

# FOOD PATTERNS OF AUSTRALIANS AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

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There is concern that little is known of the early Australian food patterns. Today, there are elderly Australians who still remember the food eaten during their childhood days. In 1980, this project was designed to develop a method whereby enough information could be collected from these present-day elderly Australians so that the food patterns at the turn of the century could be identified.

Australia, being a new country, relied on immigration as a source of population. In the 1900s, 90 per cent of the non-Aboriginal inhabitants were of British origin<sup>(1)</sup>. Early British settlers brought livestock and plants familiar to them as sources of food. The successful breeding and cultivation of these in their new home allowed the Australians to adopt the basic British eating habits<sup>(2)</sup>. Cooking techniques used were basically British, with the baking, stewing, grilling or frying of meat. Vegetables were inevitably plainly boiled or roasted. Excess food was usually preserved by drying, salting or pickling. Eggs were often packed in dry salt, sawdust, smeared with butter and packed in

bran or a proprietary siliceous liquid which was used on a large scale<sup>(3)</sup>.

In rural areas, where markets or shops were not nearby, families had to keep their own livestock and grow their own vegetables and fruits. In areas where fresh water supply was not readily available, water had to be carried from the nearest source or the waterman was paid to deliver a barrel of water each week. Other food items had to be purchased in bulk; flour in 150 pound bags, sugar in 70 pound bags, tea leaves came in chests<sup>(4)</sup>. The grocer had to weigh and wrap all regular items which he traded, as packaging was almost unknown<sup>(5)</sup>.

With the early success in the cattle industry, meat was readily available to the public and also exported to England in the 1860s<sup>(6)</sup>. Easy availability of sugar from well-developed sugarcane fields in Queensland encouraged confectionery manufacturing around the 1850s in Hobart<sup>(6)</sup>.

Towards the later part of the 19th century the influx of foreigners brought different cultures, different ways of cooking, of assembling the few available ingredients and a whole array of cooking gadgets. With the lighter and easier cooking utensils and many other labour-saving devices, housewives had more time to create and try new dishes<sup>(3)</sup>.

## Methodology

Two methods were employed in the collection of data:

- 1 Assessment of original documents.
- 2 Interviews with present-day elderly Australians.

### Original documents

Scattered information exists in a variety of books including recipe books, in newspapers and in the reports of some physicians of the time.

There appear to have been many attempts made by medical professionals at the time, advising the public to modify their eating habits to suit the Australian lifestyle and environment rather than to continue the British meal pattern<sup>(7)</sup>. Dr Philip Muskett, a prominent physician, reported in 1897 that 'Aus-

trians ate (276lb meat per head per year) as much meat as two Englishmen, three Canadians, four Germans or ten Italians<sup>(8)</sup>. Fish was not popular and only 9 pounds per head per year was eaten<sup>(9)</sup>. Females were extravagant tea drinkers raising the average consumption to 8.4 pounds per head per year, while in the United Kingdom and United States, it was 5 pounds and 1.5 pounds per head per year respectively<sup>(10)</sup>. Only limited varieties of vegetables and salad plants were grown and used. Salad herbs were said to have been entirely unknown<sup>(11)</sup>. Australian cookery was often contrasted with the highly-regarded French cookery to stress the lack of aesthetic appreciation of food by the average Australians<sup>(11)</sup>.

The problem of excessive alcohol consumption by Australians had long been recognised<sup>(11)</sup>. One could find versions of recipes in commercially available women's magazines and recipe books for curing drunkenness<sup>(12)</sup>. Many appeals were made to the public to adopt the continental wine drinking habit. Agriculturalists were also urged to take advantage of the opportunity to supply local wines<sup>(13)</sup>.

By early 1920s, Australians began to realise the need for accurate information on their dietary habits. The New South Wales Board of Trade proposed one such study in which a duplicate portion of food consumed by each of the nine subjects within a twenty-four hour period was collected and analysed<sup>(14)</sup>. The table summarises their findings.

DIET CONSTITUENT	AVERAGE COMPOSITION (%)	
	WOMEN (n = 5)	MEN (n = 4)
Fat	17.3	15.0
Protein	14.5	16.1
Carbohydrate	65.1	66.1
Ash	3.0	3.0

During later years, 1920-1925, an extensive study on food habits of 300 New South Wales residents revealed that the average individual ate the same food week in and week out with a slight increase in amounts in the colder months. A typical diet of many sedentary workers was revealed to be:

- Breakfast: Mushy porridge of some kind, white bread, butter and jam, two cups of tea.
- Lunch: Meat, pastry, bread, butter, cup of tea. (Men working in the city usually had meat pie.)
- Dinner: Meat, boiled potato and pumpkin, rice pudding, two cups of tea.

The final point stressed was that the findings reflected the general opinion among experts at the time, of the great need for food education and dietetic reform among the masses, especially in terms of food selection and purchase and economical meal planning<sup>(6)</sup>.

### The Interview

Australians over the age of 76 years were contacted through local newspapers and clubs for the elderly and asked if they were willing to provide the necessary information. They were subsequently interviewed at their homes. The interview took the form of a discussion about the foods consumed during their school days based on a number of questions relating to meal patterns, about method of preparation and factors affecting the availability of foods. Their responses were recorded on tape and the tapes kept for future reference.

## Result

Results were scored as:

- i Percentage subjects who mentioned each food items of their own accord.
- ii Percentage subjects who, when reminded, recalled eating that food item.
- iii Sum of percentages (i + ii)

In this paper only the sum of percentages is shown.

The main comparison made here was according to their place of residence during their school days. Subjects were classified as<sup>(7)</sup>:

- i Urban; when population of town was  $\geq 500,000$ .
- ii Provincial; when population was  $\geq 25,000$  and  $< 500,000$ .
- iii Rural; when population was  $< 25,000$  during that time.

## Discussion

The subjects in this study were not randomly selected, and only people who were mentally alert were included. Most of the subjects interviewed lived in Victoria during their school days, thus some food items mentioned might be more typical of Victoria.

In general, the foods consumed by almost all of the subjects in this study were those described in newspaper articles, recipe books and scientific papers written at the turn of the century.

At the interview, subjects were asked to recall the food they ate during their school days. They believed that food patterns did not vary throughout their school days. This agreed with the 1920-1925 study which suggested that the type of meals consumed was seldom varied<sup>(6)</sup>.

Housewives at that time cooked the same type of meal for the entire family<sup>(7)</sup>. It could therefore be assumed that the data collected in this study represented food available to the Australian adults as well as children. The exceptions were when the working father received an earlier cooked breakfast and in cases where adults who worked in urban areas away from home could have purchased their midday meal. In the latter case, such information on the food eaten by the adults was not available.

Table 1 illustrates number, age and place of abode of subjects studied. The range of age was 76-92 years for the total population. There were more females than males, thus these findings could be skewed towards the female eating habits.

Table 2 shows food items mentioned by more than ninety per cent of the subjects interviewed. These food items were the most frequently consumed foods for subjects, irrespective of their sex and area of residence, during that time. These were made use of in preparing composite dishes.

Milk and water were consumed frequently throughout the day as most schools at that time did not have a canteen. Subjects brought their mugs to have a drink of water from the tap. In rural areas, the drinking water was mainly tank water (from rain).

TABLE 1

## MEAN AGE AND NUMBER OF SUBJECTS

Place of Abode	Total	Females	Males
Urban > 500,000	77, n = 8	77, n = 8	-, n = 0
Provincial > = 25,000 < 500,000	82, n = 13	82, n = 13	-, n = 0
Rural < 25,000	83, n = 29	83, n = 18	83, n = 11
All areas	82, n = 50	81, n = 39	83, n = 11

Salt, pepper and vinegar were used to flavour foods and vinegar was frequently used in the making of homemade pickles, sauces, chutney and salad dressing.

Lamb was most frequently consumed, followed by mutton then beef. Sheep, being smaller, were usually killed in preference to cows because of inadequate storage facilities. Rabbit meat was more frequently consumed in areas where it was available while chicken was usually consumed at Christmas or, occasionally, on weekends. Working men frequently had bacon for breakfast while children only had it on the weekends.

The frequency of fruit consumed was dependent on the fruit season. Apples were available throughout the year, especially in rural areas where they were usually stored in the cellar after the apple season. Dried fruits were usually consumed in cakes and puddings.

**TABLE 2**

FOOD ITEMS MENTIONED BY > 90 PER CENT OF SUBJECTS

<i>Beverage</i>	<i>Flour</i>
Milk	Wheat
Water	Tapioca
<i>Condiment</i>	<i>Grains</i>
Salt	Oats
Pepper	Barley
Vinegar	Rice
<i>Meat</i>	<i>Fats</i>
Lamb	Butter
Mutton	Mutton dripping
Beef	Beef dripping
Rabbit	Suet
Chicken	Cream
Bacon	<i>Sweetening Agents</i>
<i>Fruit</i>	Jam
Apple	White sugar
Plum	Golden syrup
Apricot	Treacle
Peach	<i>Miscellaneous</i>
Rhubarb	Egg
Raisins	Egg custard
Sultanas	Cake
Currants	Biscuit
<i>Vegetable</i>	Pancake
Carrot	Pudding
Parsnip	Scone
Potato	Dumpling
Cabbage	Bread
Turnip	Gravy
Onion	Fruit pie
Cauliflower	Meat pie
Beans	Vegetable soup
Peas	
Tomato	
Lettuce	
Beetroot	

All the vegetables mentioned here were frequently consumed throughout the year, except for peas and beans which were usually available only in summer. Salad vegetables were used more on weekends and in summer than at other times.

White refined flour was used extensively for the making of most other items: bread, desserts and pastry for main dishes. Tapioca was only made into puddings.

Barley was often used to thicken soup and, to a lesser extent, was used as a drink for the sick. Rice was frequently used in puddings, to thicken soup and at odd times as a substitute for potatoes. Oatmeal was always used in porridge for breakfast and sometimes in biscuits.

Butter was used on bread and in making desserts. Dripping was either obtained from homemade roast or was bought from the ham and beef shop (delicatessen) as was the case for rural subjects in mining areas where fresh meat was not always available. Suet was used regularly in pastry for both desserts and main dishes in place of the more expensive butter. In many poorer homes, cream was considered a luxury and used only on weekends, for birthdays and Christmas.

Jam was inevitably used several times daily on bread and also in desserts. Treacle and golden syrup were frequently added for variety and also when homemade jam ran out.

Eggs were used extensively in all desserts and as a substitute for meat, especially during the Easter Season or on Fridays as some subjects were not allowed to consume meat on these days. All other food items in the miscellaneous section were derived from the food items mentioned.

No major differences were noted between the overall percentages in the food groups mentioned by the urban and provincial subjects. The main difference in food consumption among rural, provincial and urban subjects is in the fresh fish food group where the percentage of rural subjects who mentioned eating fresh fish was considerably lower than the percentages of either the urban or provincial respondents as illustrated in Figure 1. This trend however does not occur in the items of the prepared fish food group (Figure 2). It is possible that poor refrigeration (usually ice was used) and the long transportation times account for the differences found in the consumption patterns.

When subjects were asked if there was any food that they liked or disliked during their school days, different responses were obtained (Tables 3a, 3b). There was no particular trend,



## Food Habits in Australia

**FIGURE 1**

**PERCENTAGE OF SUBJECTS FROM RESPECTIVE AREAS WHO MENTIONED FRESH FISH**

<b>Barra-couta</b>	Urban 88%	<b>Flounder</b>	Urban 25%
	Provincial 85%		Provincial 39%
	Rural 35%		Rural 14%
<b>Eel</b>	Urban 25%	<b>Snapper</b>	Urban 24%
	Provincial 39%		Provincial 31%
	Rural 24%		Rural 7%
<b>Flake</b>	Urban 24%	<b>Whiting</b>	Urban 33%
	Provincial 0%		Provincial 38%
	Rural 7%		Rural 7%

**FIGURE 2**

**PERCENTAGE OF SUBJECTS FROM RESPECTIVE AREAS WHO MENTIONED PREPARED FISH**

<b>Cod</b>	Urban 76%	<b>Sardine</b>	Urban 74%
	Provincial 77%		Provincial 85%
	Rural 79%		Rural 62%
<b>Herring</b>	Urban 62%	<b>Ling</b>	Urban 23%
	Provincial 69%		Provincial 46%
	Rural 44%		Rural 48%
<b>Salmon</b>	Urban 75%	<b>Shell Fish</b>	Urban 25%
	Provincial 34%		Provincial 26%
	Rural 86%		Rural 23%

TABLE 3a

Food items liked	% Subjects
All	36
No choice allowed	16
Apple pies	10
Roast	8
Banana	8
Jam	8
Egg	8
Pudding	8

TABLE 3b

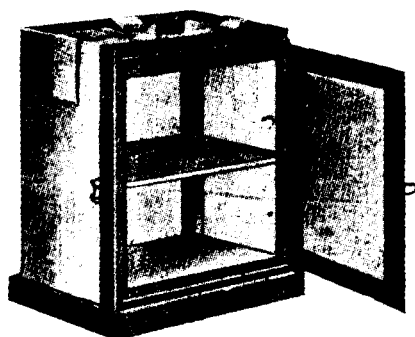
Food items disliked	% Subjects
Nil	16
Pumpkin	10
Caraway seed cake	10
Porridge	10
Cabbage	8
Parsnip	8

but many subjects mentioned that homemade food was good. Others stated that, as children, all food served had to be eaten and therefore no choice could be made as to food 'liked' or 'disliked'.

Tables 4a, b and c indicate the responses of subjects on questions concerning food-associated habits.

During those times, not many families ate away from home and if they did, it was usually with their relatives or at a picnic (Table 4a). Urban families only ate together during the evening meal, while in provincial and rural areas, families had their breakfast and evening meals together (Table 4b). Comparatively, more working men from urban households were served different or additional foods at their meals (Table 4c).

When food was left over from a meal, most families would usually keep it for the next suitable meal (Table 5a). The most popular type of food preserved was jam, while in the rural areas meat was more commonly salted or dried (Table 5b.) Wood



*Coolgardie safes, used for food storage, came in a number of shapes and sizes. Some were covered in hessian and used a crude evaporation system to keep food cool. This one is a galvanised iron version illustrated in Australasian Hardware & Machinery, December 1917. Vol. 32, No. 13. Reproduced by courtesy of the LaTrobe Collection, State Library of Victoria.*

**TABLE 4a**

THE FAMILY ATE AWAY FROM HOME	% Subjects			
	TOTAL	URBAN	PROVIN-CIAL	RURAL
Seldom	50	37	54	52
Sometimes	24	37	31	17
Never	18	25	15	17
Often	8	0	0	14
Unknown	0	0	0	0

**TABLE 4b**

THE FAMILY ATE TOGETHER AT	% Subjects			
	TOTAL	URBAN	PROVIN-CIAL	RURAL
Breakfast	60	0	54	79
Midday Meal	20	0	23	24
Evening Meal	88	62	84	97
Unknown	0	0	0	0

TABLE 4c

THE FAMILY ATE THE SAME FOOD AT EACH MEAL EXCEPT	% Subjects			
	TOTAL	URBAN	PROVIN- CIAL	RURAL
Father	24	38	15	24
Brother	6	12	7	3
Sister	4	0	0	2
Self	2	12	0	0
Mother	0	0	0	0
Unknown	0	0	0	0

TABLE 5a

LEFT OVER FOOD	% Subjects			
	TOTAL	URBAN	PROVIN- CIAL	RURAL
Kept for next suitable meal	94	100	85	97
Fed to animals	8	12	7	7
Thrown away	0	0	0	0
Unknown	4	0	7	3

TABLE 5b

FOOD PRESERVED	% Subjects			
	TOTAL	URBAN	PROVIN- CIAL	RURAL
Fruit — Jam	94	88	100	93
Vegetable — Pickled	70	62	69	72
Egg — In solution	50	24	61	51
Meat — Salted/Dried	44	12	15	65
Fruit — Preserved	34	24	15	45

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**TABLE 6**

STOVE USED	% Subjects			
	TOTAL	URBAN	PROVIN- CIAL	RURAL
Wood	100	100	100	100
Gas	8	0	23	3
Spirit	2	0	0	3

**TABLE 7**

REFRIGERATION	% Subjects			
	TOTAL	URBAN	PROVIN- CIAL	RURAL
Coolgardie	76	88	38	62
Cool place in the house	40	24	46	41
Cellar	14	0	0	24
Ice box	6	12	15	0

**TABLE 8**

NEW IMPLEMENTS USED	% Subjects			
	TOTAL	URBAN	PROVIN- CIAL	RURAL
Meat mincer	72	62	84	69
Grater	70	88	92	90
Strainer	70	88	84	93
Egg whisk/beater	68	38	69	76
Fruit bottling outfit	16	24	7	21
Coffee percolator	10	12	15	7
Portable fold-up safe	4	0	7	3
Carpet sweeper	4	0	0	7
Vinegar/cider maker	2	0	0	3
Unknown	0	0	0	0

stoves were used in all households (Table 6). Coolgardie safes were popular in urban homes while in provincial homes 'cool places in the house', equivalent to the cellar in the rural homes, were used to keep food fresh (Table 7). Few homes had carpeted floors and straw brooms were used instead of carpet sweepers. Meat mincers, egg whisks, graters and strainers were available in most homes (Table 8).

TABLE 9a

FOOD EATEN IN BETWEEN MEALS	% Subjects			
	TOTAL	URBAN	PROVIN- CIAL	RURAL
Fruit	74	88	85	65
Biscuits	72	75	92	62
Cakes	64	62	62	66
Bread & jam	62	88	46	62
Bread, butter & jam	36	0	48	41
Scone & butter	30	50	23	29
Bread & butter	20	25	23	17
Bread & dripping	18	12	23	17
Left-over vegetables/ meat	18	25	15	14
Buns	14	12	14	13
Bread, honey/golden syrup	6	12	23	17

TABLE 9b

BEVERAGE FOR IN BETWEEN MEALS	% Subjects			
	TOTAL	URBAN	PROVIN- CIAL	RURAL
Milk	32	50	38	24
Water	28	12	38	24
Cocoa	10	12	7	10
Lemonade	8	12	8	7
Cordial	6	12	0	7
Raspberry vinegar	4	0	15	0

Table 9a and 9b show foods and drinks consumed inbetween meals by subjects from the respective areas. The general types of 'snack' foods were: fruits, biscuits, cakes, bread and jam, with a drink of milk or water.

Food eaten on special occasions was, and perhaps still is, 'very British'. For Christmas, roast dinner, usually of fowl with vegetables, soft drinks, a variety of cakes and plum pudding with brandy sauce was standard in most homes. On Easter Friday,

**TABLE 10**

<b>Typical Menu Mentioned by Subjects</b>	
<b>BREAKFAST</b>	
8.00-9.00 a.m.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Oatmeal porridge with milk and sugar</li> <li>— Toasted white bread and jam (plum or melon-ginger).</li> <li>— Cup of tea with milk and sugar or a glass of milk</li> </ul>
<b>LUNCH</b>	
12.00-1.00 p.m.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Cut lunch to school</li> <li>— Buttered white bread with left-over cold meat from roast — add salt &amp; pepper</li> <li>— Piece of fruit (apple or fruit in season)</li> <li>— Piece of fruit cake or queen cake</li> <li>— Mug of water from school tank (rain water)</li> </ul>
<b>AFTERNOON SNACK</b>	
3.30-4.00 p.m.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— White bread and jam</li> <li>— Piece of fruit cake or biscuit</li> <li>— Piece of fruit</li> <li>— Glass of milk or water</li> </ul>
<b>DINNER</b>	
5.30-6.00 p.m.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— On cold days — soup (shank stock, barley, root vegetables)</li> <li>— Roast leg of lamb with gravy (dripping from roast, plain flour and water)</li> <li>— Boiled carrots, cabbage, baked potato — add salt</li> <li>— Jam roly-poly (suet crust with jam, boiled)</li> <li>— Cup of tea</li> </ul>

fish, especially Ling fish, and eggs often replaced meat, while hot cross buns and hard-boiled eggs painted as Easter eggs were popular with many families. Birthdays were not celebrated by all. For those who did, birthday cake with simple icing, sandwiches, soft drinks, biscuits and bread and butter with hundreds-and-thousands on top were very popular at the time. Most subjects said they did not attend any weddings.

The typical menu items mentioned by subjects are listed in Table 10. They have been compiled from the most popularly mentioned items for each meal.

## Conclusion

The findings from the interview were comparable to those deduced from original documents concerning Australian food habits. This relationship between methodologies gave confidence that the trends evidenced from the interview were valid for Australians at the turn of the century.

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