

# AUSTRALIAN FLAVOUR

**Traditional Australian Cuisine**

Brilliantly illustrated by an international team

**Sharon Robards**



# *Australian Flavour: Traditional Australian Cuisine*

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Cooking [118]

Sharon Robards

GMM Press (2008)

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Rating: ★★★★★

Tags: Cookbooks

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For today's abundance of fine Australian food we are grateful to immigrants from many nations. It is uniquely our own. In this book we celebrate and illustrate Australian Flavour with more than 150 recipes historical, iconic, and modern an overview, and historical notes. Australian Flavour is a collaborative work that captures traditional Australian cuisine. The recipes are compiled from some of the writers who had the biggest influence on our eating habits, from Isabella Beaton to Vic Cherikoff. More than fifty photographers from around the world have contributed images. Edward Abbott, the author of Australia's first cookery book, wrote in 1864, 'We like these quaint old customs and ceremonies and hope they will always be kept up in the old country.' Abbott was referring to Christmas pudding, and like Abbott, Australians have never lost their early heritage, they have added to it.

## ### About the Author

Sharon Robards lives two hundred kilometres north of Sydney, on the beautiful and rugged east coast of Australia, in a place called Port Stephens, a sanctuary for dolphins and a Mecca for tourists who come to see an annual migration of 6,000 whales each year.

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# Table of Contents

## [About](#)

## [Introduction](#)

## [Australia's Own](#)

[Anzac Biscuits](#)

[Chiko Roll](#)

[Chocolate Crackles](#)

[Damper](#)

[Fairy Bread](#)

[Frog Cake](#)

[Lamingtons](#)

[Neenish Tart](#)

[Pavlova - Australian or New Zealand](#)

[Pies](#)

[Pie Floater](#)

[Harry's Cafe de Wheels](#)

[Pikelets](#)

[Vegemite](#)

## Recipes by Section

### [Bread](#)

[Damper](#)

[Fairy Bread](#)

[Hot Cross Buns](#)

[Johnny Cakes](#)

[Raisin Bread](#)

[Bread and Butter Pudding](#)

[Dried Bread Crumbs](#)

[Melba Toast](#)

[Toasted Rolled Sandwiches](#)

[Burdekin Duck](#)

[Jam Tin Damper](#)

[An Account of Making Bread](#)

### [Biscuits, Cakes, Desserts and Sweets](#)

[Angel Cakes](#)

[Anzac Biscuits](#)

[Chocolate Crackles](#)

[Christmas Pudding](#)

---

[Coconut Biscuits](#)

[Easter Eggs](#)

[Gingerbread Men](#)

[Lamingtons](#)

[Neenish Tarts](#)

[Pavlova](#)

[Pikelets](#)

[Pumpkin Scones](#)

[Rock Cakes](#)

[White Christmas](#)

## **Breakfast**

[Big Breakfast](#)

[Omelettes on Fire](#)

## **Fruit**

[Apple Shape](#)

[Banana Cream](#)

[Banana and Orange Salad](#)

[Raspberry and Currant \(or any fresh Fruit\) Salad](#)

[Cosmopolitan Salad](#)

[Fruit Salad](#)

[Oranges, A Pretty Dish](#)

[Pawpaws, Baked](#)

[Peach Melba](#)

[Pineapple Fritters](#)

[Brandy or Liqueur Pineapple Fritters](#)

[Granny Smith](#)

## **Vegetables**

[Breakfast Salad](#)

[Bubble & Squeak](#)

[Cabbage, Stewed](#)

[Carrots in Butter](#)

[Cauliflower Cheese](#)

[Cauliflower Fritters](#)

[Celery Salad](#)

[Cucumbers, Dressed](#)

[Curried Vegetables](#)

[Egg Salad](#)

[Macaroni & Cheese Salad](#)

[Potato Balls](#)

[Potato Salad](#)

[Potato Savoury](#)

[Sauce, for Vegetables](#)

[Tomatoes, Baked](#)

[Tomatoes, Stuffed](#)

[Hints on Salads](#)

[Potato Ribbons](#)

[The Irish Connection](#)

## **Sauces and Gravies**

[Anchovy Sauce](#)

[Apple Sauce](#)

[Bechamel Sauce](#)

[Brandy or Rum Sauce](#)

[Bread Sauce](#)

[Brown Gravy](#)

[Butter, Sauce Melted](#)

[Caramel](#)

[Curry Sauce](#)

[Custard Sauce for Puddings or Tarts](#)

[Fish, Excellent Sauce for](#)

[Frying Batter](#)

[Lemon Sauce](#)

[Mayonnaise](#)

[Mint Sauce to serve with Roast Lamb](#)

[Mornay Sauce](#)

[Oyster Sauce](#)

[Plum Pudding Sauce](#)

[Tartare Sauce](#)

[Tomato Sauce](#)

[White Sauce](#)

[Brief Introduction to Mayonnaise](#)

[A Tolerable Party](#)

[Sauces – How to Prepare](#)

## **Soups**

[Cabbage Soup](#)

[Chicken Noodle Soup](#)

[Mulligatawny Soup](#)

[Pea Soup](#)

[Pea & Ham Soup](#)

[Pumpkin Soup](#)

[Tomato Soup](#)

[Vegetable Soup](#)

[The Stock Pot](#)

[Beef Stock](#)

[Chicken Stock](#)

[Fish Stock](#)

## **[Chicken and Fowl](#)**

[Apricot Chicken](#)

[Chicken, Fillets](#)

[Chicken Fritters](#)

[Chicken, roasted and Mushroom sauce](#)

[Chicken Salad](#)

[Croquettes of Chicken](#)

[Sage and Onion Stuffing for Geese, Ducks, or Pork](#)

[Country Captain](#)

[Turkey, Various ways of using cold](#)

## **[Meat](#)**

[Bacon & Egg Pie](#)

[Beef Stew](#)

[Carpet-Bag Steak](#)

[Devon and Potato Savoury](#)

[Dim Sim](#)

[Dumplings](#)

[Irish Stew](#)

[Hamburgers](#)

[Lamb Curry](#)

[Lamb, Roast Dinner](#)

[Lamb Shanks](#)

[Macaroni and Meat](#)

[Potato Pie](#)

[Rissoles](#)

[Saveloys, Battered](#)

[Spaghetti Bolognese](#)

[Stewed Steak](#)

[Toad in the Hole](#)

[Veal Cutlets](#)

[A Lady's Visit to the Gold Diggings of Australia](#)

[Barrier Goose](#)

[Carpet-Bag Steak - Australian or American?](#)

[Devilled Meat](#)

[Devon](#)

[Family Christmas Dinner with 7 Friends](#)

[Hints on Servants](#)

## **[Seafood](#)**

[Buttered Whiting](#)

[Fish in Batter](#)

[Beer Batter for Frying Fish](#)

[Fish au Gratin](#)

[Fish, Grilled](#)

[Fish in Tomato Sauce](#)

[Fried Lobster](#)

[Fillet de Sole a la Mornay](#)

[Kedgeree](#)

[Lobster a la Newburg](#)

[Oysters and Bacon](#)

[Oyster Kromeskies](#)

[Prawn Salad](#)

[Salmon Cakes](#)

[Stewed Savoury Dish of Fish with Lemon Sauce](#)

[To Dress Prawns](#)

[To Scale Fish](#)

[To Use Cold Smoked Fish](#)

## **[Barbecues](#)**

[Breakfast Eggs on the Barbecue](#)

[Devilled Egg Side Dish](#)

[Fish in Foil](#)

[Lime Marinade for Chicken Breast](#)

[Marinade for Fish or Meat](#)

[Marinade Steak](#)

[Tandoori Chicken](#)

[Mushrooms and Onions](#)

[Potatoes in Foil](#)

[Prawns and Fish Marinade](#)

[Soy and Honey Marinade](#)

[Sunshine Salad](#)

## **[Native Foods](#)**

### **[Popular Native Foods](#)**

### **[Recipes Using Native Ingredients](#)**

[White Chocolate and Macadamia Brownies](#)

[Chargrilled Pork with Macadamia & Peach Salsa](#)

[Macadamia Salad Dressing](#)

[Lamb Loin with English Spinach with Semi-dried Tomato and Bush Tomato Chutney](#)

[Grilled Barramundi Fillet with Lemon Myrtle Mash and Quandong Confit](#)

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[Wattleseed Mousse with Wild Rosella](#)

## **Glossary**

## **Selected References**





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# Australian Flavour

Traditional Australian Cuisine

By

**Sharon Robards**

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

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Australian Flavour is a collaborative work that captures traditional Australian cuisine. Many recipes originated in other countries and became part of our eating habits when introduced by early settlers or the first Australian recipe writers. Some recipes are known the world over, embedded in other cultures as well as our own from our earliest days, and well established as part of our cuisine. The recipes are compiled from some of the writers who had the biggest influence on our eating habits, from Isabella Beeton to Vic Cherikoff.

Australian Flavour includes a [glossary](#) of unfamiliar terms and ingredients. Two separate units of measurement is included: Standard metric weight and volume measurements, then their Australian equivalent. The Australian tablespoon is not the standard 15ml, but 20ml. All cup measurements are 250ml.

# Australian Flavour

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Traditional Australian Cuisine

**By**

**Sharon Robards**

*Macadamia Nuts*

**Photographer Brad Cavanagh**

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For my grandmothers Ruby and Nellie.  
Thank you for all the beautiful memories.

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# INTRODUCTION

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WHEN the first fleet of ships carrying convicts arrived in 1788 the sailors, settlers and Government officials brought with them recipes based on the British eating habits and cookery of the time. The diet was heavy with red meat and was dull, even monotonous. Many recipes required adaptation where ingredients were unavailable in Australia. What developed over the next couple of centuries was a delightful and distinctively Australian cuisine with world-wide roots.

Australian Flavour began as an exercise to capture the meals my grandmothers loved. I relished their cooking, summer or winter — casseroles, soups, baked dinners, and bread and butter pudding. The meals my grandmothers made at home were very much based on what was cooked at ‘Home’ — the British Isles — despite it being one hundred and eighty years for my grandmothers since the forebears landed on Australian soil, and well over two hundred years for us today.

I discovered that for a century most Australians ate a crofter’s or smallholder’s diet, based on rural recipes from the English and Irish countryside. From the same origins came ingredients, the utensils, the methods, and the manner of serving.

The pioneers relied on the camp oven, based on the Irish cauldron, a heavy circular pot on three legs to stand above a fire; camp ovens made to stand in line abreast had flattened sides. Apart from adding mashed potato to bread dough, the Irish had but one method of cooking: boiling potatoes in a cauldron. A third of the original settlers were Irish.

A modern writer called them “the prototypes of modern Australians”, because they demanded very little variety or quality in their food. This is not true of Australians today. As the years went on our taste for food was influenced by waves of immigrants from outside the UK.

As late as 1861, 60 per cent of Australia’s population subsisted on prison rations. This diet was not the healthiest by today’s standards.

Australia’s food for the first hundred years consisted of flour, meat, sugar, tea, and salt, and rice and dried peas when those foods were cheaply available. The settlers wasted very little of any animal or bird, consuming a great deal of offal meat such as brains, liver, kidneys, sweetbreads, tripe, heads, trotters, tongue, and of course sausage casings. Brawn, the jellied repository of finely sliced scraps and sausages themselves accounted for every other part of the animal. Rabbits, which were introduced for sport and food, quickly became a pest. The settlers preferred mutton. All wild and native fauna were seen as inferior to mutton.

Olden-day preferences challenged me as a compiler. Today’s consumers prefer fresh fruit, vegetables, and fish. What I thought would be a simple exercise turned into a project to capture the essence of traditional Australian food today. I discovered that Australians eat more red meat than any other culture, and that for more than a hundred years we did so three times a day. It took even long for us seriously to consider eating raw carrots.

Our early cookbooks must have frustrated and confused everybody while providing inspiration, no doubt. The ordinary settler could not get, or could not afford, many specified ingredients. The lan

was inhospitable to European plants and wildlife. Good husbandry was required to yield crops.

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In the first hundred years there were many books on various topics about Australia, although, of course, very few in the format that we expect today.

*The English and Australian Cookery Book, Cooking for the many as well as the Upper Ten Thousand*, by Edward Abbott in 1864 is the first recognised Australian cookbook.

Abbott had a great interest in indigenous foods, and mentioned roast wombat, porcupine, and emu. He suggested for a colonial banquet such dishes as asparagus, turtle soup, Tasmanian trumpet fish with butter sauce, and roast kangaroo.

Abbott used numerous herbs and spices and suggested new wines for different courses, with liqueurs and coffee to follow. For a family meal he recommended rabbit curry, rice, and strong beer followed by apricot pudding.

One of his more remarkable recipes was “Slippery Bob”, a meal of kangaroo brains made into a batter with flour and water, and fried in emu fat. Abbott described it as “‘*Bush fare*’ requiring a good appetite and excellent digestion.”



*The English and Australian Cooker Book 1864*  
 Courtesy John Oxley Library

Abbott's cookery book did little to entice Australians to change their eating habits and never reached a second edition. It took till the 1890s, the time when gas reticulation reached the suburbs when food companies began to suggest new ideas on dining, when trained servants were hard to find and when most people could read, for a demand to arise for recipe books suited to Australia.

Most of the recipe books of the time, although useful for those who lived in the bigger towns, were almost useless in the country. This prompted many women to write cook-books not only adapting common British recipes, but also occasionally promoting the use of native products.

Mina Rawson was one who included recipes such as wallaby soup, pigweed salad and boiled thistles. She published a series of cookery books starting in 1878 which continued under at least six different titles into the 1890s. She was from Queensland, and like others, she stole heavily from Mrs Beeton's mother-lode.

In the 1890s, Mrs Wicken, a diploma holder of the National Training School for Cookery in

South Kensington, London, held the position of Lecturer, no doubt in cookery and household management, at the Technical College in Sydney. She took on the task of re-writing recipes to incorporate Australian ingredients and to be economical in use. The recipes became Part 2 of Phillis Wicken's *The Art of Living in Australia*, published in 1893. Wicken's section was titled *Australian Cookery Recipes and Accessory Information*.

In 1898 *Mrs Maclurcan's Cook Book* first appeared, and the eponymous author was hailed as one of the best cooks in the country. It was one of the first books to break away from food tradition. She used British recipes but a subtle change was taking place. French cuisine was included in the book. She introduced crab and prawn recipes, and she used tropical fruits such as mangos, pineapple and pawpaw. Twenty editions followed. The last appeared in 1930.

Jean Rutledge's successful *Goulbourn Cooking Book* in 1899 was in Mrs Rutledge's words "collection of recipes [which] will meet a want, especially among the women in the bush, who have often to teach inexperienced maids, and would be glad of accurate recipes that anyone with fair intelligence could carry out."

Although the book was written for women in the bush, out of approximately 900 recipes there are almost no ingredients indigenous to Australia mentioned, with the exception of one recipe requiring "Kangaroo or Wallaby."

The *Sydney Mail* said in December 1904 "One whole section (67 recipes) has been entirely devoted to cold summer puddings, all of which should be much appreciated during the hot weather. A fund of knowledge is to be found within its pages, for the usual time-worn recipes are but lightly touched upon, and the result is a series of original dishes which have but to be tried to be found excellent."

Mrs Rutledge's recipe for Carpet Bag a la Colchester, now known as Carpet-Bag Steak, could be the first recipe of steak stuffed with oysters to be printed. In 1975 *The Goulburn Cookery Book* reached forty editions and had sold over a quarter of a million copies.

Reading Mrs Wicken's book and other early Australian recipe books, it is clear that Isabel Mary Beeton earned her own place as the most famous cookery writer in British history.

She deserves a brief paragraph here, and so does her massive 1861 *Book of Household Management* — "*Mrs Beeton's Cookbook*" — 1112 pages, 900 recipes. Most recipes were plagiarised but it was the first book to show recipes in a format that is still used today. She included many interesting ways to utilise fresh fruit and vegetables.

Many of her recipes are still in use, unchanged over two centuries. Edward Abbott avoided her recipes, but obviously studied her book. He laid out many of his illustrations in Mrs Beeton's complete style.



(Left) *Mrs Beeton's Household Management Book 1861*

(Right) *The English and Australian Cookery Book 1864*

**Courtesy John Oxley Library**

By the late 1800s fruit and vegetables were grown locally or in backyards, and many people kept chickens for their eggs and meat. A typical kitchen contained a sink with a cold water tap and a wood-fired or gas-fired cast iron stove. The urban rich had the luxury of keeping cooked food in an ice chest, a cupboard with a tray at the top to hold a block of ice, to delay food spoilage.

Nevertheless, they were dangerous times, not least because of the shallow wells supply the cold water taps. The wise cook cooked as much as possible as long as possible.



*Cooking Class For Young Girls, Victoria  
1880-1900 approximately  
Photographer Unknown*

1905 saw the Pure Food Act, the first law of its kind in the world, in an attempt to regulate the food industry. Food manufacturers now had to label food so the public were correctly informed. Vigilance continues today.

In 1909 appeared *The Schauer Cookery Book* by Misses A & M Schauer, teachers of Cookery and Domestic Arts at Brisbane Technical College in Queensland. A sixth edition in 1928, *The Schauer Improved Cookery Book*, contained over 2200 recipes.

Some of the recipes contained in the *The Schauer Cookery Book* were exact copies of M Rutledge's recipes, with only name changes, for example "Carpet Bag a la Colchester." The identical recipe appeared in Schauer's book called "Steak and Oyster Filling."

Over the next fifty years many country towns, women's and church groups, chefs, and food manufacturers produced their own recipe books, with the majority of them neglecting fruit and vegetables and most of them featuring jams, sweets, cakes and biscuits.

A book called "*Mum's Recipe Book*" was one of many promoting manufacturers' products, in this case a brand of baking powder.

The good intentions of those in the first 150 years who promoted the use of fresh fruit and vegetables, fish, and native foods took many more years to bear fruit.

By the mid 1920s most Australians cooked on gas stoves. Electricity quickly followed, as did the refrigerator or fridge, although they were not widely used in Australia until the 1940s.

The first wave of Italians arrived on Australian soil in the 1920s and opened up catering and restaurant businesses. They went on to make major contributions to our diet.

The Americans began to arrive in the Gold Rush days and influenced us from that moment. In the early 1900s they introduced something unknown here, the first soda fountains serving flavoured carbonated drinks. Fizzy drinks themselves date from 1783, when Johann Jacob Schweppe patented the machine in Geneva, moved to London, and made a fortune.

When the depression came in the 1930s, approximately a third of Australians became unemployed. They were unable to pay for food, clothing and accommodation. Church groups set up soup kitchens to feed people, and schools provided cups of milk to children.

In the late 1930s, although the economy recovered to a degree, the effects of poor nutrition became clear, especially the effects on children. The government started the first surveys of public health and nutrition. Electricity was now more readily available and cooking classes taught people how to use the new electric stoves.

During the second world war certain foods became scarce, and the government issued ration books containing coupons that were exchanged for foods like beef and lamb, bread, butter, sugar and tea. Other foods like chicken, pork and cheese was not rationed. Some rationing continued for many years. This was a time when Australians donated shiploads of food parcels for Britain. They delayed the end of rationing so they could send food to the children of war-torn Europe, too.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we breakfasted on porridge and a fry-up, lunched on bread and cheese, had a dinner of meat, cabbage, and boiled potatoes, and drank gallons of strong sweet tea.

Gravy smothered everything and Worcester sauce stripped the flavour from it. Rice made our sweet puddings: children sang “Sago, rice, and tapioca” to the tune of John Brown’s Body.

The English loathed the Irish, the Irish couldn’t stand the Scots, and the Scots looked down on the Sassenachs, but they agreed on the essentials: “No Foreign Muck!”

The next large migration, from Mediterranean countries to Australia after World War 2 challenged this island’s insularity. These new Australians brought with them a passion for food, and creativity encouraged among them for centuries. The Italians, as far back as the 1920s, blended into everyday life in this country, far away from their home, and introduced pizza, spaghetti, and wine into our diets.

We moved on from the British macaroni cheese to our own version of spaghetti Bolognese. Known fondly as “Spag bog,” it is Australia’s second favourite meal. It is the meal most cooked by Australians at home and most ordered when dining out. The British tradition of a roast dinner on Sunday is Australia’s favourite meal.

In the *post-post-war* 1950s, immigrants came from *mittel-Europa*: Hungary, Yugoslavia, Italy and Austria. We gained our first delicatessens selling salami and pickled gherkins. The Spaniards introduced olive oil, the Greeks and Yugoslavs introduced coffee, and all of them not only introduced wine but started making it.

After more than a century of shameful prejudice and persecution, the Chinese are recognised today as being among our oldest, our most law-abiding, and our most loyal settlers. The hard-working



Chinese brought fresh vegetables to the heart of the city, and offered rice-and-noodle-based take-away meals, piled high with vegetables, and an array of sauces, as an alternative to the ubiquitous fish and chips wrapped in newspaper. They have possibly made the biggest influence on our eating habits. Even in the 1960s Chinese cuisine was flourishing. Today it is our most popular take-away food.

Supermarkets began to spring up in the 1960s and caused a demand for pre-weighted and packaged items. Australians began to enjoy at least the convenience of frozen packaged TV dinners in 1959.

By the end of the 1960s, most Australians had a refrigerator and frozen food became popular, in particular frozen peas. Coffee began to challenge our national drink of tea.

Cafes and restaurants sprang up around the country, and fish and chips began to be replaced by pizza shops.

The next decade saw electric stoves outsell gas stoves. Appliances such as electric blenders, can mixers, and frying pans joined the already common electric jugs and toasters. Fast-food outlets, owned or franchised nationally (and later internationally), specialised in mass produced fried chicken, pizza, or hamburgers.

The 1970s brought another massive wave of immigration to our shores. Balkan, Hungarian, Lebanese, Spanish, and Turkish restaurants opened up around the country. Vietnamese and Cambodians arrived. Hundreds of spicy ingredients found their way into inner city markets and into our supermarkets.

The exact time Australians began to change their eating habits, and move away from British meals, is impossible to pinpoint, and although our cuisine today is based on many things, the old favourites are perennial, as many recipes in this book bear witness.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Margaret Fulton became one of Australia's best-known cookery writers. Her interest in food took her to many countries, and she was the person who brought international cuisine into Australian homes. Fulton's most notable book, Margaret Fulton's *Encyclopaedia of Food & Cookery – The complete kitchen companion from A to Z*, first published in 1983 then revised in 2005, contains more than 1500 recipes from around the world.

The 1980s saw Australians gain a better awareness of health issues related to food. At the beginning of the decade, we were the largest consumers of meat and sugar in the world. By the end of it, red meat consumption was declining, and white bread was no longer our staple food by default. Rice and pasta were now widely eaten. People started to eat out more in restaurants. French, Italian and Mediterranean cuisines became popular.

Manufacturers produced a variety of edible items from processed grains, salt, oil, and flavourings. These "snacks", heavily advertised, and the traditional potato crisp, found a ready market among television watchers, at a retail price somewhere between ten and twenty times their value.

Our awareness of alternatives increased from the 1990s. We began to demand food with less salt, sugar, preservative, and artificial flavour. Busy women wanted meals that were not only healthy, but also easy and quick to prepare.



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