. There should have been added to each voting form a postscript, to which everybody would write an answer: 'What is your favourite dish?' Nothing could be simpler, saner, and more constitutional.

*Argus*, 13 March 1937

Australian Steak'. And when Melbourne hosted the Olympic Games in 1956, international athletes considered steak and eggs quintessentially Australian, telling the Games catering manager, 'We want the same as you, man—steak and eggs'.

Some *Argus* readers sent in their ideas of a truly outback feast, such as Bushman's Mince ('First catch your hare and use it fresh'); and two young students from Mildura ardently advocated witchetty grubs; 'at all chop picnics at Mildura, and these are fairly

Where in the world will you find anything more sustaining, more inspiring, more satisfying, more invigorating, more absolutely culminating and fulfilling than steak and eggs? Nowhere.

Lennie Lower, *Here's Luck*  
(1930)