

Aboriginal cooking before and after colonization

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NB For the names of books relating to the authors and page numbers, see page 8

Food becomes culture in two ways. Firstly, when it is cooked: because once we have the basic products of our diet, we transform them – by fire or other means of processing. Secondly, when it is eaten because, although we can eat anything, we choose our food according to economic, nutritional or symbolic values.

[Food] culture, writes Michael Symons, gains its force through repetition, reiteration, recapitulation, rigmarole, rhythm., regulation, reproduction – recipes.’ (Symons 25-26)

The receipt

The word recipe derives from receipt: what is given or handed on. The recipe, then is the portable pattern of food usage which delineates and codifies a food culture.

BW Higman writes that the invention of cuisine was an ‘element of human evolution’ and ‘an essential feature of a successful hunter-gatherer food culture’, with the recipes, at first transmitted orally, providing ‘continuity into the present.’ (Higman145)

A shared language was necessary for the sharing of recipes, especially in pre-literate times. The *recipe* is the carrier of the virus that spreads the cuisine. But without *language* – and repetition – these carriers would spread neither through time nor through place.

So, a body of recipes – the foundation of any peasant cuisine – was created, over time, as the property of a language group. This process was repeated all across the world.

Catch and eat your budgerigar

Reading Arrernte Foods, by Margaret-Mary Turner, I realized that there is another more ancient kind of, for want of a better word, ‘cuisine’ – and recipe.

Margaret-Mary Turner has published in a book, *Arrernte Foods: Foods from Central Australia*, an inventory of local foods and methods of preparing them which would have comprised the diet of her people before 1788.

She begins with honey-like foods, which include bush honey, nectar and edible gums, one of which is witchetty bush gum. Turner says, ‘when the flowers start to fall, it comes out through the bark and forms in lumps... you can make it into a lump on a little stick, like a lolly.’

Then there’s the honey ant, which is found in the ground in Mulga country. ‘You don’t swallow them, you put them on your tongue and bite on the abdomen and suck the honey from it.’ And there is also honey produced by stingless native bees.

Next, Turner lists thirty-eight foods from plants the same number as (anthropologist Richard and Betsy see TOFOE) Gould’s assay of the Gibson Desert), including the wild orange, quandong, wild fig, two bush tomatoes and the bush banana fruit, flower, leaves and root. ‘You can eat the bush bananas when they are small or full-grown ... You can cook bush bananas in hot earth, or they can be eaten raw when young.’ The flowers ‘hang in clusters and can also be eaten. You can even eat the plant itself’: the root can be eaten raw or cooked.

Four edible seeds are listed and eleven edible grubs, caterpillars and other insects. Turner reminds us that non-Aborigines use the name witchetty grub for any edible grubs, but the witchetty grub proper is found only in the witchetty bush. Cicadas are also eaten. Most of these grubs and insects are cooked in the coals first.

There are fourteen listings under meat and other food from animals, and these include the obvious, like the goanna, bearded dragon, carpet snake (Turner remarks that one reptile 'feeds lots of people'), kangaroo, rock wallaby, euro and possum, of which Turner says 'they taste really sweet, especially the milk guts [intestines, the same as Southern American chitlins], but nowadays they are few and far between.' The crested pigeon was another prized game bird, as were the galah and the budgerigar.

Of the budgerigar she writes: 'they are eaten when they are newly hatched. In green times, there are lots of them in dry creeks, in little holes in gumtrees, in gidgees, ironwoods and other trees. The newly hatched birds are covered in white down. You cook a whole lot of them in hot earth and when they are cooked, you pull the guts out and eat the bird. Some people remove the head before eating the bird, others eat it with the head because they like the taste.'

Finally, two recipes which illustrate the diverse range of Aboriginal 'cuisines.'

Between 1966 and 1967, anthropologists Richard and Betsy Gould lived with and then reported on the food and food gathering practices of a group of thirteen Ngaatjatjarra people in the harsh climate of the Gibson Desert, north of Warburton, around 1500 kilometres north-west of Perth.

At the opening of their book *Yiwara: Foragers of the Australian Desert*, they write that 'as on most days, the hunt has been poor, but the collecting successful.' The only meat available was a goanna, which was roasted, cut in half and shared among the two male hunters' families by being roasted, and 'mashed' between two flat stones into a paste after the intestines were first discarded and the organs given to the hunter as his due. This paste of flesh, skin and bone provided a mouthful of food for each member of the group. A hardship recipe. And in *The Oldest Foods on Earth*, I included a recipe I called How to Kill and Cook a Turtle Yonlu Style, from LalLak Burrarwanga and family's book *Welcome to My Country* which begins:

First we prepare the *miyapunu* for cooking. Djawa kills the *miyapunu*. He hits it over the head with a rock or an axe to stun it. Then he puts a sharp stick in the head through the brain to kill it. He cuts its head off and pulls the guts out through the neck. He draws out the liver, the intestines, all sweet and fatty. This female *miyapunu* has *mapu* in her, soft ones, and we pull them out to cook. We don't have a pot here so we will cook the *mapu* (eggs) on the sand by covering them with ashes. We have built up a big fire for the *miyapunu*, so there is a lot of hot sand we can use to cook the *mapu*.

Two interesting things about this recipe (which I have not included in its complete form) is the use of the shell to boil the turtle – as Indigenous Australians as far as we know did not have vessels in which to boil – and the addition of a leaf from the djilka tree (the grey bark tree, *Drypetes deplanchei*) as a herb to add flavour, thus a recipe in the Western sense as well.

So, here is a list of *recipes* which include not just the way to eat the food, but how to identify, find, catch, kill and eat them. These recipes would have been transmitted orally, accompanied by demonstration, from mother to daughter, from father to son, down the millennia, along with the intricate associations of food and climate (see below).

I say from mother to daughter and father to son because there was a fundamental gender divide in Aboriginal food culture. Broadly, hunting and cooking of large animals was done by males, and foraging of plants and killing and cooking of smaller animals by women. Thus it could be said that these recipes were not, as in other cultures, created only for nourishment and flavour, but also for survival.

It recently struck me that this 'cuisine' was the original, from a time before land ownership created the kind of hierarchy that led, eventually, to wealth and poverty and to 'haute cuisine.'

Whether by design or accident, the Indigenous inhabitants of the country we now call Australia never saw land as something to be owned, bought and sold, but to be shared and nurtured as a religious duty.

At this point, you could ask: if the line from hunter-gatherer to agriculture and land ownership is linked, why then did the original inhabitants of Australia not go down that track? The answer is complex and is to be found (at length) in Bill Gammage's book *The Biggest Estate on Earth: how Aborigines made Australia*.¹ Briefly, what is called in English 'the Dreaming' was the unifying principle of these people and associated with it were two basic rules.

Firstly, *obey the Law*. Secondly – and most importantly in explaining why Aboriginal people did not take the path towards land ownership – *leave the world as you found it*. Western agriculture does not leave the world as it has found it, as we are seeing in this country right now: the tragedy of the Murray–Darling Basin being one example.

So for them, food was/is not just nourishment but part of the labyrinth of religious obligations they owed to the land – and to eternity.' The Dreaming conceives an unchangeable, free of time' (Gammage 123). So the land was managed to minimise change.

As Billy Griffiths writes 'The first Australians cultivated the land through fire and developed a complex and intimate relationship with the environment that relied upon detailed knowledge of plants, animals and the seasons.' (Griffiths 149)

Their recipes were not just about the cooking of the food, but about the lore of the food to be eaten and the maintenance of the eternal Dreaming.

We need a new word for this original cuisine, a cuisine that has retained the spirituality that all cuisines once had, before ownership, money and the mingling of different nationalities and their foods.

There was some mingling on the northern and Western fringes, with visitors like the Macassans, but on the whole, the original inhabitants were isolated from the rest of the world.

Another element of their food culture or 'cuisine' was that gathering, hunting and fishing for it was their occupation.

The archaeologist Schrire, writing about what the locals in Arnhem Land thought of her that 'To men whose childhood had been spent hunting possums and spearing fish she [I] seemed utterly ignorant.' (Griffiths 154)

But I believe we need to replace the word 'cuisine' in discussing Indigenous food culture. Cuisine, a noun meaning kitchen is a synecdoche: A figure of speech in which a part is made to represent the whole. That is, the kitchen is also used for the activity within, cooking.

Aboriginal Cookings before 1788

In 1998 I wrote a book that was meant to be a marker of where Australian restaurant food – and food culture – was at the turn of the millennium. I collected recipes from all the prominent chefs of the time and asked them for their opinions on what was this Australian cuisine that was being debated.

The proposal was accepted and when I began to write the book, I decided to drop the term cuisine, and I called the book *Australian Cooking: the chefs, the produce, the recipes*.²

In writing about Indigenous foods, I propose we call them Aboriginal Cookings rather than cuisines, a word that to me is totally inapposite to use in regard to pre-colonial Indigenous cooking. And to justify my use of the neologism 'cookings' I'm going to quote Tyson Yunkaporta, the author of *Sand Talk*, a book I will be quoting from extensively below. He writes:

One of the exciting things about the English language is that it is a trade creole, so it changes shape wherever it goes. I will be honouring this quality by taking her for a spin to see how she goes around some tight bends.'

My thesis, then, is that, before colonisation, there could have been as many Aboriginal Cookings as I have defined them above, as there were Aboriginal languages, and that has been estimated at as many as 290. But like most things, this changed after 1788.

Post-colonial Aboriginal Cooking

Let me begin this discussion of post-colonial Aboriginal food by folding in a long quote from *Sand Talk*:

Let's start out by looking at the recent restaurant phenomenon of Indigenous cuisine. It's marketed as ancient, holistic, and exotic but in reality, it's just a shallow collage of token souvenirs, far removed from anything resembling an Indigenous diet. Customers are titillated by wallaby scaloppine with mango coulis when it's neither wallaby season nor mango season, and sit staring at dot paintings over their partner's fifty dollar plate of warrigal greens and magpie goose carpaccio.' (Yunkaporta 187)

And he's right. We eat this native produce without any understanding of or reference to the complex seasonal and local associations. To illustrate this, he points out that the silky oak tree has the same name in Aboriginal languages as the word for eel, because its wood has the same grain as eel meat and it flowers in the peak fat season for eels.

Only in western 'Native food restaurants' will you find bush tomato combined with and bunya nuts or lemon myrtle as they traditionally didn't grow in the same areas, and were most likely too far apart for trade.

Many such Natural associations are outlined by Gammage. So what is post-colonial Aboriginal cooking? *Sand Talk* again:

Aboriginal cooking is not about using native ingredients – it is about using what is available and optimally nutritious at different times of the year and employing cooking techniques that produce the same effect as cooking over hot coals or slowly in the ground. So chicken wings, curry powder and winter sweet potatoes in a pressure cooker could be considered Aboriginal cooking – kangaroo lasagne is definitely not... even tofu cooked in a ground oven is Aboriginal cooking (Although any blackfella caught eating tofu could lose his race card on the spot).

(Yunkaporta 188/189)

This entire chapter ('Lemonade for headaches') is worth reading. Yunkaporta is not saying don't eat native produce, but that we should not fetishise it, we should eat it seasonally, and we should recognise the complex local seasonal interactions even when we disregard them by combining foods that do not grow together: I love bush tomato (akudjura) combined with lemon myrtle.

We should also be aware of, respect and acknowledge Indigenous knowledge and stewardship of the produce we use in our cooking and wherever possible, make sure that a portion of the price of this produce is returned to Indigenous communities, just as we do when buying Indigenous art.³

We can only do this in an informed way with more communication between the two most divided groups in the Australian population: blackfella and whitefella.

Books mentioned in the text

Bill Gammage: *The Biggest Estate on Earth*

Billy Griffiths: *Deep Time Dreaming*

BW Higman, *How Food Made History*

Michael Symons, *A History of Cooks and cooking*

Tyson Yunkaporta: *Sand Talk*

Richard Gould: *Yiwara: Foragers of the Australian Desert*.

(Only Richard is listed as the author, but it is known that his archaeologist wife Betsy was an unacknowledged co-author)

¹ The principles of Indigenous Australian religious beliefs and practices are examined at some length in Chapter 4, *Heaven on Earth* and alluded to throughout the book.

² This book was commissioned by my then publisher at Random House, Margaret Sullivan. When she left, she handed the project to Deb Callaghan. I presented her the manuscript, and we were discussing design and type when word came that the sales team had rejected the book. When the book was rejected, Deb left Random House. It has remained on my computer, and I have 'mined' it form the past 20 years, and it sort of turned up as my thesis.

³ I recognise this will be difficult, but we should be aware that these processes are the ideal