ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA

For Food Cultures of the World Encyclopedia (2011)

OVERVIEW

The Commonwealth of Australia is an island country located between the Indian and South Pacific Oceans. It is comprised of the continental mainland, the island of Tasmania and several smaller surrounding islands. Consisting of six states, Australia is the world's sixth largest country, just slightly smaller than the continental United States. The continent was inhabited by Aboriginal settlers from Southeast Asia up to 60,000 years ago. The British took possession of the country in the late eighteenth century and turned it into a prison colony for their criminals, and Australia officially became a country in 1901.

A majority of the country's population is condensed along the southeastern and eastern coasts. The central region is sparsely populated because of its dry, desert environment. As a whole, the country receives very little rainfall and struggles to manage its limited fresh water resources. The country boasts more than 21 million citizens, with Indigenous Australians making up only 1 percent of the population, just over 500,000 people.

Indigenous Australians are defined as those whose ancestors lived on the continent and its neighboring islands before British colonists began to arrive in the seventeenth century. The Northern Territory has the highest proportion of Aboriginal Australians among its population, and the state of Victoria has the

lowest. The percentage of Aboriginal Australians living in remote areas of Australia is just slightly lower than the amount of Aboriginal Australians that dwell in or near urban settings.

Aboriginal Australians' diets vary by location. Generally, the closer a family lives to an urban center, the more processed, Western-style foods they consume. The farther a family lives from a city, the more likely they are to supplement the processed, Western foods they consume with traditional foods and cooking methods.

VIGNETTE

Jack and Ann Smith are Aboriginal Australians who live with their two children, Nicole and Jonah, and Jack's unemployed brother Mark, in a modest neighborhood in Walkerville, South Australia, a suburb northeast of the city of Adelaide. A few years back, Jack and Ann moved their family closer to the city from the bush, or the desert region where the nomadic Aboriginal populations traditionally lived. In Walkerville, Jack works as a mechanic and Ann has a job as a housekeeper. Still, they struggle to pay bills and buy groceries every month because they make nearly 50% less than the average non-indigenous Australian family. This lower-class lifestyle affects their diet, which incorporates many processed, fatty Western foods and very few traditional foods and cooking methods. However, processed foods are not new to the Aboriginal Australian diet; since the late eighteenth century in the bush, nearly everyone has relied on

government rations of processed food to survive as European settlement killed off more and more natural food sources. The only difference now is that there is a much larger selection to choose from.

For daily breakfasts, Ann makes sure to stock up on plenty of fresh fruit for a family favorite, fruit salad with cream and sugar, which Jack eats before heading to work at 6 a.m. She also stocks up on cream, as the rest of the family loves it on top of cereal with fruit juice when they wake up at 7 a.m. for school. Mark, Jack's brother, typically gets the children ready for school so Ann can leave for work at 6:30 a.m. He spends the rest of his day doing chores for the family around the house to help contribute.

Most of the family eats lunch out during the day. Jack and Ann often buy meat pies from convenience stores during work around noon, and the children purchase chicken nuggets and toasted cheese sandwiches from their school cafeteria. The children also drink off-brand sodas with fruit flavors like passionfruit and mango, or their favorite juice, Ribena, which is made from black currants. Mark is only one who eats lunch at home, and he typically makes himself a snag on the dag, or a pork sausage quickly grilled and served in a piece of white sandwich bread with barbecue sauce.

At dinnertime, Nicole and Jonah beg their mother to cook frozen French fries sprinkled with chicken salt, which is exactly what it sounds like; chicken-flavored salt. Ann accompanies the fries with pre-formed frozen hamburger

patties that she throws on the family grill and a bag of frozen mixed vegetables that she heats in the microwave.

For a treat, especially on the weekends, Ann uses all-purpose flour and butter to make quandong crumble from the country's wild native peach.

Quandong Crumble Recipe

Filling:

1 cup of dried quandongs, rehydrated in water overnight

1 cup of peeled, chopped apple

1/2 cup of water

¾ cup of sugar

1 Tablespoon fresh lemon juice

1 Tablespoon cornstarch or arrowroot

Crumble Topping:

1/2 stick of butter (2 oz) cold and chopped into cubes

1 1/3 cup flour

¼ cup rolled oats

3 Tablespoon sugar

½ teaspoon ground cinnamon

Method:

Preheat oven to 400 degrees F. To make the crumble topping, put all of the crumble ingredients in a bowl and work them with your fingers until pea-sized bits of butter are integrated with the rest of the ingredients. Place quandong, apple, water, sugar, lemon juice and cornstarch in a pan and toss to thoroughly combine. Sprinkle crumble on top of filling and bake for 45 minutes, or until filling is bubbling and thickened and crumble is browned.

Since leaving the bush three years ago, the Smith family has experienced many changes in their eating habits and cooking methods. While growing up in the outback, Jack's mother would grab one of the chooks (chickens) they raised in their backyard and slaughter it before dinner. When Jack brought home a live chook recently, both of his children cried for hours after the slaughter. The older Smiths miss the days when a few hours of hunting would yield a kangaroo; these days, money is the only currency that will buy them meat. A special meal used to mean freshly-caught echidna (porcupine) cooked in a ground oven and Johnny cakes (a campfire flat bread) shared with several other families, but today, a special monthly treat is an intimate meal with the immediate family at the local Mackas (McDonalds) for burgers, fries and Happy Meals.

MAJOR FOODSTUFFS

"*To make food go further*

Eat less."

– Aboriginal saying

Aboriginal Australians have the oldest existing culinary tradition in the world. They are believed to have entered northern Australia 40,000-60,000 years ago. From there, Aboriginal families and clans spread across the country, each adapting to wildly different climates and environments, from humid rainforests to achingly dry deserts, from sunny coastlines to snowy mountain tops. Due to such an assortment of climates and settings, it is difficult to generalize about early Aboriginal cuisine.

However, there were a few commonalities shared by almost all Aboriginal clans before the Europeans settled in Australia in the year 1788. Early Aboriginal clans were hunter-gatherers that moved frequently based on food supplies. Their diet consisted of over a thousand different plants and a variety of wild animals. It was largely vegetarian with the occasional infusion of meat, and had a heavy focus on grains. Women and children gathered plants (nuts, tubers, seeds and fruit), caught small animals and fished, which accounted for a majority of the clan's diet. Men were responsible for hunting large and small animals, including kangaroo, emu, wild birds, bandicoots, and turtles.

Of course, variations existed based on region, with desert clans dining on witchetty grubs and flying foxes (bats), and coastal clans serving shellfish, stingrays and oysters. To catch their meals, they would use spears, sharpened animal bones, nets, or whatever they could fashion or use from their surroundings.

Almost all Aboriginal communities made some form of flatbread on their campfires, commonly known as damper. To make most dampers, they would gather seeds, dry them, and then grind them when they needed flour. The result was much heartier than the wheat flour damper of today, and was also very nourishing.

Post-European settlement, available foodstuffs to Aboriginal Australians changed drastically and altered their basic diet. As land was cleared for more settlement, crops, and livestock, more wild Australian plant and animal foods were destroyed or displaced, affecting the availability of traditional Aboriginal food sources. To account for this gap in their natural diet, the government assisted Aboriginals with food rations of processed, Western, high-fat foods, which still accounts for a majority of their food today. Traditional foods and cooking methods are still used, but only by those families living remotely, and only as a supplement to the high-calorie, low-nutrient processed food they regularly eat.

COOKING

"Corn beef and damper, sure we'll have enough,

We'll boil in the bucket such a whooper of a duff!

And as for fish, we'll catch 'em very soon, very soon,

For we'll bait for barramundi on the banks of a lagoon!"

--Old Bush Ballad

Traditional Aboriginal Australian cooking was viewed by Europeans as simple, but it was very time and labor-intensive and required many skills from the clan cook. These abilities included adapting to different weather and environments, getting creative when tools or new cooking methods were needed, knowing which kind of wood works with which sort of food, etc. Some plants and fruits were edible in their raw state, but several required cooking in hot ashes or soaking in water to improve digestibility or to leach out toxins in the food. For instance, munja seeds, or kernels from the cycad palm, were great for drying and grinding into flour, but fresh munja contains a poisonous acid. Aboriginals would cut thin slices of the seed with a sharpened kangaroo blade bone and dry the pieces. When they needed flour, they would soak the pieces in water until the acid released, and then grind into flour for bread-making. This and other traditional cooking methods were passed down to their children through songs, along with an oral history of their culture.

Their cooking equipment and methods were quite rudimentary and yet sophisticated; they could steam and smoke food in an earth oven or char it in ash oven, grill over hot ashes, bake food in hot ashes (parching), or roast on hot coals (mainly reserved for small animals and seafood). For example, to cook damper or other flatbreads, a cook would build a large fire, scrape aside the hot coals, set the dough in the center of the fire, and then top the dough with hot coals and ashes to bake.

To cook a kangaroo, they would build a ground oven by digging a shallow hole, and starting a wood fire in it. Stones would be placed on top of the fire, and when the fire burned down and the stones were hot, soaked branches were placed on top. The branches would start steaming, then the meat would be placed on top and covered in more hot stones, wet leaves, and paper bark to make an air-tight seal until the meat was cooked. Cooking equipment had to be light, portable, and made from the land, like coolamons (vessels) made from bark or tree gnarls.

For the modern, remote-living Aboriginal family, some aspects of their modern cookery reflect traditional as well as Western cooking methods, like using the Western methods of boiling and frying over a traditional open fire. Depending on how remote a particular Aboriginal community is will determine what sort of cooking equipment is available. Many remote areas have no running water or electricity. If a family is lucky enough to have a kerosene-run refrigerator, it breaks often or funds are too short to run it all the time. A camp might have a small propane cook top, but typically they rely on cooking over an open camp fire or ready-made convenience foods that require little to no cooking, purchased from a station store or a monthly mail truck. Post-European settlement, certain cooking equipment was introduced into remote Aboriginal communities to make open fire cooking easier, like shovels for handling fires and making damper, and cast iron or steel camp ovens (a three-legged pot with a lid that acts as an oven when placed into hot coals).

Damper Bread Recipe

Ingredients:

1 cup of self-rising flour

½ cup milk

½ Tablespoon butter

Dash of salt

1 Tablespoon sugar

½ teaspoon baking soda

Method: Mix the flour with salt, sugar, and baking soda, then rub the butter into the flour until you get pea-sized bits. Stir in milk until the mix forms into a dough. Shape into small biscuits and bake in a 400 degree F oven for 15 minutes, or until bread is fully browned.

Billy cans are pots used to boil water or brew tea over open fires, and nearly every family has a coveted billy can. They supplement processed foods by hunting and gathering native foods whenever possible, and adapting native cooking to Western cooking equipment and methods. A common sight that blends both Western and Aboriginal worlds is a camp fire pot boiling a leg of kangaroo with the paw curled over the edge of the pot.

It is important to note that several organizations and individuals are

striving to preserve Aboriginal Australian culinary heritage. Professional chef and fellow Aboriginal Australian Mark Olive works in remote Indigenous communities, organizing workshops to reclaim traditional Aboriginal cooking methods, and educating kids about these traditions as well as nutrition.

Modern, non-remote-living Aboriginal families use even less traditional cooking methods and recipes than their remote-living brothers. The most common cooking methods involve using a microwave, a stove top or basic oven, and the occasional barbecue grill. Since these families have easier access to a wide range of processed food and tend to own a refrigerator or freezer, frozen or premade foods like fish sticks and sausage rolls are popular. This means instead of cooking food, reheating is only needed. While this average family tends to have better living conditions then those living in more remote locations (electricity and running water are much more common), housing and cooking equipment tends to be modest, and is often in need of repair.

If a traditional Aboriginal recipe is made, the main ingredients are almost always substituted with available Western ingredients and Western cooking methods, and it is often for celebration or reminiscence, rather than a daily or religious sustenance. For example, a traditional Aboriginal stew might contain kangaroo or emu meat and be cooked on an open fire, but today, they might use corned beef, a preserved meat that was served at the station camps because it required no refrigeration, and a stove top. Many modern Aboriginal families still

rely on corned beef for a large quantity of their meat supply, not because of poor refrigeration but rather because these are the traditions they remember.

TYPICAL MEALS

For remote-living Aboriginal Australians, breakfast starts with leftover food from the day before. During mid to late afternoon, they eat dinner, which consists of vegetables, grains, and occasionally meat or fish (depending on the community's location), and is typically prepared at the main camp. Throughout the day, they also consume snacks *au natural*, eaten fresh while hunting and gathering, typically berries, nuts, insects, and plants.

Traditional Aboriginal eating habits are still factored into some modern, remote-living Aboriginal communities, which include taboos and eating order. Meat is a rare treat and carefully split up among the community based on rank. Men are favored, with the hunter giving away choice bits to his relatives, who might pass some down to the women. Offal, which is really prized, goes to the elders. The hunter may invoke a traditional law called *The Vow*, where he is allowed to lay claim to a choice piece of offal, and if anyone else in the tribe eats it, they will have broken the law. Other taboos include various foods that are forbidden to eaten based on circumstances, particularly around menstruating women and girls, and boys around the age of initiation. For example, young boys about to undergo initiation are forbidden to eat wallaby and two kinds of bandicoot because they have been known to turn black beards brown, an

unfavorable color.

For urban-living Aboriginal Australians, their typical meals are most similar to a Western diet. Breakfast is often cereal with cream or full-fat milk, toast with Vegemite, a yeast-based spread, or a bigger fried English breakfast of sausage, tomatoes, mushroom, fried eggs, and toast. Lunch can be fast food or something convenient and pre-packaged, like meat pies and sausage rolls with tomato sauce that can be bought at gas stations and convenience stores.

Dinner is made up of cheap meats cooked simply (pork, lamb, beef, and chicken are common meats), either grilled, fried (breaded meat cutlets is a popular dish), boiled or baked, or it can consist of frozen, pre-made food like a frozen pizza or shepherd's pie. A few times a month, a typical family treats themselves to a meal at a fast food restaurant.

EATING OUT

Regardless of where they live, many Aboriginal Australians are classified as lower class or impoverished, so the opportunity to dine out does not come often. For remote-living Aboriginals, restaurants few and far between in the bush, so dining out often involves picking up a pre-made food from a local store.

For urban-dwelling Aboriginal Australians, there are certainly more opportunities to dine out, as proximity to an urban center typically means there are more restaurants, and fast food restaurants are a popular choice. McDonalds is widely popular across Australia, as is other U.S. fast food companies like KFC,

Subway, and Burger King. Even then, an outing to a fast food restaurant is a special occasion, because families are often large and money is scarce.

Restaurants that serve traditional Aboriginal Australian food do not really exist in Australia, and if they do, they often go out of business because the general population does not dine on native Australian ingredients or traditional Aboriginal Australian cuisine. For example, professional Aboriginal chef Mark Olive opened an Indigenous Australian restaurant in Sydney in 1996 called *The Midden*, but the restaurant only lasted for 18 months as there was not enough interest in it. Plenty of non-Aboriginal Australian chefs are using native ingredients in their cuisine, but not to create Aboriginal Australian food. A lamb meat pie flavored with native lemon verbena and wattleseed would be a good example of how Australian chefs are utilizing native ingredients with popular European dishes. The use of native foods in restaurants is currently a trend, and often these restaurants charge far beyond an average Aboriginal's dining budget for the native population to enjoy the food.

SPECIAL OCCASIONS

Special occasions like cultural ceremonies traditionally drew together a large group of Aboriginals, so there was a great need to hold such occasions near an abundant source of food. This means many ceremonial foods were linked with seasonal abundance. For instance, spring and summer in the mountains in the states of Victoria and New South Wales yield large quantities of bogong moths,

so ceremonies that take place during that time often occurred in the mountains so there would be a plentiful food source for the group.

Although they do not perform ceremonies nearly as frequently as their ancestors did, modern remote-living Aboriginal Australians still perform ceremonies whenever possible and try to use traditional recipes and ingredients whenever possible. For example, for the Kunapipi (Fertility Mother) ceremonies, a hearty damper is made from munja seeds and can be stored for months before to save time and energy. Urban Aboriginal Australians do participate in such ceremonies and foods, but not nearly as often.

DIET AND HEALTH

The diet of the average Aboriginal Australian family has been modified drastically over the past 200 years; a brief history of this change is warranted to understand the modern Aboriginal Australian diet. Traditional Aboriginal Australian cuisine was determined based on the belief that people should live in harmony with their environment instead of damaging it, as well as a practice of seasonal eating. As hunter-gatherers, they would travel around based on season and available food supply, and as a result, they often ate fresher food, which is healthier than processed food. This also helped prevent them from completely depleting a food supply in a single area, as they constantly moved to find new food sources. Through trial and error, they discovered foods that hurt their bodies and foods that increased their health, and they passed this knowledge down to

younger generations through songs and stories.

The Europeans settled in the country in the late eighteenth century and took ownership of the land because they assumed it was *terra nullius*, a legal term that means owned by no one. Aboriginal Australian clans were displaced or killed as Europeans spread out for settlements and to raise herds and grow crops. Life as hunter-gatherers taught Aboriginals to adapt to new environments, and they coped by hunting the herds and cooking them in traditional methods, as well as hunting newly introduced vermin like rabbits that were killing off native animals.

Shortly after European settlement, the newly formed government started handing out rations of Western food to displaced Aboriginal Australians, and they quickly became dependent on the handouts. Other Aboriginals were sent to work at pastoral stations where they received similar rations in exchange for work; food they had never tried such as corned beef, flour, sugar and tea. At this point, Aboriginal diets depended largely on how well the station stores were stocked. If the station store manager wasn't empathetic to the Aboriginals, the store would lack healthy, nutritious food that negatively affected Aboriginal health, as it was low in calcium and vitamins. They shifted from a mainly vegetarian diet to a meat-focused diet because rations rarely had fruit, vegetables and dairy, due to poor transportation methods and a lack of refrigeration.

Families were separated and from the late eighteenth through the late nineteenth century, Australian Federal and State governments removed

Aboriginal children from their homes and placed them into European Australian households, which made it difficult to pass on the oral culture and culinary traditions of their people. However, this did not eliminate Aboriginal Australian culinary culture completely; some remote-living Aboriginals adapted by finding time to hunt and gather traditional bush tucker (Aboriginal food) on the weekends, and when work on the stations would slow down, many would go on a walkabout, or a spiritual walk into the bush to live off the land, rebuild their health and strength, and to share Aboriginal traditions.

It wasn't until the late 1960s that Aboriginal civil rights were finally recognized, and government control over where they lived and moved was taken away. Many Aboriginal Australian workers were let go from their station jobs and forced to live in fringe camps and be on welfare, which only further cemented their dependence upon processed foods that were cheap and easily available in local stores. There was also a decline in gathering bush tucker, which was exacerbated by the ongoing clearance of land for more settlement areas.

From the 1960s until the present, Aboriginal clans and families took various paths that ultimately led them to one of two destinations: living in a rural, remote Aboriginal community (often close to the outback), or moving closer to cities and towns and attempting to assimilate even more into Western society.

Those that created their own remote Aboriginal communities still rely on station stores or monthly mail trucks for their food supplies. Canned fruit,

powdered milk, rice, and canned meat are staples in a modern remote Aboriginal diet. But ever adaptive, remote-living Aboriginals have combined parts of Western culture with their traditional culture, supplementing processed foods with Aboriginal foods and cooking methods whenever possible. Many families adapt popular recipes from other ethnic cuisines to their native food supply and cooking methods, and curried gulah, or spaghetti and kangaroo meatballs are commonly found on modern Aboriginal camp sites. Bush plum pudding is another common recipe found on camp sites during the holidays, an Aboriginal take of the popular British Christmas dish.

Those Aboriginal families that chose to live closer to Western society had better exposure to food sources in the form of grocery stores, which meant direct access to fresh fruit, vegetables and dairy. But meat and sugar still plays a significant role in their diet, just as it did at the pastoral stations. Despite the fact that Aboriginals living in a non-remote area can now self-select their diet for the first time in a hundred years, they still cling close to their learned pastoral station diets because it is what they know. Fast food outlets are also finding their way into the average modern non-remote Aboriginal diet.

It is important to note that almost all of these communities (remote and non-remote) are lower class or impoverished, so food supplies dwindle based on the money a family or community can generate at any given time.

An interesting twist in the history of Aboriginal Australian cuisine is the native foods industry of Australia. Created in the 1970s, the native foods industry is comprised of Indigenous Australian foods such as fruits, spices, nuts, and herbs, commercially manufactured for restaurants and gourmet stores. A positive side of the Australian native foods industry is that it utilizes Aboriginal cultural heritage and provides Aboriginals with jobs. However, most native foods are so high-priced that neither remote nor non-remote Aboriginal families can afford to work it into their regular diets.

Due to the westernization of their diets to varying degrees, both remote-living and urban-dwelling Aboriginal Australians have a number of serious health concerns, including obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, alcohol, and drug abuse. As of 2005, 57% of Aboriginal Australians were overweight or obese regardless of whether they lived in a city or the bush. They are 1.2 times more likely to be overweight or obese compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Studies show that Aboriginal Australian babies are fully nourished by their mother's milk, but with so much processed food in their environment, they inevitably gain excess weight and become unhealthy when they move on to solid foods. Exercise is another large factor in why so many Aboriginals are overweight, as more than 70% of remote and non-remote Aboriginal Australians do little to no exercise. Diet and exercise are also contributors to the large number of Aboriginals suffering from cardiovascular disease and high blood pressure.

One group trying to make a difference in Aboriginal Australian health is The Fred Hollows Foundation, which has been collaborating with Indigenous women in the Northern Territory to create a cookbook for Indigenous Australians that can be used in remote communities and can help alleviate poor health due to diet.

Aboriginal Australians' increased rate of obesity has led to an excessive occurrence of type 2 diabetes in the Aboriginal Australian community, making them 4 times more likely to develop diabetes than the non-Indigenous Australian community. The first Aboriginal Australian case of diabetes occurred in 1923, but before that, there was no history of metabolic conditions among this community, as most hunter-gatherer Aboriginals were in good physical condition and their diet was healthy. After a group of diabetic Aboriginal Australians returned to a traditional lifestyle and cuisine, studies found that their health improved and their diabetes conditions either lessened or disappeared.

Alcohol is another factor in poor Aboriginal health, specifically in diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Studies have shown that although Aboriginals are less apt to drink alcohol than non-Indigenous Australians, they are more prone to drink dangerous amounts of alcohol when they do imbibe. Between 2000 and 2004, 1,145 Aboriginal Australians died because of injuries or diseases instigated by alcohol, with the median age of death around 35 years of age.

Further Reading

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