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The taste of class: Colonial Australian food writing, fact or fiction?

Abstract:

Writers of Australian history, including food history, typically present the same negative stereotypes of colonial eating habits with little attempt at holistically examining and explaining the context and circumstances informing food choices in the period. Nor has there been significant challenge to these unsavoury representations. This paper looks at how social class may have influenced period reportage on the cookery and eating practices in Australia in the nineteenth century with particular reference to meat consumption.

Biographical note:

Charmaine O'Brien is a food writer, historian and culinary educator. She is the author of several books on Indian food history and culture, including the *Penguin Food Guide to India* (2013), a historical and cultural guide to India's diverse regional cuisine and a culinary history of Melbourne. Her current research is focused on the food, cookery and eating habits of colonial Australians and is the subject matter of a PhD in creative writing that she is undertaking with Central Queensland University.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Taste – Food writing, Australian – Australian colonial food – Meat – Class

Introduction

After working up an appetite promenading the thousands of exhibits at the 1867 Paris exposition, visitors could choose to satiate themselves with a diversity of international food and drink (Bureau 2012). There was the novelty, for the time, of tea with lemon slices floating in the cup at the Russian concession and iced brandy smashes – manufactured ice being the innovation in this item – at the American bar; the exotica of Iberian drinks or coffee in a ‘real Algerian café’; the native sophistication of French dishes as well as Swiss, Prussian, Viennese and Bavarian offerings (Argus 1867: 5). Yet, it was the joints of roast beef served up by a ‘caterer from the wilds of Australia’ that ‘carried off the palm for gastronomic achievements (sic) in the presence of all the cooks of the capitals and courts of Europe’ and showed ‘Frenchmen what they ought to eat’ (South 1868: 2). The ‘caterer’ in question was actually a duo, Felix Spiers and Christopher Pond, who had run a successful restaurant and catering operation in the apparent ‘wilderness’ of 1850s Melbourne.

It was common practice for nineteenth century commentators on Australian cookery to hold up the ideal of Gallic cuisine ‘as a mode of rebuke to reinforce colonial¹ culinary inferiority’ (Bannerman 2001: 269). A report in the *South Australian Advertiser* (2) on the success of Felix Spiers and Christopher Pond at the Paris exposition declared it ‘strange indeed’ that somebody from the ‘land of mutton and damper’ had been able to win the ‘rapturous approval of Frenchmen’ for their cookery. Given the persistent perpetration of the ‘cliché of British culinary ineptitude’ (Crew 2012: 13) practiced by colonial Australians, represented in stereotypes of an ‘abominable’ diet (Meslee qtd. in Symons 1984: 30) that was little more than badly cooked greasy meat, bread, overly sweet stewed tea and stodgy puddings (Bannerman 2011: 52; Symons 1984: 114), modern Australians might also find it inexplicable that their Anglo-forefathers created anything ‘tasty’ to eat, let alone food that had reportedly gained the approbation of very race that held the ‘international stereotype for ... culinary superiority’ (Bannerman 2001: 218).

Writers of Australian history, including food history, typically present the same negative stereotypes of colonial eating habits with little attempt at holistically examining and explaining the context and circumstances informing food choices in the period. Scholarly challenge, albeit it niche, to these unsavoury representations has thus far failed to alter the predominant discourse. The ‘elegant gastronomy’ (South 1868: 2) of Spiers and Pond represents a singular example of colonial culinary excellence, but their story opens a way to question if the food of colonial Australians was as universally abysmal as has been popularly accepted. This paper will look at how ‘taste’ in its cultural sense may have contributed to the development of the view that the food eaten in that period tasted so terrible in the physical sense, that when Michael Symons, in his seminal book on Australian food history, nominated it as the ‘world’s worst cuisine’ (1984: 254), this notion was readily accepted by his readers.² An important consideration in posing this challenge is to consider who it was that had the social power, and the literacy skills, to have writing published that influenced the prevailing view of Australia’s culinary past.

A classless society?

Modern Australia is commonly described as an egalitarian country: an arguable reality (Gittens 2012), however most Australians reportedly believe they live in a 'classless society' (Young 2002: 31). This belief may have served to obscure the fact that social class was a strident and affective cultural construct in colonial Australia, and this paper will argue that it played a role in shaping the contemporaneous reportage of the food and cookery of the colonial period, subsequently influencing our contemporary understanding of it.

The dominant cultural norms of the non-indigenous population of the Australian colonies were exactly those of England (Russell 1994: 152) and the complex social hierarchy of the 'mother country' was 'faithfully replicated' (Butterfield 38). In England, a hereditary aristocracy occupied the pinnacle of the social system but its premier members did not migrate to the colonies (Pont 1985: 46) and a 'self-appointed colonial gentry' (2012: 13) took their place. This ostensible antipodean upper class included some pedigreed members but they were not of the highest breeding: 'younger sons, or cadet branches of good [British] families, the occasional royal bastards under assumed names' (Boyd 1972: vii). They were kept company by a mixed bag of the members of the 'acceptable' professions and their wives' (Boyd 1972: vii), the 'impoverished sons of [English] clergy, military and navel officers' (Butterfield 38) and 'squatters', local 'landed gentry' who had claimed property by occupation rather than inheritance (Young 2002: 150). The *ancien regime* back in England would not have considered this collective a comparable set, particularly as entrée to the upper echelons of colonial society could be gained on grounds other than one's biological antecedents (Young 2002: 5). I will argue that the absence of a hereditary, unassailable ruling class played a significant role in the development of the notion that colonial Australians ate badly, taking meat as my example because of its particular association with this era.

As in any hierarchical society the elite in colonial Australia represented only a small percentage of the population; the majority were defined as middle- and working class, but subtle gradations nuanced these social rankings creating various sub-classes (Twopenny 1976: 71; Bannerman 2001: 80). Space constraints do not allow for a more expansive explication of this 'complex social reality' (Young 2005: 5) so I will proceed with the terms 'gentry'/'upper class', 'middle class' and 'working class' as broad descriptors of the operant social stratification.

What money cannot buy

By the mid-nineteenth century, Australia had an economic environment in which a person of any class could considerably improve his or her pecuniary position; acquiring serious wealth was a real possibility. Professional services, building, market gardening, hostelry, brewing, cartage and retail trade were particularly fruitful for the middle and working classes (O'Brien 2008: 72). Those who did well in such occupations were referred to as 'self-made'; a term sneeringly employed by the gentry, yet what the 'self-made' desired to pair with material achievement was to gain

respectability and improvement in social rank (Russell 1994: 7). In Britain, entrée into the upper classes could not be purchased³. In Australia, the absence of a genetically legitimate elite to maintain barriers to entry into high society meant that the social fabric of the colonies was quite permeable, and that wealth could be more easily employed to facilitate upward class movement (Russell 1994: 7).

Visitors to Australia from England often remarked that the colonial upper class maintained a more heightened sense of class-consciousness than their English prototypes (Butterfield 2012: 13), although they were not alone in 'rigidly [holding] up the rank ordered society of England' (Young 2002: 129). In reflection, a particular 'internal contradiction' informed life in the colonies (Russell 1994: 15). While the economic situation allowed people born into the lower ranks of society to gain wealth, and the fluid and flexible social situation made ascension of the class hierarchy possible, once 'respectability' was achieved those who had risen in rank could be the most virulent in preventing other aspirants from joining them (Russell 1994: 6). The expanding middle class could be pitiless in vying for status (Zeuss 1985: 166) with the contest particularly 'tense' amongst the 'lower margin' of this group (Young 2002: 126).

Aspirant upstarts

The social scene of colonial Australia was not just 'tense', it was riven by 'acute social uncertainty' (Russell 1994: 10) and reads more like a battleground (Butterfield 2012). The possibility of unwittingly associating with someone of unsavoury background – perhaps with the 'convict stain' of transported criminal history – made public interactions especially straining (Russell 1994: 10; Young 2002: 150). Those in higher positions kept others under 'surveillance' and punished transgressions against the social mores of the time – an aspect of colonial life I will return to – making successful social climbers 'unsure' and 'anxious' that they might be ousted as imposters (Young 2002: 127). 'Tradesmen', people involved in retailing and entrepreneurial building development⁴, posed particular concern (Russell 1994: 4). The British upper classes held people who earned their living selling goods publicly in particular disdain and the colonial gentry maintained this prejudice; indeed, it was sharpened in Australia as retailing was a popular occupation amongst emancipated convicts (Russell 1994: 4). The colonial *nouveau riche* keenly advertised their wealth with material possessions and retailing was therefore a lucrative business. Successful shopkeepers were believed to be especially intent on transcending class boundaries and seeking social position and influence entirely on the basis of wealth. As Russell explains:

Men and women of the gentry alike feared the pretensions of [tradesmen] and created brutal caricatures of the rude, vulgar, pushy and over-bearing tradesman and their wives as a defensive against them and other members of the middle and lower classes with social aspirations (1994: 8).

Taste control

One of the ways the colonial gentry sought to ward off the perceived threat to their social leadership from tradesmen and other such self-made individuals was by asserting themselves as the rightful arbiters of 'good taste' (Butterfield 2012: 53). They defined the genteel behaviours and manners – copying English modes – that demonstrated they knew how to do things in the best taste and were therefore of established background. Parvenus could use etiquette manuals – a popular genre of writing and publishing in the nineteenth century – to learn upper class social habits, but their performance often lacked the subtleties learnt from firsthand experience and gave them away as intruders. The gentry were unforgiving of such ham-fisted encroachment on their territory (Russell 1994: 8) yet, as their own claims to superior social status were often tenuous, they were not beyond condemning those of lesser rank for 'things they did themselves' (Butterfield 2012: 40).

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu claims that 'social distinctions which relate to taste are ... about class hierarchy' (qtd in Beetham 2008: 391). In her quintessential nineteenth century domestic manual, *Beeton's Book of Household Management*⁵, Isabella Beeton wrote, 'the rank which a people occupy ... may be measured by their way of taking their meals' (quoted in Beetham 2008: 391). Beetham draws on these comments as evidence that 'the way food was prepared, presented and consumed ... [served as] a marker of important social differences' and that 'what and how we eat are never simply physical and material' (2008: 391). In colonial Australia, ideas about what constituted good taste in 'food and eating may have [helped] to support other cultural constructs [such as] emulation of Anglo-Celtic cultural activities' (Bannerman 2001: 44), or to 'regulate entry into society' of newcomers (Russell 1994: 6).

Privilege at table

It was 'inevitable' that colonial Australians would use the British model of cookery and eating as their 'frame of reference' (Santich 1987: 34). In England, meat – especially the 'choice cuts' such legs, steaks and chops – was expensive and only the upper classes could afford to eat it each day and at every meal across that day, and this restricted access had made meat a 'symbol of exclusivity' for the socially rarefied (Zeuss 1985: 160). In the colonies, meat was so affordable that a working class man could 'buy beef and mutton at the rate which he [would] pay for potatoes [in Britain]' (Nisbett qtd in Santich 1978: 29) and therefore enjoy it as a staple food. This denied the colonial gentry the use of an important elite cultural symbol – the regular consumption of meat – with which to distinguish themselves from the rest of society (Zuess 1987: 92). When a social group experiences an exclusive symbol as losing power because it has been taken up by an outsider group seeking to emulate them, they will either find new symbols or try and hold onto old ones (Zuess 1985: 160). I propose that the colonial elite wanted to maintain meat as a unique class privilege – after all, many of them had themselves only recently risen into this class and wanted to enjoy the exclusive privileges that they understood went with it – and that their

'ideology of defense' (Zeuss 1985: 161) in this was to condemn the meat eating of the lower classes by drawing attention to through 'brutal caricatures' that showed it as 'bad taste'. This served to punish social aspirants for transgressing class boundaries by making meat eating seem undesirable (Zuess 1985: 161), thus preventing them from acquiring any of the qualities of gentility or status that regular meat eating might have conferred.

Creating unappetizing descriptions of the eating habits of the lower ranks may have also been an attempt by the colonial gentry to demonstrate to those in Britain that they understood the ways of upper society where a 'slice of mutton' (Trollope 1979/1951 320) was what someone of breeding took at a meal, not the great lumps of meat purportedly eaten by Australians of inferior background. Disparaging the quality of local meat, as well as the way it was eaten, was another way for the colonial gentry to demonstrate that they had 'good taste', for anything of colonial origin was considered to be of inferior quality to that found in Britain (Butterfield 2012: 20). It was also important for the Australian gentry to demonstrate to their brethren at 'home' (as they called England) that they understood and enacted the British mode of life as they usually intended to return there with their colonial-made fortunes and did not want the taint of colonialism to mar what they anticipated would be a 'triumphant' return (Butterfield 2012: 13).

Penning taste

In his 1883 book on *Town Life in Australia*, Richard Twopeny wrote that colonial Australians had the coarse habit of 'grubbing' (85) their food rather than dining on it as people of refinement and taste, such as the French, would have. He also wrote of the cheapness and inferior quality of the available meat compared to that in Britain. Twopeny, the son of a rector, was born in England and educated there and in France (Ward 1976). He made his adult home and career as journalist in the colonies and his birth and education would have assured him a place amongst the colonial gentry as a man of good taste. He serves as an example of the type of person of upper social rank who wrote the type of disparaging comments about the food and eating habits of the greater body of colonial Australians in books, newspapers and other published commentary that inform the stereotypes that persist today. What Twopeny and his ilk neglected to do was to ask the common man how he liked the food he 'grubbed' down. Perhaps if he had, he may have heard something like this conversation that takes place between a successful doctor (Richard Mahony), and a working class man on a boat to England in the novel *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* set in Australia circa 1850s:

I left England, sir, six years since, because a man is a sprite to live on air alone. My father went half-starved all his days – he was a farmhand, and reared a family o' nine on eleven bob a week. He didn't taste meat from one year's end to another. Out yon [Australia] ... I've ate meat three times a day ... I've come home to fetch out me old mother and the young fry. They shall know what it is to eat their fill every day of the seven (Richardson 1930: 352).

This is an avowedly fictional exchange, but it suggests that colonial Australians outside of Twopeny's class, those whose appetites have largely remained 'silent' because they were not written (Singely 2012: 31), may have experienced the meat they ate as other than 'abominable'. Perhaps the taste of it in the physical sense may have been of small matter in their assessment. Food was fuel for the working classes and simply having access to ample and regular supply may have imbued it with satisfactory flavour, and the fact that eating meat so freely would be denied them back in Britain might have added additional savour. Conversely, the aspiration to demonstrate cultural 'good taste' in contrast to the lack of it in others, may have influenced the negative portrayals commentators such as Twopeny made of the eating habits of rank outsiders. Indeed his work may have included its own elements of fiction.

Conclusion

This discussion is informed by a more comprehensive study of food in colonial Australia. There are other social factors that may have played a role in shaping representations and experience of food in colonial Australia that I will explore in this larger work, but will touch on here. Paid domestic cooks were often of poor Irish background and English prejudices about both class and race might have negatively influenced the perception, and the experience, of the food these cooks turned out. Gaelic cooks would have also numbered amongst the colonial Australians who felt no need to impress the folks back in England and actively wanted to repel their distal power and influence. In a type of reverse snobbery, they may have continued to perpetrate the idea that colonials coarsely scoffed down great piles of meat as a way of signifying national identity and 'thumbing the nose' at their British overlords (Benbow & Anderson 2014).

If we do not understand our past we are more easily 'mystified' and 'less free to choose' (Berger 1973: 13). The evidence presented in this essay on the distorting influence social class may have played on shaping current perceptions of Australia's food past should alert us to the need for a more complex understanding of our culinary history including putting the people who generated the literary currency that have shaped it under closer scrutiny to try and illuminate the frame of reference through which they wrote. We live in world rife with words and images generated largely by a modern educated elite: marketing and advertising practitioners, lifestyle media and health 'experts', inveigling us to eat and drink more than we need, or to demonise some foods and overly preference others, in subtle and pervasive ways we do not realise we are subject to, and therefore cannot choose to exercise control over. More than half the Australian population are now overweight or obese and the often unconscious influences of the 'obesogenic environment' surrounding us are considered to play a significant contributing role in this critical health and social issue (Swinburn, Egger & Raza 1999: 570). Gaining a more considered and nuanced understanding of how food has worked in the past can help us to better identify the complex social, cultural and political influences that impact our eating behaviours, and therefore make us better able to choose to resist these effects

Endnotes

1. I use the terms 'colonial' and 'nineteenth century' interchangeably herein, although my examples are exclusively drawn from the latter period and the former is correctly 1788–1901.
2. This view did not go entirely unchallenged.
3. This was in theory, In reality, cash-strapped aristocrats would strategically marry well-heeled members of the lesser classes.
4. Skilled trades, for instance, masons, plumbers and carpenters, were known as artisans and mechanics.
5. This book was popular in the Australian colonies; by the late nineteenth century a section on 'Australian cookery' had been added.

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