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Living the good life: community cookbooks as an expression of Australian lifestyles and values

Abstract:

Community cookbooks are a distinctive subgenre of cookery texts, consisting of the compiled recipes of individuals, sold in aid of community causes. Since their origins in the late nineteenth century they have been accruing as primary textual evidence of Australian lifestyles. They depict regional variations in what people ate and how they prepared it, as well as giving some insight into a few truly trans-regional, 'Australian' tastes and dishes. They show something of how Australians liked to spend their time; the organisations they chose to support; and their conception of food, cooking and eating as a part of community life and family life. Viewed collectively, community cookbooks offer a broad insight into the civic and culinary activities of 'ordinary people' across the nation. This article will give an overview of how this special variety of cookbook has contributed to the building of 'Australian' ideals of lifestyle and community: through explicit participation in dialogues of nationhood; through contribution to a wide variety of civic projects which were integral to twentieth-century nation-building; and through their important role in the development of shared social and culinary norms.

Biographical note:

Sarah Black is an independent historian. A former high school teacher, she received her PhD from the University of Adelaide in 2010 and since then has been active in teaching food history at her alma mater. Her professional background in language and literature led her to a particular interest in cookery literature, particularly the distinctive genre of the community cookbook. Her current research explores Australian food history and culture, with particular interest in regionalism, ethnic identifications, gender and the civil society. She has presented her work to a wide audience and is the author of several articles and book chapters.

Keywords:

Food writing – Cookbooks – Community cookbooks, Australia

Community cookbooks began to be compiled in Australia around 1894. This unique subset of the cookery genre documents family and community culinary traditions (Ireland 1981, Bower 1996). They fulfil many purposes beyond their primary purpose of raising money for causes. They also advertise products; share information about issues affecting the community, such as health; develop and present a particular group image; act as a forum for sharing culinary and other domestic ideas; explore and define national, regional and local cultures; and many more things besides. From a historical perspective, their value as a body of texts is not limited to the communication of foodways. Driver describes them as ‘a powerful form of cultural expression and a vehicle for promoting social cohesion’ (2001: 1). Contributing actively to a ‘process of community building’ (Ferguson 2012: 698), community cookbooks represent the distillation of the cultural identities, activities and accrued social capital of families, communities, regions and nations.

Of all the types of cookbook, Bannerman judges community cookbooks to be the most revealing of the reality of Australian kitchen life, ‘probably the best of the available sources of information on popular cookery’ (2001: 25). He concludes that of all the forms of cookery discourse in the early twentieth-century Australian print media, ‘only the contributory cookbooks can be taken as reasonably valid samples of what people were actually cooking’ (2001: 194). His assessment of the relative candour of the community cookbook resonates with various American researchers, including pioneer community-cookbook bibliographer Margaret Cook, who found that community cookbooks ‘reflect the cooking fashions of the period ... more accurately than the standard works by professional authors’ (1973: np). Bannerman positions community cookbooks, along with newspaper cookery correspondence, at the heart of public discourses on social and moral values, and particularly the importance of food and eating to matters of civility, social progress and nationalist sentiment (2011: np).

Amitai Etzioni defines community through two principle characteristics: ‘first, a web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another ... and second, a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms and meanings, and a shared history and identity – in short, to a particular culture’ (1996: 27). Community cookbooks map such webs of community, recording individual and group relationships, shared values and experiences, and shared ideals of good living. Voluntary associations, as described by Engin Isin, are ‘the building blocks of civil society and associative democracy’ (1996: 655). In the 1890s, the only groups producing community cookbooks were faith-based, such as church mission associations, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and individual parishes. As time went on, though, other kinds of community groups evolved and began to produce their own community cookbooks to finance their own visions for the civil society – schools, patriotic citizen groups during wartime, hospitals, service organisations, the Country Women’s Association, the Red Cross, everything from local progress associations to animal welfare groups to community choirs and the Scouts. As Rabinovich notes, it is the sheer ‘diversity of the genre’ in association with its often ‘laissez faire character’, which enables it to capture such a range of ‘conflicting social trends and negotiations of ... cultural identity’ (2011: 109).

The idea of the ‘good life’ took on particular resonance in the evolution of Australian national sentiment and the foundation of Australian federal democracy. Labour historian RA Gollan described Australian nationalism in the lead-up to Federation as including ‘a belief in equality of opportunity, and a conviction that in Australia [people] had a right to a good life’ (1955: 146). The idea of the good life has remained a significant component of popular understandings of what it means to be Australian (Craven & Purdie 2005: 5). In recent Australian history the ‘good life’ has often been identified with hedonistic, material pleasures, but when Australians talked about the ‘good life’ during the late nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, they were concerned with both the material and the moral aspects of living well. Community cookbooks bear rich evidence that the ‘good life’ involved a diet that was both physically and emotionally sustaining. This was variously framed within distinctions of class, gender, race and other cultural categories that were (in any given time and place) agreed upon as right and proper. The ‘good life’ also bore a range of meanings related to community, virtue and mutual responsibility. Warden comments with respect to the foundations of Australian government, ‘for the good life to be pursued, civic virtue was necessary’ (1993: 89). Community cookbooks are evidence of the activities and causes that Australians considered to support a good life, an ‘Australian’ way of life. The recipes and other information they contain, moreover, constitute representations about rightness, propriety and goodness, about how to live a good life.

As a way of interrogating the insights community cookbooks offer into community activities and civic life, regional and trans-regional foodways, domestic and culinary culture – in short, into the idea of the good life in 20th century Australia – I propose to use the case study of curry. Appadurai calls curry ‘a category of colonial origin’ (1988: 18), as it was a product of the Raj. The essential inauthenticity of curry powder and of ‘curry’ as a dish, discussed by Zlotnick (1996), Narayan (1995) Heldke (2003), Cwiertka (2005), Ian Cook (2008) and others, makes curried dishes particularly interesting as representations of empire, and of the problematics of identity in multicultural, postcolonial, globalised communities.

Curry has a surprisingly long history in the West. It was in 1747, well before Cook’s first venture into Antipodean waters, that Hannah Glasse included a recipe for ‘currey’ in her cook book, *The art of cookery, made plain and easy*. There is no evidence as to whether curry came to Australia with the First Fleet, but if not, it surely was not far behind. As early as 1806 a ‘gentleman designing to leave the colony’ auctioned off, amongst his household effects, some curry dishes (SG 1806: 1). In 1813, J Laurie of Hunter Street, Sydney, advertised for sale ‘a few Cannisters of lately imported CURRY POWDER, in high preservation ... with directions for use’ (SG 1813: 2). In 1822, travellers Elizabeth and John Hawkins enjoyed ‘a sumptuous repast’ including curried duck at the home of Sir John Jamison (1963: np) and in 1893 Philip Musket proposed a vegetable curry as one option for an Australian national dish (2004: 93). So by the time community cookbooks began to be published in Australia in the mid-1890s, curry was a well-defined, well-accepted foodstuff near to the heart of Anglo-British-Australian food habits.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries Australia knew primarily what I shall call, following Appadurai, the ‘colonial curry’. This consisted of a base of fried onions and

apples, made into a sauce sweetened, spiced (generally with a proprietary curry powder) and thickened with flour. Ginger was never used and garlic rarely (generally in minute quantities). A tangy, acid element was often provided by vinegar, lemon or tomato. Sometimes milk, almond milk or coconut milk was used. There was nearly always a fruit element additional to the apples, such as dried fruit or fresh banana, occasionally orange, and at least one recipe even called for raspberries. The colonial curry was virtually always served with boiled white rice (often presented inside a ring of the rice), generally garnished with lemon slices and parsley, sometimes with sultanas. Curries of this kind were included in the very earliest Australian community cookbooks, such as *A voice from the bush* (1890s), the *Cookery book of good and tried receipts* (1895) and the *Temperance cookery book* (1896), the *Book of tested recipes* (1900) and the Maryborough Methodist *Housewife's companion* (1902). The colonial curry was the direct descendant of the Anglo-Indian curries popularised by influential British cookery writers such as Eliza Acton and Mrs Beeton.

In Australia curry was subject to considerable use and abuse over the years. The curry method was seen as a gold standard way of using up leftover roasted meat, but as Australian home cooks have long known, pretty much any protein, legume, vegetable or leftover can be curried. Moreover, curries appealed to the thrift instinct in many early Australian cooks. The combination of thrift and the seemingly infinite flexibility of curry made it a surefire (and much abused) kitchen staple over generations. The compilers of the *Coronation cookery book* commented in 1936, 'Curries are becoming very popular in this country, but the average cook has a very vague idea of their making, thinking, apparently, that they consist of an ordinary mince with the addition of a curry-powder thickening, but there is a great deal more than that to be thought of'.

Rare indeed is the community cookbook that does not contain a good handful of curry recipes. My research indicates that around 90% of community cookbooks contain one or more recipes for curry. The nature of those recipes, however, has undergone tremendous change over time. This transformation in what is held to constitute a curry has generally been attributed to the happy influence of recent decades of Asian migration. However, as Sheridan notes, 'the interest in Asia [and Asian food] predated Asian immigration' (2000: 326), and hence recent immigration history cannot, on its own, explain the history of Australian curry. Bannerman also contends that popular narratives 'based on themes of British colonialism modified by subsequent immigration and industrialisation' (2011) do not suffice in the face of the evidence.

Camilleri (2008) argues that an Australian 'culture of dependence' (first on Britain and notions of empire, later on the USA) plus 'residual racism' has historically hampered true engagement with Asian cultures. In the pre World War Two era it predisposed Australians to prefer to encounter foreign cultures through the comfortable prism of empire, with its racialised narratives of superiority. Bannerman (1996: 207) sees Federation-era curries as deriving from precisely this background, moving from their origins in the Raj back to Britain and then outward again to the other colonies, a process described also by Zlotnik (1996). The vectors of this process could be quite personal and direct, though. Given that many prominent early Australians had prior experience of life in India, as noted by Yarwood and Knowling

(1982: 20), it is unsurprising that early Australian food culture, particularly for the middle and upper classes, should sound these notes of empire.

The colonial curry, then, may be viewed as a synecdoche of empire. It is, or may be taken as, an emblem of a worldview in which exploitation of colonial riches and subordination of colonial subjects was what an Englishman's life was all about, was in fact his manifest destiny. Domestic food culture was an apposite forum for reconciling such a worldview. McClintock (1995) observes that domestic life played a key role in the civilisation of empire, just as Hall (1992) distinguishes middle class white women's central role in the articulation of national and imperial identities. Michael Billig's concept of 'banal nationalism' - that a sense of belonging and identity comes less from grand patriotic gestures than from everyday conduct and 'the embodied habits of social life' (1995: 8) - supports such an understanding. (See also Byrne 2007.)

There was, however, change afoot in the world of Australian curries. *Favourite recipes of famous men* (1975) illustrates neatly the transition in Australian curry-making from the 1930s to the 1970s. No fewer than three of the prominent citizens approached by the Rheumatism and Arthritis Association of Victoria nominated a curry as their favourite recipe. Those recipes reveal the cultural and culinary changes that were underway in Anglo-Australian homes. Bowling champion John Dobbie, a gentleman of the old school, provided 'Brown Curry' (1975: 60). This was a classic Australian colonial curry recipe as previously discussed. Victorian Minister of Health Alan Scanlan nominated 'Madras Curry' as his favourite dish (1975: 77). Coriander, cummin, cinnamon, cardamom and cloves as well as ground chillies were specified and the meat was simmered to doneness in the sauce rather than being separately fried, as in the traditional method. Margarine was used for frying and flour for thickening. In particular, the use of individually selected spices, garlic and ground chillies mark this recipe as a more modern example of its kind than 'Brown Curry'. The suggestion to serve Madras Curry with sliced bananas or almonds alongside was somewhat more exotic (if not necessarily more 'authentic') than lemon slices and parsley. Finally, jazz entrepreneur Kym Bonython gave a recipe for 'Extra Hot Le-Ka-Ri Curry' (1975: 51). This recipe demonstrated not only industrial modernity in its use of canned curry sauce,¹ but also a balance of modern and colonial influences. There is no doubting Mr Bonython was a connoisseur. His recipe specified 'well-hung beef steak, or lamb from the leg', to be floured and fried in oil with onions before adding the curry sauce, extra seasonings including cardamom pods and chili powder and a cup of medium dry sherry for a long simmering. It should be served 'with rice, slightly undercooked with Indian saffron added to the water. If you are having a party you can add these extra dishes: poppadums, cucumber ... served in yoghurt, shaved coconut, peanuts, sultanas, pistachio nuts, dahl, sliced bananas, Bombay duck, chutney.' The modern South-East Asian influence is palpable here, even within the context of a curry recipe that retained a clear lineage from the 'colonial curry'. This recipe shows how Australians were becoming more conversant with a wider range of ingredients and more confident to try new styles of food; the curry would be served not with a ring of parsleyed rice but with a selection of side dishes understood to be

more authentically Asian in character. However, at this stage, these developments were primarily urban.

Curry has long been a mainstay of country cookery, perhaps the more so the further outback you got. The Royal Flying Doctor's Women's Auxiliary in the 1960s printed a recipe for Drover's Curry which was said to be 'a handy way of getting a tasty meal in a hurry with only a piece of cooked salt beef'; a reflection of curry's longstanding role in ringing the changes on the very basic foodstuffs often relied on in remote areas of Australia. *Recipes* by the Parkes Lutheran Ladies Guild (1983) also illustrates some themes of country curries. 'Chicken Curry', by Nola Leske, called for a steamed chicken, onions, green pepper, butter, curry powder, bayleaf and a tablespoon of sugar, along with the usual salt, pepper, flour and chicken stock. This represented a modernised, labour-saving version of colonial curry. Ruby Hourigan's 'Curried Chicken' (14) showed stronger industrial influences, using chicken stock cubes and a packet of chicken noodle soup as well as the usual prepared curry powder. Thickened with flour, it represented an evolution from the colonial curry to what could be termed an 'industrial curry'. Roma Thiel's 'Curry Recipe' (19) used butter, onion, green pepper, garlic, ginger and chilli powder as well as curry powder. It was thickened with flour and the liquid involved was evaporated milk. Scallops and prawns or canned salmon were the protein element of the dish. This idiosyncratic curry recipe showed colonial, modern/Asian, and modern/industrial influences. Canned goods played a prominent role in each of these recipes. This is typical not only of the era but also of the location, fresh ingredients being often less available in rural than urban areas.

The *Immanuel College recipe book* of 1995 told a changing story. 'Dutch Curry and Tuna Mornay' called for 1 packet Dutch Curry and Rice Soup, to be combined with canned tuna, plus apple, onion and celery. The mix was covered with breadcrumbs and cheese and baked for 30 minutes at a moderate temperature. Again, this recipe represented massive change, not only in its use of modern industrial ingredients. The apple and onion signalled an abiding link to the colonial heritage and the gratin technique showed the influences of the intervening years of Australian culinary exploration. This recipe is an extraordinary hybrid. However, The *Immanuel College recipe book* also contained recipes for Tandoori Murgli, Pudine Wala Kheema and Shahi Korma Lamb Curry, indicating that different recipe contributors were conversant with different types of curries. Recipes called for garam masala, wedges of lime, fresh herbs and a wide variety of individual spices. Every curry recipe called for fresh garlic and ginger. The South East Asian influence was quite palpable here, as was the role of consumer affluence in encouraging the taste for small luxuries.

Sheridan (2000: 328) has concluded that culinary experimentation with the food of the Other served practical, commercial and fantasy purposes. Whether or not women actually cooked 'foreign' foods, they were thinking about them. And of course, the evidence from community cookbooks suggests that they *were* cooking foreign foods, adapting them to their tastes and lifestyles along the way. In seeking to explain the interest in Asia, Sheridan points towards the popularity of travel to Asian countries, but also notes that the role of economic factors should not be underestimated. She suggests that factors such as the rapid expansion of the manufactured foods industry, increased consumer affluence and new food technologies were more important than

immigration in explaining the Australian interest in Asian dishes during the 25 years after the Second World War. It may be that the war itself, and Australian experiences of it, have been undervalued as factors prompting those changes in cultural discourse that we see in the food culture. Sobocinska (2010), for example, argues that the common Australian sense of the 'colonial order of things' and the innate superiority of white people, prior to World War Two, was directly challenged by experiences in war against the Japanese, which led to a re-evaluation of discourses of colonial superiority in the aftermath of the war. In food terms, this tallies with the falling away of the 'colonial curry' during that period and a new engagement with the flavours of Asian countries encountered through immigration, industry and travel.

It is not overstating the case to say that, right across the time-space continuum of 20th century Australia, people have been recording curry recipes in community cookbooks. These show that interest in some Asian flavours and Asian-influenced dishes began early in the Australian mainstream. However, it proceeded in tiny increments before reaching critical mass around 1970. Camilleri argues that 'a new national identity is gradually emerging, drawing in part on the experiences and insights of the ethnic communities that have made Australia their new home' and indeed, curry recipes in community cookbooks reflect this process. Having begun as an emblem, even a caricature, of empire, they evolved in the later 20th century through an amalgam of influences including industrialisation, widespread affluence promoting not only travel and tourism but also more lavish and adventurous tastes, immigration and the incorporation of an ever-widening range of new ethnic identities under the umbrella of Australian culture and lifestyle. These transitions were preceded and enabled by the re-evaluation of national discourses of colonial superiority which had proven their hollow character in the crucible of war.

Inasmuch as we see this process at work in community cookbooks, we see, in closeup and practical ways, a constantly evolving discourse of Australian life. What Duruz says of memory is equally true of the memories encoded in food form in community cookbooks – that they allow 'unusual connections' that can confront both the 'boundaries of ethnicity' and of 'mainstream' identity as well. (Durez 2005: 65–6) The continuum of changing ideations of 'curry' in Australian community cookbooks through the 20th century demonstrates how, on an individual and personal but also a public level, members of Australian community groups engaged in discourses that could both confirm and disrupt normative identities. Community cookbooks, through the seemingly simple process of sharing recipes, allow complex negotiations of group and individual identities. By enabling ordinary people to participate in the civil society, making manifest their social, religious, political and cultural values in the fabric of the community, these cookbooks 'represent, in form, content and purpose, the social web that sustains communities' (Black 2010: 52). The good life, indeed.

Endnote

1. Le-Ka-Ri was a proprietary tinned curry sauce produced in Malaysia, trademarked in the UK. It was recommended in the *Sydney Morning Herald* by well-known cookbook writer Ted Moloney in the early 1970s (*SMH* 18 Feb 1973: 81), which suggests it was considered a 'high-class' choice. It had been sold

in Australia at least since the 1950s, having been listed as an 'Epicurean's delight' in an advertisement for Boan's Continental Foods in the Perth *Mirror* (16 April 1955: 7).

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