

Central Queensland University

Bronwyn Fredericks and Rodney Stoter

‘We’ve always cooked kangaroo. We still cook kangaroo. Although sometimes we use cookbooks now’: Aboriginal Australians and cookbooks

Abstract:

Aboriginal Australians have a long history of eating native animals and plants. Food preparation techniques were handed down through the generations, without any need for cookbooks. But colonisation changed the diets of Aboriginal Australians, introducing us to a processed diet high in salt, sugar and fat, and causing a wide range of diet-related health problems. Over the years, many Aboriginal Australians lost their connections to traditional food preparation practices. In this paper, the authors provide a brief overview of Aboriginal food history and describe a newly-emerging focus on reintroducing native foods. They describe the work of an Aboriginal chef, Dale Chapman, who is actively promoting native foods and creating a native-Western food fusion. Chapman has developed native food recipes and a cookbook, in an effort to make native foods accessible to all Australians. She promotes a future when native foods are part of the identity of all Australians – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

Biographical notes:

Bronwyn Fredericks is an Aboriginal Australian woman from South-East Queensland (Ipswich/Brisbane). She is a Professor and the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Engagement) and BMA Chair in Indigenous Engagement at Central Queensland University, Australia. Bronwyn is widely published across several disciplines and is now undertaking cross disciplinary research into Indigenous foods and cooking. She holds a PhD, MEd, MEdStudies, BEduc and a DipT (Secondary)(Home Economics).

Rodney Stoter is a Kuku Yalanji man from Far-North Queensland. He currently works in the coal mining industry in Central Queensland and owns a farm near Rockhampton where he intends to grow native foods. Rodney has a focus on health and wants to decolonise his diet for improved health benefits.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Cookbooks – Aboriginal – Australia – Cooking – Food

Introduction

For more than 60,000 years, Aboriginal Australians have been living on Country and cooking on Country. Historically, our people ate a wide range of native animals and bush foods – a diet that kept us healthy and maintained our communities. The diets of Aboriginal Australians changed dramatically with colonisation. We gave up our native foods and learned to depend on processed foods that are high in salt, sugar and fat. The poor health status of Aboriginal Australians is a direct consequence of colonisation and the changes to our diet and lifestyles.

Today, there is growing interest in Indigenous foods and Aboriginal cooking traditions. As Aboriginal people regain their culinary culture, an increasing number of cookbooks are available to showcase Aboriginal foods to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. In this paper, we provide a brief historical perspective of Aboriginal foods and describe some of the newly emerging approaches to native foods.

Traditional Aboriginal foods

For Aboriginal Australians, food and cooking are part of Country. The foods that we prepare and eat come from Country and are part of it. In the context of this paper, Country means a *place of origin* in spiritual, cultural and literal terms. It refers to a specific clan, tribal group or nation of Aboriginal people and encompasses all of the knowledge, cultural norms, values, stories and resources within that particular area — that particular Indigenous place. It includes knowledge of food sources and understanding of the best ways to prepare food (Fredericks & Anderson 2013, Iselin & Shipway 1998).

Historically, Aboriginal people ate a wide range of foods including kangaroo, wallaby, emu, witchetty grubs, moths and lizards, as well as berries, roots and honey (NHMRC 2000). Some foods needed to be prepared in specific ways to neutralise poisons or toxins found in the raw product (O’Dea 1991). Aboriginal people knew how to prepare and cook native animals and plants in ways that maximised their nutritional value (NHMRC 2000). Across the diverse land of Australia, with physical environments that range from deserts and rainforests to wetlands and tablelands, Aboriginal people knew how to find food and water (O’Dea 1991). They had a range of digging sticks, scrapers, spears and cutting tools that were used to source food and prepare it (NHMRC 2000).

Australian Indigenous food sources varied in different locations and across different seasons (NHMRC 2000). In each region, the local Aboriginal people had an extensive knowledge of the plants and animals. They knew what foods would be available and where to find them (Iselin & Shipway 1998). Aboriginal groups would often travel within and across Country to find different foods throughout the year (Jerome 2002). In some cases, tribal groups would travel every few years to gather specific foods. For example, the tribal groups in south-east Queensland would travel to the Bunya Mountains (Boobarran Ngummin) every three or four years between January and March for the great harvests of the Bunya Trees (*Araucaria bidwillii*) (Maxwell

Consulting 2010). At these harvests, large ceremonial gatherings took place, and different tribes traded goods and held feasts (Jerome 2002). Bunya nuts can be eaten raw or boiled or roasted or stored in their shells for months. Today, there is renewed interest in the Bunya nut from both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people with a Bunya Symposium even being held by Griffith University in 2012 (Slow Food in Australia 2013). There is additionally interest in renewing the festivals at the Bunya Mountains (Maxwell Consulting 2010). In coastal areas, where fish, shellfish and other coastal foods were plentiful, people were less likely to travel long distances to collect food (Iselin & Shipway 1998). Inland peoples, who lived in areas where food was scarce and hardship might be experienced, travelled more frequently (O’Dea 1991).

Most of the time, cooking involved placing animals straight onto hot coals or fires. Small animals would be cooked mostly through this method. As ‘BP’ explains in an early record of Indigenous cooking:

The aboriginal cooked his possum in the simplest fashion ... His usual means of cooking meats was on the coals or in the ashes. Here and there, where the rock-holes could be utilised as pots, he boiled his game and fish by dropping in the water’ (1925: 37).

Large animals such as kangaroo required several processes which involved cookery and preparation techniques. For example, the kangaroo would first be placed in the flames to singe the fur off and as the carcass began to swell it would then be removed from the fire. At this time the kangaroo would then be removed from the fire, where the fur would be scraped off and the animal gutted. Then it would be returned to the heat, although this time the meat would be placed on hot coals for cooking.

Each Aboriginal tribe developed its own diet and cooking techniques (NHMRC 2000). These ways of food preparation, cooking and eating formed part of a unique body of knowledge that linked Aboriginal people to Country. The food pathways of Aboriginal people cannot be separated from cultural processes and practices. Food knowledge was passed from generation to generation for thousands of years. There was, thus, no need for cookbooks.

Changes to our food and cooking

Prior to colonisation in 1788, Indigenous Australians were of generally good health (Saggers & Gray 1991). But the invasion, with the establishment of the British penal colony at Botany Bay, started the destruction of Indigenous lifestyles and cultures through colonising practices. Aboriginal people were gradually and increasingly separated from their land. They found it increasingly difficult to seek out and prepare traditional food, and their movement across Country became limited. Over time, their food sources diminished, as farming and cattle grazing became common and colonial frontier violence continued (Foley 2005).

After colonisation, traditional foods were often replaced with introduced foods on missions and farming properties – either as rations or as payment for work (Rintoul 1993). Aboriginal people were fed bully beef, salt, flour, jam, sugar and, at times,

tobacco. While the rations varied in different places, they were generally inadequate (Foley 2005).

Before colonisation, Aboriginal people had eaten fresh and unprocessed food that was low in kilojoules and high in carbohydrate, fibre, protein and nutrients (NHMRC 2000). After colonisation, they gradually shifted to a diet that was energy dense, starchy, fatty and salty. These foods became so entrenched that some are now seen as a cultural part of contemporary Aboriginal diets – including damper and Johnny cakes (Foley 2005, Fredericks & Anderson 2013). Food preparation also changed, with a shift away from cooking on open fires to the use of pots, pans and appliances. The use of cookbooks is part of this shift (Fredericks and Anderson 2013).

Interest in Indigenous foods

Today, there is a growing interest in Indigenous foods and in regaining traditional food knowledge. Many Aboriginal people combine Westernised approaches to food with traditional knowledge passed down from their Elders. They continue to express their links to Country through their food. They may have kitchens inside their houses as well as a capacity to cook outside.

Although many Aboriginal people do not live in their own country, this does not necessarily mean that their connections to Country are lost, or that the significance of Country is no longer present. This is evident in the words of Irene Watson (2008: 99) when she declares, ‘I still belong to country. It is bred into me and it is an old idea and one that still lives’. Bob Morgan (2008:204) states that ‘my culture and worldview are centred in Gumilaroi land and its people. This is who I am and will always be. I am my country’. Sally Morgan (2008: 263) describes how ‘our country is alive, and no matter where we go, our country never leaves us’. This connection to Country exists irrespective of whether Bob Morgan, Sally Morgan, Irene Watson and other Aboriginal people are living on their Country or not.

The fact that a large number of Aboriginal people now live in urban, peri-urban and regional centres means that many Aboriginal Australians now pass through and live within the Country of other Aboriginal Australians (Fredericks 2010). Some Aboriginal people are descendants of the Aboriginal people who occupied the geographic localities where urban centres have now been built. These people, like their ancestors, belong to the Country on which urban centres have grown.

Access to traditional foods can be difficult for people who live in urban and regional areas. Some native foods, such as emu and crocodile, have become a novelty, served in a small number of restaurants that market themselves as native ingredient specialists serving gourmet cuisine. These restaurants are out of the financial reach of many Aboriginal people. For Aboriginal people, it can be heartbreaking to acknowledge that the foods eaten by our ancestors are now extremely difficult to access, but may be available to the wealthy. It is equally heartbreaking that less healthy foods from other places have become dominant. Our Australian native herbs and spices are not packaged and available for sale in general supermarkets. Nor are

our native fruits and meats. Instead, we can buy foods from shores far away. Many of these ‘new foods’ have now become naturalised (Craw 2012, Santich 2011).

Perhaps the most noticeable shift back towards Indigenous foods is the growing interest in kangaroo meat. This is in contrast to the past few decades where kangaroo meat could be found in large supermarkets in the refrigerated pet food section or in shops selling pet and farm supplies, roughly chopped and diced for the consumption of animals (mostly dogs). In recent times, we have witnessed kangaroo meat presented as small fillets ready to cook for dinner and attractively presented like fillet steak. We have additionally seen a rise in new ways of presenting kangaroo meat, for example, as mince to use in dishes like bolognese sauce or meat balls. Similarly, kangaroo sausages are presented ready to cook in a pan or on the barbecue. These are sold either plain or with bush tomato and other herbs, with others marketed as ‘kanga bangers’ (Fredericks & Anderson 2013). Kangaroo is becoming more readily available across Australia, even in the large chain supermarkets. It is also one of the few meats that can still be hunted in traditional ways. Many Aboriginal people still have the capacity through access to land holdings to hunt kangaroo for their families and clan groupings – just as their families have done for generations.

Dale Chapman: Indigenous food advocate

Dale Chapman is an Aboriginal woman who was born in Dirranbandi in south-west Queensland on the land of the Kooma people. She is a qualified chef and has lived on the Sunshine Coast in Kabi Kabi / Gubbi Gubbi Country since 1976. She has worked in the food industry for over 30 years, and uses Australian Indigenous foods widely in her cooking. In 2004 and 2006 she represented Australia in France and was invited to cook and showcase native Australian foods. In 2006 she also cooked in Italy.

Dale is more than a chef who uses native foods; she is also an advocate of the value of native foods in fighting heart disease, diabetes and the other health problems that plague Aboriginal people. Through her business, The Dilly Bag Bush Tucker Products and Learning Programs, she shares good health messages and the benefits of eating native foods. She promotes the improvements in health that can be made through by eating native foods or ‘bush tucker’ (Champagne 2012). She recently expanded her business to include a gourmet food range, Coolamon Food Creation, and won a bronze medal with these new foods at the Sydney Royal Food Show in 2012 (Coolamon Foods). Her work is increasing the accessibility of Indigenous foods.

Dale’s food blends native foods and other fresh ingredients in a fusion of styles. For example, her sauces include macadamia satay, lemon myrtle, coconut and bush tomato, and chili. Her jams and chutneys can be used to accompany meats, poultry or game. Her recipes include meats such as grubs, kangaroo, crocodile, emu and bugs, along with other readily available meats such as lamb, chicken and beef.

Dale is part of a growing Indigenous food movement. We are increasingly seeing Indigenous foods on sale, Indigenous ingredients used in a variety of foods, and cookbooks that promote Indigenous cooking practices. Dale has published a small cookbook that is readily available to all on the internet (Chapman undated). She has

shared many of her recipes through radio talk shows and public appearances at community events. Dale believes that ‘everyone in Australia should be having bush food – a native mint, a lemon myrtle, a bit of kangaroo – or something in their diet on a regular basis’ (Chapman in Klauzer 2011). In discussing kangaroo, she said:

There are kangaroos in every state ... It’s a lean meat, it’s very nutritious, it’s low in fat and low in cholesterol. Kangaroo for me, it’s an animal that I can eat ... My family are all emus (according to Indigenous totems) so we can’t eat emu, but we’re allowed to eat kangaroo (Chapman in Klauzner 2011).

Chapman has made available a number of recipes available that use kangaroo meat as the central ingredient. The native herbs and spices that she uses can be found for sale via mail order (or gathered from the bush). Some of her kangaroo recipes include Char-grilled kangaroo steak served with char-grilled vegetables (Chapman in Klauzner 2011) and the Coat of Arms Pie with bunya nuts (Chapman in ABC 2010). The Coat of Arms Pie with bunya nuts features both kangaroo and emu meat since both the kangaroo and emu are featured on Australia’s coat of arms.

We often use Dale Chapman’s recipes from either her cookbook or from websites that feature one of her recipes. Sometimes we also use her recipes as inspiration for our own creative cooking. We seek to incorporate native food into our diets and to make native food our everyday food. We often cook kangaroo fillet with vegetables. We say that this is our version of ‘meat and veg’. For example, we often cook kangaroo fillet in a non-stick pan (Fig. 1). We often dry bake our vegetables to accompany our kangaroo fillet because we like this combination (Fig. 2). Sometimes we add a sprinkling of bush pepper or ground lemon myrtle or dried bush tomato or bunya nuts or macadamia nuts or a combination of ingredients. We then often finish our meal off with some steamed greens or salad greens. This is one of the standard meals in our household (Fig. 3).



Fig. 1. Cooking kangaroo fillet in a non-stick pan. Photo. Bronwyn Fredericks, 2013



Fig. 2. Dry baked vegetables with a sprinkling of dried bush herbs. Photo. Bronwyn Fredericks, 2013



Fig. 3. Cooked kangaroo fillet with bush tomato sauce, dry baked vegetables with bush herbs and steamed greens. This is one of our standard ‘meat and veg’ meals in our house. Photo. Bronwyn Fredericks, 2013

Chapman’s contribution to a revival of Indigenous foods

By making recipes available and promoting Indigenous foods, Dale Chapman is part of an Indigenous foods revival. She is making Indigenous foods more available and more acceptable for all Australians – not only for Aboriginal Australians, but for non-Aboriginal Australians as well. With most Aboriginal Australians now living in urban areas (ABS 2007), many Aboriginal people do not have an opportunity to learn to cook kangaroo in the traditional ways – either ‘in the bush’ or ‘outback’ on an open fire. But Aboriginal people increasingly cook traditional foods in their backyard or in their kitchens. Recipes help them to learn to cook traditional foods and reclaim our old ways.

Dale Chapman’s approach is helping Indigenous Australians to reclaim their foods

and reintroduce foods that were removed from our diets through the process of colonisation. Through chefs like Dale, Aboriginal Australians can reaffirm their foodways in a contemporary setting. Her work is also encouraging Australians to see kangaroo and other native foods as ‘everyday’ foods, rather than ‘gourmet’, and as foods for all Australians, not just Indigenous Australians. She is helping to create a vision – of a time when native foods become part of Australian food culture. Imagine what it would be like if Indigenous foods were seen at ‘backyard barbecues as well as sophisticated restaurants’ and if they were ‘mainstreamed into the supermarkets’ (Santich 2011). Imagine a future where Australians see native foods as part of their identity – just like lamb, beef and chicken (or like meat pies with sauce). Maybe even a time when Dale Chapman’s Coat of Arms Pies are available at a roadside pie van with the option of bush tomato sauce.

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