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Regional Flavours

Food, lifestyle and health in Australia's regions

by Rita Erlich, Ruth Riddell and Mark Wahlqvist

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Preface

Mark Wahlqvist AO

Providing they remain available, the foods of our childhood determine, in large measure, our lifelong taste preferences and food habits. The human brain has ‘food memory’ centres (principally the amygdala), which, according to Taketoshi Ono, are recruited in fine detail for appearance, feel, texture, taste and smell. Our food nostalgia is probably more convincingly appreciated when we think of the hankering most people have for the cooking of their mothers—or perhaps parents, since fathers also help establish our food preferences.

Our sense of food regionality has its beginnings in the food locality of our childhood. I grew up in Adelaide, and the focus of this ‘locality’ was a household garden in which my two brothers and I each had our own little plot to grow food or ornamental plants of our choice, with parental guidance. We also had poultry, and we boys were responsible for feeding and looking after the birds and collecting their eggs. Twice a year we ceremoniously killed a rooster; this was virtually the limit of our poultry consumption. We had a cornucopia of garden produce—fruits, nuts (almonds), vegetables, and herbs such as mint. We ate freshly picked green peas, carrots and tomatoes. We looked forward to seasonal figs, nectarines, peaches, apricots, plums and grapes. My father particularly enjoyed and grew rhubarb and strawberries.

Vendors delivered hot wholemeal bread and yeast buns (The Baker), fresh milk and cream (The Milkman), rabbits (The Rabbit) and bulk groceries (The Grocer).

We bartered with friends and neighbours for foods we did not grow but were available locally. We cycled to pick wild or exotic fruits—blackberries, olives, quinces, pomegranates, loquats—in the hills and gullies within reach of home. We preserved the produce to have out of season; we made wonderful jams and we made drinks such as ginger beer. We loved to join our parents while they cooked—especially because we could try the food as the texture and flavours developed. Our appetites were keen because we cycled a great deal and played games after school, notably cricket and tennis.

The local shops sold fresh produce, meats and bulk groceries, and through our family network we obtained specially baked foods and German sausages and meats. In the post–World War 2 years, some foods (such as butter), which were exported to the United Kingdom and Europe as part of food relief, were in short supply, and we had coupons for their purchase. We children queued for these foods, although we were by no means short of food to eat. There were also some Australian-made foods that we liked, such as oatmeal porridge, Granose^R, Weetbix^R and baked beans. Our parents imposed strict quotas on bought indulgence foods such as chocolates and soft drinks.

The biggest change to my eating pattern came when I went to university and formed friendships with Asian students. My future wife and fellow medical student, Huang Soo Sien, taught my family to cook Chinese food; we also grew to love Indian food. Despite all the food nostalgia and memories, we seized the cross-cultural moment and expanded our taste horizons and food diversity. Our sense of food locality did not prevent us from embracing food regionality. We began to appreciate that, in any case, what we had been doing was combining European and Anglo-Celtic food traditions in a single household, supported by the ability to grow, barter for and buy the food and ingredients of these food traditions. Now came the ‘Asianisation’ of these traditions in our Australian locality Adelaide.

Since Soo Sien and I established our own household we have been more dependent on markets and stores, rather than our own garden, and our food culture has been dominantly Hakka Chinese, although it is coloured by an additional influence—that of our Greek neighbours and friends and our interest in Mediterranean food. Now our son lives in France and we take an interest in the food he introduces to us. Our children’s extended food cultural reach influences our food habits, just as we influenced our parents’ habits. A relentless diversification of the way we eat continues, crossing regional boundaries and distilling the best for our enjoyment and health, as far as we understand it.

Consistent with this personal account, this book has some underlying premises:

- A local and regional identity for our food patterns and preferences often simply awaits expression.
- If we nurture and cherish food difference it will provide opportunities for food security and economic advantage, through local produce and trade.
- Food diversification confers health advantage—and there is much evidence to support this—provided we remain physically active. The 2004 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report *Australia’s Health 2004* and Janie Smith’s *Australia’s Rural and Remote Health: a social justice perspective* draw attention to the generally higher mortality and morbidity rates in regional Australia compared with the major cities. Remoteness and limited access to health services, less disease prevention, and socio-economic disadvantage are the principal reasons for this rural–urban health disparity. A vigorous local food economy, along with an increase in the availability of nutritious food, can go a long way to reduce this disparity. The advantages of rural life—clean air, a relaxed pace of life, less noise, and community support, as reported by Richard Kerbaj—can then come to the fore.
- The internationalisation of our food supply is more likely where there is a high regard for local foods. A strong local food culture is better placed to form part of a wider network of local food cultures because it has something to offer and because it is strong enough to receive and incorporate food ways from elsewhere.

The Australian regions we chose to look at are indicative only of the Australian regional food supply: we could have chosen many other regions. Studying these regions, however, gives us the opportunity to consider the prospects and barriers to wealth creation and health maintenance at the regional level insofar as the food supply is concerned.

The authors and contributors

The authors acknowledge the invaluable support of the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, without which this project would never have come to fruition.

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Co-author Ruth Riddell is the publications officer for Nutrition Australia. She has 20 years' experience teaching home economics, health and human development in secondary schools and has spent many years working in curriculum development. She is the author of 14 textbooks for primary and secondary students and of many articles for newspapers, journals and magazines. Her thesis was on the subject of adolescents' food habits, and she is a mentor to a number of staff and volunteers of Nutrition Australia.

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