

Wogfood – An Oral History with Recipes

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by John Newton

Introduction

The Star Hotel on the corner of Goulburn and Sussex Streets in Sydney is an adamantly Australian pub on the very edges of Chinatown. It's the pub for the left-wing factions from the Trades Hall across Goulburn Street - has been so for years. Foster's bar towels, blokes smoking Winfields, even a little room out the back that looks suspiciously like a Ladies' Lounge. Surrounded by Hokkien, Chiu Chow, Szechuan, Cantonese and Singaporean restaurants, the Star is making no concessions.

Walking past this cultural bastion, while working on and thinking about this book, I noticed, leaning against the tiled outside wall, a tall blackboard covered with white painted words. At the top it read AUSSIE FOOD. Below it was a menu. The first item on the menu - lasagne.

But this casual acceptance of what is and isn't genuine Australian mung (in itself an interesting word, being, according to the Oxford *Australian National Dictionary*, First World War services' slang corrupted from the Italian *mangiare*, to eat, which arrived here via England) depends, really, upon when you were born, on whether you grew up alongside the migrants who flooded in after the Second World War, or whether you are a member of the pasta generations.

On another occasion, when flying back from Melbourne, I was seated next to an elderly woman in a brown woollen coat and cap who clutched her handbag nervously to her lap

during the entire flight until lunch arrived. I lifted the foil flap on my serving and found it was airline lasagne. I noticed my neighbour, having placed her bag beside her, cautiously lifting hers, peering in and poking at it apprehensively with her fork, as one would at a slug in the lettuce. 'What's the mystery?' she asked, perhaps to no-one in particular, but I answered anyway. 'Lasagne,' I said, 'a layer of pasta, cheese, tomato sauce and probably mince.' She continued to poke at it before pushing it away with a sigh, adding, 'I'm too old.'

Such an incident underlines the importance of food to culture. None of the ingredients of that lasagne would have been unfamiliar to my flying companion - flour, water, eggs, minced meat, tomato and cheese - but it was the way in which they were put together and served that was foreign to her. Nowhere is this clash of cultures more obvious in the stories in this book than at the Bonegilla migrant hostel.

Bonegilla wasn't the only migrant hostel in Australia, but it seems to have been the one that processed most of the people I spoke to. About 15 kilometres from Albury, Bonegilla was opened in 1947, and closed in 1971. Its major purpose was to house non-British migrants. The naive intention of the authorities was that they would be familiarised, Australianised, and placed in employment in six weeks. Nothing better illustrates the gap between the cultures of most of those new arrivals and the hosts than memories of the food.

In *Fresh From Italy*, Stefano Manfredi remembers, even as a little boy, recognising that something was wrong with the food at Bonegilla. It didn't occur to him until later what it was: 'We had left behind more than a country when we got off the boat from Italy and went to live in that migrant hostel - we'd left

behind an entire culture. And in daily life, that culture was expressed in the preparation and eating of food.' At Bonegilla, the preparation of food was left to the Army. 'Rotten old mutton for lunch and dinner,' remembers migrant journalist and writer Pino Bosi in Glenda Sluga's invaluable book *Bonegilla, a Place of No Hope*.

Miraculously, our relationship - by 'our' I mean that between Anglo-Australians and these new arrivals - survived those days. It survived the incidents reported to me during the course of gathering these stories, when two people speaking in their native tongue in public would be told to 'speak English or get back to your own country'. It survived the gibes, the taunts and the unconscious and conscious racism to the point where I can write a book like this - and call it *Wogfood*.

From being predominantly a term of offensive racist abuse, it has become, even among themselves (probably especially among themselves), a term of affection, a tribal word to reaffirm common backgrounds and experiences. On the side of an Italian-Australian farm outhouse that I visited was scrawled this riddle: Question - what's green and drives a Valiant? Answer - Kermit the Wog. If different ethnic and racial groups of people are going to be able to live together in peace and harmony anywhere in the world, I believe it will be in Australia.

And, it should be reported, the terms of abuse were not all one way. We may have had wog and wop and dago, but the Italians were calling us *testa quadrata*, square head; or *morti fami*, die of hunger (look at what we ate!); and *doppio ciglio*, two eyebrows. Calabrians had some words for us in their own dialect: *culuo rutto*, broken arse; *salami*, dope; and *kaka sices*, deadshit to name just three.

One of my favourite foreign pejoratives is the one used by the Greeks, *alathotos* (pronounced ala tzo sos), a word meaning unanointed with olive oil, and so not a member of the Greek Orthodox Church - sort of like saying 'ungreasy wog'.

Nowadays, as I understand it, the universal term for all Anglo-Australians is *skip* - short for Skippy, and, to be really offensive, its use is accompanied with a kind of short-armed nibbling and hopping motion.

One of my Italian informants, after telling me a few of these words, said, 'Jesus, John, it's taken us 40 years to get accepted - now you're going to blow it by telling everyone what we used to call you.' On the contrary, bringing it all out in the open is, I believe, a gesture of reconciliation.

But who is a wog? This is a decision I had to make before I started this book. And, I discovered, the word has very different meanings in different English-speaking countries. When I told a table at lunch in London what the name of my book was to be there was a horrified intake of breath. 'I don't think,' murmured one well-bred pom, 'you could call it that over here.' Wog, in England, is still a very nasty word: it means nigger. In America, on the other hand, it means nothing, the preferred terms there being spic, wop and dago, and still offensive.

I decided, before compiling a list of people to interview, that for Australians, wog means just about all those whose countries share a shore with the Mediterranean, except the French, who are frogs, and the Yugoslavs and Albanians, who used to be balts.

Usage apart, *The Macquarie Dictionary* defines the word as applying to '1. a native of North Africa or the Middle East, esp. an Arab. 2. a person of Mediterranean extraction or of similar complexion and appearance'. For etymology; it offers '(? short for Golliwog)', although I have also read, somewhere, that it derived from First World War services' slang used by, troops stationed in Egypt, being the initials for 'worthy oriental gentleman'. A little heavy-handed racist irony.

My own etymological preference is that offered by my friend Jan Power, the Brisbane food writer, philosopher and wit: 'I've always thought it stood for wine, olive oil and garlic.' And so it

does.

The idea for this book came from one cook whose story is in this book, George Haddad, whose assertion that Australians are infinitely more open to new food ideas than most of the wogs of his acquaintance set me to thinking, and two others whose stories I haven't told here: Stefano Manfredi and Vince Trotta. Stefano because, while working with him on *Fresh From Italy*, I began to wonder about everybody else's story; and Vince, who didn't have a restaurant when I started (he was too busy getting established), who, when I asked him what sort of food he cooked, told me, 'Well, I'm a New Australian, so I guess you'd call it New Australian food.'

And isn't it what. The changes have occurred so quickly, so profoundly, it's occasionally necessary to check our bearings by looking over our shoulder. The 1970 edition of *The Australian Women's Weekly Cookbook*, edited by Ellen Sinclair, does indeed have a pasta section - with eight recipes (including lasagne). But look at the ingredients for spaghetti bolognese: '1 large onion, 1 lb minced steak, 8 oz can tomato paste, 1 pint water, salt, pepper, 2 beef stock cubes, 1/4 teaspoon oregano, 1/4 teaspoon thyme, tablespoon oil, 3/4 lb spaghetti, grated Parmesan cheese.'

The word 'olive' is mentioned once in 257 pages, in a caption for a page of photographs of canapes: creamed blue cheese with stuffed olives.' Not one recipe suggests the use of olive oil.

Even as late as 1982, the relatively sophisticated *Australia The Beautiful Cookbook* (Weldon Owen) offers scant evidence of what would have been called, in those days, 'ethnic dishes', sprinkled throughout the text, yet there is a separate section entitled 'Our cosmopolitan cities: recipes including French, Italian, Balkan, Spanish, Middle Eastern, Chinese and South East Asian.'

For the first 150 years of white settlement in Australia we lacked the peasant class that would

have given us a solid culinary tradition, and the middle class that would have given us a dining-out tradition - the restaurants that existed were for the 'upper classes', a relative handful of Australians in the two major cities.

Until recently, what most of us ate at home all over Australia (of course, there were exceptions) was very much the food that my wife remembers from her own childhood: 'charcoal chops, cremated kidneys, mushy veggies'. The food Gay Bilson told *The Sydney Morning Herald*, in 1983, she ate at home was: '...three cuts of meat: mid loin chops which were grilled, rolled beef which was roasted, and leg of lamb which was roasted too. All were cooked and cooked and cooked until any trace of blood disappeared.'

It is obvious that those who arrived here after the Second World War preaching the gospel of wine, olive oil and garlic did so into a culinary vacuum. What is fascinating is that the message has been taken up with such evangelical fervour.

This book ignores competing academic theories on the existence or otherwise of an 'Australian cuisine', or the sources of what we eat, in favour of recording the directly remembered and even misremembered foodlore of that group of non-Anglo-Australians (all but three from a post-war migrant family) who came here with their culinary cultures intact. Because, however the academics choose to interpret it (and choose they will), there is no doubt that these people have had a profound influence on the way we eat and live in Australia today. Especially in the last ten years, as the second and third generations have grown up so convertibly Australian that they have become increasingly curious about their origins and their roots and discovering the food of their homelands.

Wogfood's contribution to what we are eating in Australia today is only one part of the story yet it is a very important part of that story, because it has to do with more than food. It has to do with our adoption of a way of life far better suited to our climate than that first imposed on us by the original colonists. It often seems to me

that, just as you have to live in a house for some time to understand how it works, to appreciate its spaces and idiosyncrasies, it has taken us 200 years to understand how best to live in this 'wide brown land'.

And it took a bunch of migrants from the Mediterranean, arriving with their rolling pins and mortars and pestles, and with absolutely no intention, like Rosa Matto's mother, of 'falling into whatever the natives of the new land ate', who taught us, finally, how to be comfortable here, and how to eat. Three cheers for the wogs. Where would we be without them?