

A broader palate: The new and exotic food experiences of the Australian Imperial Force 1914-1918

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Abstract

This article explores the new culinary experiences of the men and women of the Australian Imperial Force during the First World War, drawing its evidence from soldier letters and diaries. It reveals the range of culinary novelties, as well as the gamut of responses to the new tastes and eating habits they encountered in the Middle East and Europe, showing that the largely Anglo food culture that they were used to was broadened by their wartime experiences. It also questions the long-term impact of this broadened experience on the Australian palate.

Keywords:

Australian Imperial Force, culinary history, Australian diet, World War One.

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When Australia raised its volunteer Australian Imperial Force (AIF) for service in Europe and the Middle East during World War One, it was the first overseas experience for the majority of the more than 330,000 soldiers who served over the course of the war. While about a fifth of Australia's volunteers were born in the British Isles, and others in British

Dominions such as South Africa and New Zealand, or a smattering of foreign countries, most had only experienced the British-based culture of Australia, and even the majority of those born overseas came from similarly British cultures. Australia proudly protected its identity as a British outpost on the far side of the world, seeking to limit immigration to Whites only, especially of British heritage, through a series of thinly disguised and almost universally supported racial laws collectively known as the White Australia Policy. Consequently, the dominant cultural framework was British, though necessarily with some adaptations due to Australian differences in geography, climate, economy and society, and this was also true of Australian patterns of eating around the early twentieth century, which were closely modelled on the British diet (Beckett, 1984; O'Brien, 2016; Santich, 2012).

Scholarly analysis of British culinary trends of the period note a heavy dependence on meats, and carbohydrates, accompanied by too few vegetables (Beardsworth & Keil, 2002; Burnett, 2004; Gatley, 2016; O'Brien, 2016). Typically British cuisine was labelled 'plain cookery', in contrast to French *gastronomie*, and was characteristically plain and proudly 'free of any French influence' (O'Brien, 2016, p. 142). While not always simple in its preparation, plain cookery was championed as a spiritual discipline, in a counter-snobbery to the sensual appeal of French cooking (O'Brien, 2016; Coveney, 2006) – what one writer described as “a joy-less representation of food” (Gatley, 2016, p. 53).

While it is easy to stereotype the British diet as “meat and two veg”, there were significant class variations, with the aristocracy accustomed to French cuisine, considered a badge of civilization (O'Brien, 2016) and at the forefront of culinary innovation and practice (Bruegel, 2015; Ferguson, 2004; Gordon, 2018), while the middle and working classes could increasingly afford former luxuries, many of them imported, such as white bread, tinned or frozen meat, and tea and sugar. The urban and rural poor subsisted on a

bread-based diet of sufficient calorific but incomplete nutritional value, especially low in meat and vegetables (Duffett, 2012b; Gatley, 2016; Lauden, 2013). Ironically, the Industrial Revolution, instead of improving nutrition, “deliberately reduced living standards, particularly dietary” (Symons, 2007, p. 34), shifting working class diets “towards a high degree of homogenization”, as increases in income “resulted in the consumption of greater quantities of familiar ingredients rather than in the choice of radically different foodstuffs” (Duffett, 2012b, p. 255). Thus, the widespread but not universal British diet was characterised by a “rigid culinary framework” (Beardsworth & Keil, 2002, p. 84), and a “dietary conservatism” which was “particularly unadventurous” (Duffett, 2012a, p. 255). The British ranker of World War One was “not renowned for his sense of culinary adventure. Forays into unfamiliar foods were infrequent and doomed to failure” (Duffett, 2012b, p. 214). Changes in diet provoked horror, even when merely eating familiar foods at unfamiliar times (Duffett, 2012b).

The Australian diet imitated that of Britain in so many ways, down to the stock fare “red meat and vegetables cooked in a plain British style” (Junor, 2016, p. 477), and a devaluing of vegetables “as unattractively ‘water rich’, that is ‘calorie deficient’” (Duffett, 2012a, p. 254). A consciously renewed emphasis on British Imperial ties in the school curriculum in the 1890s meant that the bulk of the volunteers in the AIF during World War One were raised in a society that elevated everything British above and against all other cultural influences, including food. Junor (2016) writes of Australia that “In the early twentieth century, ‘plain food’ was often ‘synonymous with moral rectitude’, and the avoidance of ‘gustatory temptation’ considered a puritan virtue” (p. 477). A French visitor in the late 19th century praised the culinary resources of Australia but damned the cuisine as the world’s most “elementary, not to say abominable” (Symons, 2014). Sadly, while indigenous ingredients had been part of the diet in earlier decades, by the late 19th century,

abundant cheap beef and lamb and improved transport and processing pushed indigenous foods off the menu, and many considered eating native meats “as something monstrous” (Singley, 2012, p. 36). While a few still enthusiastically explored native foods, “the experimenters were probably a select few” and by the turn of the century there was widespread prejudice against it (Santich, 2012, pp. 62-63). In imitation of the British upper classes, wealthy Australians hired male cooks serving high-class London cuisine (O’Brien, 2016), while exclusive restaurants also featured French cuisine (Symons, 2007).

There were some differences between British and Antipodean diets. Australians ate more meat than the British, and probably ate more vegetables and fruit, and more varieties as well, though their low status means they were often overlooked in discussions of food at the time (O’Brien, 2016). Sub-tropical and tropical fruit and vegetables such as pawpaw, chokos and passionfruit featured regularly (Symons, 2007). Australia’s higher standard of living (McLean, 2013) meant that the poor in Australia ate better than those of Britain. Yet despite identifying variations in cuisine, these same scholars admit that on the whole, Australian food of the era was characterised as “simple, British and wholesome” (Junor, 2016, p. 488), remaining “largely faithful to its English parent while taking on some modifications in respect to its new environment” (O’Brien, 2016, p. 57), “monotonous” (Santich, 2012, p. 23), inheriting from Britain “a diet of flour, sugar and tea” (Symons, 2007, p. 34), along with plenteous beef and mutton, while “most Australians served meals very plainly, avoiding the pretensions of ‘made dishes’ – that is, anything more elaborate than the unadorned fried, roasted and boiled slabs” (Symons, 2007, p. 63).

Given that the typical Australian diet followed the mostly limited and monotonous British model, it is hardly surprising that the Australian army rations were modelled on the British Army, especially as once in the theatres of war, AIF units were supplied by the

British army. Like the civilian fare, this also featured a diet heavy in meat, fats and carbohydrates (Duffett, 2012a; Wishart, 2018), particularly featuring bully beef (tinned corned beef) and biscuits (wheaten savoury biscuits baked to a rock-like consistency), along with limited servings of fresh meat, vegetables (mostly potatoes and onions), bread and a handful of other items, though the more palatable and varied items on the official ration table such as fresh meat, vegetables and bread were often in variable supply due to problems of storage and transport of such perishable items (Duffett, 2012b; Weeks, 2009; Wishart, 2018; Zweiniger-Bergielowska et al, 2016). The typically minimal cooking skills of most army cooks, not helped by an army cookery training that emphasised economy over palatability (Duffett, 2012a), meant that monotonous bully beef, biscuits and stews were the standard fall-back dishes, leaving soldiers eager for variety in their diet (Duffett, 2012a; Roper, 2009; Zweiniger-Bergielowska et al, 2016). The fundamental problem was that the army saw food in terms of supplying fuel to soldiers, overlooking the rich and complex emotional, social, spiritual and cultural significations of food that cannot be simply reduced to a calculation of calories (Beardsworth & Keil, 2002; Coveney, 2006; Roper, 2009; Zweiniger-Bergielowska et al, 2016). To meet the shortfall in diversity, volume and cultural value, soldiers added to their diet through various means: food parcels sent from home, purchases from army canteens and local shops, estaminets and restaurants, dining in the homes of locals, and stealing from any available source, such as army stocks, shops, local gardens and cellars.

Official records shed little light on what soldiers ate, even regarding official rations (Wishart, 2016). Food ranked below ammunition and horse feed on the scale of priorities, and in any case, administrators still exaggerated both the quantity and quality of what soldiers actually received (Duffett, 2012a; Zweiniger-Bergielowska et al, 2016). In order to better understand what soldiers ate, other sources, particularly the diaries, letters and

memoirs of soldiers must be used. Duffett (2008) and Zweiniger-Bergielowska et al (2016) argue that such sources offer reliable evidence that contradicts the complacency of official sources regarding the adequacy of army food, especially from a social and psychological perspective.

However, such egodocuments, as Dekker (2002) labels diaries, letters and memoirs, need to be treated with caution. Fulbrook and Rublack (2010) note that they are “open to a range of potential readings and conflicting interpretations” (p. 264), often concealing as much as they reveal. As the ego itself is a problematic concept, by definition texts which claim to speak from the ego must similarly be problematic. Reynaud (2018) comments on caveats by official Australian war historian C.E.W. Bean about uncritical trust in information in diaries and letters, including his own, noting how they could be biased, based on hearsay, or inaccurate due to fatigue or backdating of entries. Nevertheless, they remain invaluable sources on the subject of the AIF and food, because the members of the AIF were no exceptions to a universal soldierly obsession over food (Roper, 2009; Weir, letter, March 25, 1917, MLMSS 1024, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW (MLSLNSW); Zweiniger-Bargielowska et al, 2016). While soldiers at times in their letters sought to impress domestic audiences with their experiences, especially their novel ones, on the subject of food there is a mass of evidence which harmonises correlations, and makes outliers more readily discernible. This study is based on the readings of the egodocuments of well over 1,000 members of the AIF, and helps fill a gap in our knowledge, especially of exotic food experiences. These ranged from the novelty of army-style catering and having to cook for themselves, to the food experiences of Egypt, Palestine, France and Britain, including dining out, new ingredients and dishes, and service and table manners.

For the members of the AIF, the entire circumstances of army eating were usually a novelty. Duffett (2012a) observes that for many British soldiers, the initial contact with army food “was found particularly distressing” (pp. 253-254), with crude service, mediocre food and all-male companions replacing the comforting domestic setting of family meals prepared by loving mothers and wives. Australian diarists do not record the same level of shock, perhaps because as volunteers, the members of the AIF came to the army with a different mindset, although the initial contact was still a source of fascination. A number recorded their first army catering experiences, one detailing every novelty for his family, from the mealtime bugle summons to the army terminology of ‘messing’ and ‘orderlies’, eating in the open air, and having to do his own dishes at the end of each meal (Gallwey, MSS1355, *The Silver King*, Australian War Memorial (AWM)). While some complained about the quantity or the quality of the food (Lesnie, Diary, June 1915, 1DRL 0415, AWM; Adams, Diary, May 7, 1915, DRL 0007, AWM), others were satisfied with their food and circumstances (Kingsley-Norris, Diary, August 19, 1914; Adam, Diary, February 10, 1915). There is little evidence in Australian war writings of the sense of displacement noted by British scholarship. Indeed, those with militia experience or from the bush may have experienced similar catering services already.

The second novelty for most in the AIF was doing their own cooking, which happened periodically during the war when circumstances interrupted official catering services. A handful had experience as cooks in restaurants, shearing sheds and the navy (Boulton, Diary, September 3, 1915; Wilson, 2012), but for most it was a new experience. The proportion of men in pre-war Australia responsible for cooking had declined sharply in the late 19th century. Male cooks were common in restaurants and squattocracy homes – Australia’s equivalent of the landed gentry, and in working men’s shearing sheds and on the goldfields, but otherwise cooking had become a designated female role (O’Brien,

2016), and the kitchen culturally designated “a female domain, so female that any male who, by inclination or obligation, made the kitchen his workplace was automatically contaminated” (Santich, 2012, p. 187). This may account for the army appointing cooks from the least militarily competent men, a role denigrated as an unsoldierly task (Duffett, 2012b). An AIF man appointed against his will as officers’ cook complained, “I’m no good at cooking, a girl’s job and I’m all boy” (Hutton, Diary, January 6, 1917, MLMSS 1138, MLSLNSW), despite turning out meals that included rissoles, soup, roast beef and custard. Eventually, his complaints worked and he was given other roles.

The irony of manly soldiers doing cooking featured in their letters. Several noted that their “home folk” would laugh at the idea (Anon, Letter, *Heidelberg News*, March 10, 1917; Kayser, Letter, *Mount Barker Courier*, August 6, 1915; Burke, Letter, *Nepean Times*, November 13, 1915; Sherringham, Letter, *Wellington Times*, August 26, 1915). “I know you women folk will be sceptical of our cooking abilities” wrote Knuckey (Diary, August 30, 1916, PR03193, AWM), one of many who were proud of their new-found cooking skills. They sometimes badged themselves “a good ‘chef’” (Treganowan, Letter, October 13, 1918, PR3166, AWM), or compared themselves favourably with their mothers or women in general (Cross, Letter, *West Wimmera Mail*, December 10, 1915; Johnston, Letter, *Gosford Times*, November 30, 1916; Raws, Diary, December 4, 1915, 2DRL0481, AWM; Roberts, Letter, *Gippslander and Mirboo Times*, September 16, 1915). The culinary standards required for such status could be very low, a soldier rating himself “quite a good cook” for having mastered the rather basic art of boling stale bread in condensed milk (Edwards, Diary, July 28, 1915, PR91192, AWM). However, the widespread perception of being good cooks, supported by lists of elementary recipes they had mastered such as rissoles and cups of tea, suggests either or both of two things: the standards of domestic cooking in Australia were often abysmally low, or AIF notions of

their ability were inflated by circumstances of war. Given the general complaints over official army catering, their own slender skills may have taken on more lustre.

It would be fascinating to know how many of these self-titled good cooks continued to cook once back in Australia. Having learned domestic skills in the army, a middle-class soldier promised to practice them when he returned home (Gallwey, Letter, January 21, 1917), perhaps an unlikely outcome given the habitual bragging and melodramatic posturings that mark his voluminous writing (Reynaud, 2019). The evidence of broader change could be hard to find, though what is known suggests that men reverted to their breadwinner roles and women retained their near monopoly on domestic cooking after World War One (Junor, 2016). Oddly enough, after months of self-catering in primitive conditions at Gallipoli, some found it “curious” to be served hand and foot with fine table settings and no dishes to do on board a transport ship (Moody, Diary, December 19, 1915, 1DRL504, AWM).

Shaping the AIF response to the rest of their exotic food experiences was a foregrounding of the tourist dimension of their overseas service. As most self-identified as British, their “shared British heritage” made travel to the UK resemble “a secular pilgrimage” (Woollacott, 1997, pp. 1004, 1008), while Europe was like the old aristocratic Grand Tour to the sites of the origins of Australia’s European culture formerly only available to affluent Australians (Thomson, 1995; White, 1996). Recruiting targeted the advantages of overseas travel, something many soldiers consciously took advantage of, thus justifying their nickname as the ‘six-bob-a-day tourists’. The generous AIF pay made them affluent relative to all other national armies, and therefore capable of sampling foreign experiences more fully. This also fuelled resentment, for it often inflated prices out of the reach of other nationalities (Curran, 1999; Gibson, 2014). Britain was top of the list in terms of desirability, but Paris was not far behind for many as a prestigious tourist

destination (Curran, 1999; Gordon, 2018), while Egypt and Palestine offered sites of biblical significance keenly visited by even the most secular of men (Reynaud, 2018). While White (1996) focuses on the sightseeing dimension of AIF tourism in Europe and Britain, foreign food experiences were also a vital part of the experience. The Anzacs served in theatres where the food traditions were very different to the British-Australian norms familiar to the majority. Exotic foods perhaps sit uneasily in the popular concept of the Anzac diet, and admittedly, they were not the dominant foods available during the war, but tourist expectations made sampling new experiences normative. Tourism also set up dichotomies of the familiar versus the ‘other’, especially evident in engagements with non-European cultures, for example in Egypt and Palestine, which were approached from a superior imperialist model (White, 1996). On the other hand, travel to Europe came from a space of “cultural dependence” rather than “imperial confidence”, with “a certain humility” leading to “educational, civilizing” outcomes (White, 1996, p. 119).

In the course of travelling halfway around the world, many experienced “foreign cooking for the first time” (Laurence and Tiddy, 1989, p. 29). They confronted not just a range of new foods, but also familiar ingredients prepared in new ways, giving birth to flavors and food experiences that terrified some and tantalised others. And it was not merely the food: the exotic locations also provided new experiences in etiquette. Although any member of the AIF with a sense of adventure could revel in new foods, those from a more educated and wealthy background may have been better placed experientially to appreciate culinary exoticism.

Duffett (2012a) identifies a “strong culinary conservatism in the British working-class soldiers” (p. 257), “a permanent state of ‘fragile unadventurousness’ when it came to trying new food” (Duffett, 2012b, p. 93). This tendency was accentuated psychologically by “extreme circumstances”, where new foods added to the insecurity, leading some “to

go hungry rather than eat nutritionally sound, but alien food” (Duffett, 2012a, p. 258). The Australian troops, less bound by tradition than the British (Duffett, 2012b), appear to have suffered from this less than their English cousins.

The AIF’s war theatre experience began in Egypt in late 1914, and was for most their first taste of a non-British culture and, while fascinated, they were mostly dismissive of the physical and moral filth they saw there and in Palestine. The dismissive evaluations of local foods and behaviours was motivated by a racial condescension towards the ethnic populations. However, although Australians were more likely to focus on the exotic in their contact with these cultures (Nicholson & Mills, 2017), the food on offer in Egypt was often less exotic than it might have been, for the large expatriate community, mostly European, dominated the culinary orientation of the cafes and restaurants. The hotel chefs were mostly Europeans, or Egyptians trained to cook to European tastes, and a number of Australians praised the food of Cairo. One man praised hotel cooks for preparing “excellent meals”, trying the “many strange courses and I tell you they *are* tasty” (Reay, Letter, January 21, 1915). Another told his wife of a “very choice and dainty patisserie” in a French shop, and a “nice clean and cheap Italian restaurant” (Read, Letters, January 13, 1915, January 16, 1915, MLMSS 2836, MLSLNSW), clearly delighting in his elite exotic food opportunities.

Other Australians saw the culinary experiences in Egypt in a different light, especially when eating the local cuisine. “The food here is terribly different to what we were used to. There is always a taste and smell of oil,” one complained (Nowland, Letter, *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, September 28, 1915). Served camel meat, another wrote, “It looked like leather and tasted like leather and I’m darned certain it was leather” (Laurence & Tiddy, 1989, p. 30). An unimpressed soldier wrote a diatribe against Egyptian cooking, accusing them of serving small pieces of half cold leathery roast meat with “some queer green mush

round it” resembling cow-chewed lucerne, or cooked cucumbers “with indigestible seeds” and “[g]enerally no potatoes”. “Gippys [sic, meaning ‘Egyptians’] can’t cook English food and never will”, he wrote, adding, “So you can imagine that it is a relief to have one’s own cooks again” (Evans, diary, January 31, 1916, 2DRL0014, AWM).

With the transfer of Australia’s infantry divisions to France and Belgium in 1916 came a large-scale encounter with northern French cuisine, which offered other possible responses from the Australians. On the one hand, France’s deliberate and successful cultivation of a distinctively French *gastronomie* as the pinnacle of world cuisine (Bruegel, 2015; Ferguson, 2004; Gordon, 2018; Meyzie, 2015) lent it a prestige reflected in its widespread adoption by the privileged classes of Britain and Australia, where Frenchness was a marker of superior culinary civilisation and where, despite the overwhelmingly Britishness of the food, French influences could still be discerned (O’Brien, 2016; Symons, 2007). Many Australians were therefore predisposed to approve of the culturally elite exoticism of French food.

But as already noted, the ‘plain cookery’ counter movement in Britain and Australia advocated “none of your unwholesome French kickshaws” (Symons, 2007, p. 76), promoting instead a morally upright cookery opposed to French influences, and taught in cooking schools to Australian girls and women aspiring to become model housewives and mothers (O’Brien, 2016; Symons, 2007). For Australians with entrenched British-Australian tastebuds, the very Frenchness of the food was a problem.

Overall, French cuisine was given a positive review in the majority of Australian accounts, and comments such as, “Here we had our first experience of French cookery and very delightful too, beans cooked in butter, roasted chickens” (Peters, Diary, December 12, 1916, MLMSS 1887, MLSLNSW) were not uncommon. Another man had a dinner

“cooked French style and we enjoyed it immensely, such a change from Men’s cooking” (Adams, letter, September 10, 1917, 1DRL008, AWM).

French terms proved a bigger obstacle when writing about their culinary experiences. Diary entries record the bastard French used by the soldiers, sometimes adding equally erroneous translations. Sharing rations with French *poilus* in a trench, one man wrote, “They had beaucamp (bukoo) wine and mung (tucker)”, claiming they “lived like lords”, with all sorts of wines, champagnes and whiskeys available. As their invited guest each night, he ate “[s]uch luxuries as tinned lobster, fruit salads and dishes which to me were foreign” (Anon, Letter, *Port Pirie Recorder*, July 15, 1918). Another with a better grasp of French enjoyed “some petit beurre gamin (little butter biscuits)” and “a dish of sausages, frogs, and shrimps with a bottle of apple cider, to say nothing of a bowl of salad bon pour soldat (good for soldier)” (Sherringham, Letter, *Wellington Times*, October 12, 1916).

As impressive as French food was, there were those who did not like it. Some found the French habit of drenching desserts in rum to be overdone (Brewer, Diary, August 19, 1917, MLMSS 1300, MLSLNSW; Vercoe, Letter, *Yorke’s Peninsula Advertiser*, September 15, 1916). The low-alcohol beer of French and Belgian Flanders also astonished, as even “the girl of four years had their bowl of beer for tea” (Burrell, Diary, August 14, 1917, MLMSS 1375, MLSLNSW), and was considered by some Australians to be “almost undrinkable” (Drummond, Letter, September 12, 1917, MLMSS 1485, MLSLNSW), its flavor like “sour water, horrid” (Hutton, Diary, May 31, 1917, MLMSS 1138, MLSLNSW).

Dining out was one tourist experience shared by virtually every member of the AIF. Duffett (2012b) notes that the limited peace-time incomes of most British rankers meant that restaurants would have been unfamiliar experiences, though take-away fish and chips or pies were popular. On the other hand, Australia’s higher standard of living had led to a

restaurant boom in the twenty years preceding the war, though many were fixed-menu four- or six-penny establishments offering identical menus of traditional meat dishes with potatoes “and sometimes some soggy boiled vegetables” (Symons, pp. 122-123), though high-class restaurants, usually French, catered for finer palates and bigger wallets. Hence the practice of eating out was familiar to more Australians, though the frequency and the availability of elite cuisines was not.

Periods of leave both near the front and in Britain, a higher disposable income, a need to break the monotony of army food, and the chance to eat at prestigious establishments meant that dining out was a common soldierly practice. Much of it of course was conducted in the myriad of *estaminets* in the villages of Flanders and the Somme, many of them improvised in the parlours of regular homes to take advantage of wartime demand. The ubiquitous menu of fried eggs and chips actually replaced the original more diverse *estaminet* menus due to the narrow demands of British soldiers, the “hot, fresh and made to order” meals appealing for their freshness compared to army cookery, and they also “closely mirrored the men’s working-class diet” (Gibson, 2014, p. 144). Ironically, some Australians were amazed at the limited menus, complaining that “[i]t is invariably the same in them all”, for “[t]hey never think of offering poached or boiled eggs for a change and meat is out of the question” (Sullivan, diary, March 8, 1917, MLMSS 1733, MLNSLNSW). Not all *estaminets* offered such limited menus. One soldier recalled “a sort of pancake with potatoes and they’d sweeten it and it was very nice” (Laurence and Tiddy, 1989, p. 30), while another recorded being served “salmon, tinned pork, lobster, beer, stout and champagne” in one (Bloch, Diary, July 19, 1916, PR04826, AWM). The attraction of *estaminets* was also because of their wines and beer, as well as the welcome company of civilians, especially young females, though even children generated connotations of home. In this sense, the most common *estaminet* dining out experience,

while still conducted in a French environment, was strongly normalising as well as exotic, with homely and romantic associations.

Australians were also hosted by French families, either in homes in which they were billeted, or new friends who invited them for dinner. A group of officers “dined with our very excellent host ... – and it was some dinner”, with generous servings of food and drink, including a “bonze” [sic: Australian expression meaning ‘first-rate’] omelette, “boshter” [sic: ‘excellent’] soup and “simply glorious” roast meat and potatoes (Brewer, Diary, August 19, 1917, MLMSS 1300, MLSLNSW).

Along with the more casual estaminet and family dining came experiences in regular restaurants, some of them of a very high standard. One Australian found a restaurant meal “heartily welcome”, in spite of its “strange features”, such as a “rather queer looking green thick soup” and coffee that was “scarcely a success” (Waterhouse, Diary, April 4, 1916, MLMSS 2792, MLSLNSW). Cramming “all the most fashionable restaurants and cafés, such as Maxims, Weber, Lucas, Le Lague, Café de Paris, Picardies, Tryon Palace, Ulysses etc” into a five-day visit to Paris, a young lieutenant proclaimed, days before being killed at Polygon Wood, “[t]hey are rather expensive but the cooking is delightful” (Hannaford, Letter, September 18, 1917, PR 84285, AWM). A corporal in Paris boldly dined in an exclusive Italian café, enjoying the “excellent” food alongside French officers and “grandly dressed women”, who proved themselves very friendly while expressing surprise “to see ordinary soldiers patronising such a first class place” (Avery, Diary, October 23, 1917, PRG 500, State Library of South Australia (SLSA)). While taking “French leave” in Le Havre, a soldier shared “a beautiful meal” in a restaurant. The menu was “all French dishes but we shut our eyes and chanced it”. Apparently, it was largely satisfactory as “not much of the food found its way back to the kitchen” (Knuckey, Diary, September 22, 1917, PR03193, AWM). Another found it strange to be dining among

civilians in Amiens, including “surprisingly dressy” ladies with short knee-length skirts, but he enjoyed “some novel dishes which tickled my palate including the much talked of frogs legs, a bowl of oxtail soup was delicious, roast beef, and delightful crepe sousette [sic], coffee and liquor, it was not cheap but very soothing” (Thomas, Letter, December 8, 1916, 3DRL2206, AWM). Others considered Parisian dining cheap, one getting “a splendid meal at a swankey restaurant”, including five courses, wines and coffees, for about half of what he would pay in London. He recognized the significance the French placed on mealtimes, observing that “dinner is quite a serious business” (Dawes, Letter, *Scone Advertiser*, April 12, 1918). In all of these examples, there is a sense of the delight, not just of the soldier in the lap of luxury after the hardships of the trenches, but also of the colonial revelling in elite tourist experiences, and the emotional dimension of food being stressed.

European-style fine dining also occurred in Egypt. One soldier listed breakfast in a Russian bar, lunch in a swank hotel, and tea (dinner) in “a fashionable restaurant” (McInnis, Diary, February 6, 1916, 1DRL438, AWM). An excited soldier told his family of “high pressure” dining at the Hotel Metropole, which included macaroni pie, salad, mandarins and fresh dates alongside more traditional dishes, making what he reckoned to be “a fair feed” (Butters, Letter, *Stawell News*, March 20, 1915). Others dined at “The Belgian”, or “The Continental”, or enjoyed “a ripping feed” in a French café in Alexandria (Thistlethwaite, Letter, June 18, 1916, MLMSS 7703, MLSLNSW; Anon, Letter, *Kadina and Wallaroo Times*, November 22, 1916; Grant, Diary-letter, January 5, 1918, PR00009, AWM).

The Australians often dined out while in Britain during training, on leave or convalescing, and they recorded their pleasure at eating at “a very dainty café” (Thistlethwaite, Letter, September 7, 1916, MLMSS 7703, MLSLNSW), or dining in a

“wonderful restaurant” that was “really a night club”, featuring “[a]bout forty different hors d’oeuvres [sic]. The waiter cooked the fish before us, likewise a pancake” (Beeston, Diary, December 7, 1915, privately held). A couple of lance corporals, one a bank clerk from provincial Rockhampton in Queensland in civilian life, treated themselves in a “swank restaurant” in London frequented by “high-ranking officers”. The French menu was no problem to the bank clerk, who understood the language, but both were surprised to find the “sardines and different salads and dainties” were merely the entrée and not the main course. Fish came next, then fowl, then two puddings and an ice, topped off with a cigar. “It was very unusual to have so many different dishes like this”, he wrote. Best of all, at the end they were attentively ushered out without paying, being mistaken for high-class regulars with a monthly account (Gallwey, Letter, September 21, 1917, 2DRL0785, AWM). Writing home about dining in such establishments was not merely keeping the family informed, but also a way of marking the soldiers’ participation in status-loaded activities, as well as a distinctively Australian delight in putting one over authority.

A soldier travelling to Europe via America with a stopover in New York was taken by friends there to Churchill’s restaurant, “one of the fashionable places in New York”, which was his first experience of cabaret. There he ate his first oysters, followed by soup, fish, turkey with mashed potatoes, French beans, “and some other vegetable, I don’t know what it was, very nice all the same, then lettuce salad, then ice-cream. Ice-cream is eaten in these flash places in summer instead of puddings, finishing up with French pastry and coffee.” The meal took three hours, “and we all enjoyed it very much” (Hauff, “Soldiers’ Letters,” *Shepparton News*, July 22, 1918).

Soldier responses to novel ingredients varied from suspicion to delight. Visiting an Egyptian food market, a battalion doctor wrote of sampling “many queer articles of diet” though the net effect was a welcome change from standard rations, resulting in “decent

soup, decent bread and butter, decent fish and a host of other decent things” (Read, letter, January 17, 1915, MLMSS 2836, MLSLNSW). The Australian Light Horse in Sinai and Palestine from 1916-1918 experienced other culinary novelties, including fresh dates “which melt like butter in the mouth; so different to our squashed Dates” (Weir, letter, October 2, 1915, MLMSS 1024, MLSLNSW), and chapatti and dripping instead of bread (Savage, Diary, May 27, 1918, MLMSS 303, MLSLNSW). Weir, from a privileged squatter-farming background in Australia, seemed more at ease with exotic situations than many, dining on a number of occasions with Bedouin Pashas. The traditional nine-course dinners in sumptuous settings included lentils, liver and rice, whole roasted fat-tail sheep, local cheeses, catfish, camel, maize bread, and the whole head of a sheep, eyes, brains and all, with desserts made of buffalo milk, starch and sugar. (Weir, Letters, February 18, 1916, February 19, 1916, February 21, 1916, February 23, 1916, March 2, 1916, March 17, 1916, MLMSS 1024, MLSLNSW). Later in the campaign he tasted cooked prickly pear, which he considered “quite good” (Weir, Letter, August 25, 1917, MLMSS 1024, MLSLNSW).

Distinctive French foods such as bread, butter, snails and horse meat, sauces, wines and champagnes naturally featured, though there is a strange silence on the subject of garlic and ‘smelly’ French cheeses, the typical British bugbears of French cuisine (Duffett, 2012b), though one Australian did associate garlic-eating with the German enemy (Oliver, Letter, PR90157, AWM). French bread was popular, one writer considering that “the French bread is far superior to our British war loaf” (Hurley, diary, August 12, 1917, MLMSS 389, MLSLNSW), an opinion shared by others (Alcock, Diary, ca. 1917, MLMSS 1609, MLSLNSW; Bailey, diary, ca. 1918, PR90018, AWM; Hayne, Diary, ca. 1916, MLMSS2775, MLSLNSW). Others agreed that it was “good when it is hot, but when it gets cold it is like iron” (Taylor, Letter, ca. 1918, PR03112, AWM).

A surprising number of Australians tried snails and frogs' legs, no doubt influenced by the prestige factor. One found frogs' legs "simply lovely, but the snails are a bit too much for me" (McGuinness, Letter, *Koroit Sentinel*, September 2, 1916). A soldier in Paris considered frogs' legs "so delicious that at every meal after I had them" (Hannaford, Letter, September 18, 1917, PR84285, AWM). Another dined out on "fine dainty dishes but what they were composed of I know not but if 'twas frogs I'll have more" (Hutton, Diary, August 15, 1917, MLMSS 1138, MLSLNSW). A less-than-impressed soldier in Paris claimed that "Only the high class Parisians eat frogs the feet only – the bodies are not eaten.... The ordinary Frenchman would no more eat a dish of frogs' legs than an ordinary Englishman" (Schwinghammer, "Digger History," accessed March 18, 2020, <http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-asstd/schwinghammer.htm>). Fewer found snails appetising. One soldier recorded an upset stomach the day after eating snails (Kiel, diary, January 4, 1917, PR00046, AWM), though another had them whenever they were available, admitting that "I've been guilty of eating them with a mixture of other foods" (Milne, Letter, March 18, 1918, accessed 11 February 2020, <https://www.lillydalewardiary.com/1918-entries>).

The French were also notorious in the Anglo world for eating horse meat. Hearing that all Parisians ate horse flesh, an apprehensive Anzac in Paris went vegetarian while there, "as I had a horror of eating same" (Schwinghammer, "Digger History," accessed March 18, 2020, <http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-asstd/schwinghammer.htm>). Not all were so afraid, one Australian declared it "not so bad. I have tried it fried" (Goodwin, diary, July 23, 1916, MLMSS 1598, MLSLNSW). Another "got rather fond of horse steak" finding them filling, and estimating that in total he must have eaten the equivalent of "a couple of colts" (Laurence and Tiddy, 1989, p. 29).

Some objected to the non-Anglo habit of dressing salads, a surgeon complaining his was “drenched with olive oil which I did not like”, (Richards, diary, January 24, 1915, MLMSS 2908, MLSLNSW), while another decried an “oily looking salad” (McGuinness, Letter, *Koroit Sentinel*, September 2, 1916; Waterhouse, Diary, April 4, 1916, MLMSS 2792, MLSLNSW). A novel ingredient in salads was dandelion. Persuaded by a mademoiselle to try them, an Australian rated them as “not bad. They had a rank taste about them but are quite fine to eat.” His hosts “seemed quite surprised” that Australians would never think of eating them (Gallwey, Letter, August 2, 1917, 2DRL0785, AWM). A hungry Australian in a German prisoner-of-war camp was introduced to boiled burdock by a French fellow prisoner, calling the dish “splendid; just like spinach” (Alexander, Diary, June 23, 1918, MLMSS 1610, MLSLNSW), a rating perhaps aided by the lack of greens and starvation rations of the camp.

Along with new ingredients were new dishes, mainly drawing positive reviews. One Australian rated the best experience of his time in the army as the meal in a quiet restaurant in New Cairo. “And the courses!,” he exclaimed. “I have never tasted the like of it since, nor have I any idea now what they consisted of” (Roberts, Memoir, ca. 1915, PR00395, AWM). Another enjoyed a meal that featured fish with prawn sauce, beef cutlets, fresh strawberries “in some kind of firm frothy cream” and excellent bread rolls (Richards, Diary, January 24, 1915, MLMSS 2908, MLSLNSW). On the other hand, a well-travelled doctor on a sight-seeing visit to Memphis complained of “the strangest meal I’ve ever had”, only excepting one on a Cantonese river-boat. It consisted of sardines with dry bread, boiled eggs, a scrawny chicken, and cakes, cheese and fruit, all served on the same plate (Griffith, Letter, *Heidelberg News*, December 18, 1915).

While resting on the islands of Imbros (now Gökçeada) and Lemnos during the Gallipoli campaign, Anzacs found Greek food not merely a relief from the dreadful

monotony of Gallipoli rations, but also nutritionally and emotionally welcome variations. One enjoyed partridge baked in “the tenderest of mutton or was it goat” with potatoes, and a sweet omelette, with wines and fruit. He labelled it a “feast, for such it was after the daily menu over at Anzac” (Sparkes, Diary, December 3, 1915, MLMSS 3047, MLNSLNSW). Another soldier, unable to face one more ship’s meal, went ashore and delighted in “a good plate of rice cooked in Greek style cream cheese – wine – crystalized pears and plums, chocolate etc” (Ward, Diary, April 13, 1915, MLDOC 1300, MLNSLNSW). An Australian was astonished to see a Greek at Anzac Cove itself at Gallipoli “with 40-50 partridges, feathers and all for half a crown per piece” (Adam, Diary, October 6, 1915, 1DRL0003, AWM).

England and Scotland were, by virtue of the shared culture with Australia, less likely to offer exotic food encounters. However, some traditional British dishes were unavailable in Australia. One soldier enjoyed pheasant for dinner, pronouncing his first “real English dish” “delicious”. He also experienced the “novel sight” of a pudding surrounded with flaming brandy, and the next day dined on partridge. While visiting Scotland, he was introduced to Scottish girdle scones (known as griddle scones elsewhere), to which he “took a great fancy” (Gallwey, letter, December 28, 1917, September 21, 1917, 2DRL0785, AWM).

Dining out highlighted differences in service, presentation and etiquette. An Australian considered a dessert buffet bar “a peculiar way of doing things” (McInnis, Diary, February 6, 1916, 1DRL438, AWM), while a nurse in Egypt found it “very funny” to be served rock and water melon every meal (Avenell, Letter, June 22, 1915, MLMSS 4495, MLNSLNSW). Some commented on the “flash” saloons and restaurants, with women “very lightly clad and music everywhere” which they found “astoundingly prevalent” (Treganowan, Letter, July 30, 1917, PR3166, AWM). Two “Billjims” (a popular generic

nickname for the Australians, roughly equivalent to a British “Tommy” or German “Fritz”) were overheard puzzling over the French menu, misinterpreting boiled cabbage (“Choux rare a la bonne femme) as “‘something’, done or made, ‘like a good woman’” (“Anzacalities,” *Kia-ora Coo-ee*, August 15, 1918). The French practice of having each person help themselves from dishes placed on the table was one of “many peculiarities” for Australians, more accustomed to being given a pre-served plate by the hostess, while an Australian was quizzed by his host about the quality of the meat when he left a portion of it uneaten on his plate (Waterhouse, Diary, April 4, 1916, MLMSS 2792, MLSLNSW).

Coffee service attracted attention over the “tiny weeny little cup of black coffee – a ridiculous affair not as big as an egg cup” (Walther, Diary, March 19, 1916, PR00937, AWM), served at the end of meals by a soldier unaccustomed to Euro-Mediterranean coffee-drinking traditions. French coffee served in “their curious cups (without a handle)”, “or rather in bowls” (Peters, letter, December 12, 1916, MLMSS 1887, MLSLNSW) was also striking, as was the French practice of adding a dash of rum to the coffee. An Australian “nearly had a fit” at the mere sight of a French maître d’ who fitted his “comic opera stage” preconceptions of an archetypical French waiter (Bryan, Letter, *Queensland Times*, February 21, 1917).

French table manners could be rustic, one soldier amused by their noisy eating, their using fork and bread instead of fork and knife, and the more pleasing habit of wiping a plate clean with their bread. (Cocks, Letter, ca. 1917, MLMSS 1171, MLSLNSW).

Table manners

“All eat with hands, and literally tear the food”, he wrote. “The lamb’s head was smashed with an axe – and brains Bon [sic] Bouche.” He noted the round table at one feast had been borrowed from his previous host. “Evidently only the one Table in District –

Bedouins feed on the floor – and tear the food with hands” (Weir, letters, February 18, 1916, February 19, 1916, February 21, 1916, February 23, 1916, March 2, 1916, March 17, 1916, MLMSS 1024, MLSLNSW). At the other end of the dining experience, a soldier shared a meal in a “native village”, experiencing the collective serving characteristic of the culture. The “meat and vegetables were placed on one big dish in the centre of the table and it was a case of the fastest eater scoring best; it was not a bad feed and had plenty of beer, lemonade and water melon” (Tomlins, Diary, April 30, 1916, MLMSS 1002, MLSLNSW).

including one description that captured several ways in which the local dining etiquette differed from his own, not all unwelcomed:

Relief at English cooking

Such experiences meant that Australians often took refuge in their familiar foods. [in Egypt] Having ordered a very English meal of steak (though made from the local cow which he called a yak or buffalo), green peas, chip potatoes and tea, an officer was told by the café owner, “You Australians always order the same” (Weir, Letter, April 15, 1916, MLMSS 1024, MLSLNSW). Some dined out in private homes or hotels that offered English fare, to their great relief (Moncrieff, Letter, April 16, 1915, R98-13 Moncrieff & Jenkyn Family Papers, John Oxley Library, State Library of Qld (JOL, SLQLD)). Dining with an English clergyman after the Sunday service, one soldier had “a splendid dinner” with “roast beef carved in English fashion and not in the beastly Egyptian way” (Evans,

Diary, January 31, 1916, 2DRL0014, AWM). Others “received quite a pleasant surprise” when served a traditional English meal by Egyptian caterers, discovering that their cook had been taught “how to cook for Europeans” (Tomlins, Diary, April 23, 1916, MLMSS 1002, MLSLNSW). An officer enjoyed a “splendid dinner well served nice linen silver and glass” in the home of a wealthy Oxford-educated Egyptian Bey (Weir, Letter, April 25, 1916, MLMSS 1024, MLSLNSW).

Others complained over the scarcity of tea in France, a coffee-drinking nation. “One does not get a decent meal in France”, one claimed with considerable exaggeration, noting meagre breakfasts of “only coffee, and dry bread”, though admitting to “a fair dinner with wine, and at night another hot meat with wine again” (Growcock, Letter, *Gympie Times*, January 27, 1917; Knuckey, Diary, n.d., PR03193, AWM). A nurse was relieved to have “[g]ood plain food and heaps of it always.... English cooking, not like the greasy French hashes” (Pocock, Diary, July 10, 1916, PR5050, AWM).

Exotic food in reverse happened too on rare occasions. Billeted Australian artillerymen gave their French hosts some rolled oats to cook. They had to explain what these were and how to prepare porridge, which the French couple had not seen before. The hosts “were delighted and at once gave me an order for a tin” (Dewhurst, Diary, February 25, 1917, MLMSS 8661, MLSLNSW).

Conclusions

Surprisingly little long-term impact on Australian eating patterns

Soldier letters and diaries reveal something of the extent and nature of the new culinary experiences of the more than 330,000 Australians who served overseas for up to four years

during World War One. For a great many, it was their first immersion in other cultural contexts, and the food that they encountered broadened their culinary horizons. For some, the novel flavors and culinary customs were unwelcome, but many received a revelation of the pleasures of foods they had not encountered or even in many cases imagined.

It would be satisfying to report that these diverse food experiences had an impact on Australian dining habits when the war was over. The fact is, we do not know. It appears that Australian historians have never really asked the relevant questions. To what extent did food habits change? Did new ingredients and dishes gain wider acceptance post-war? Having experienced frequent dining out, did Australians go to restaurants more after the war? Did Australian men take up a greater share of the cooking duties? Having never posed those questions, the assumption is that the men returned to their homes, where they ate the same old food prepared by their womenfolk as before. Obviously, some were delighted to come back to the safe tastes of home, with no more risk of strange food encounters, but others must have missed the culinary delights they had experienced while in Egypt, France, Belgium and other places.

The widespread revolution in Australian eating habits would have to wait until the post-World War Two immigration boom from various European nations, and then the Asian and African migration from the 1970s onwards, brought the range of world flavors to Australian palates (“Australian food and drink,” accessed April 12, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110322040504/http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/foodanddrink/index.htm/>). However, it would be fascinating to see if the exotic culinary experiences of so many Australians during the Great War had any impact at all on the inter-war diet, or whether their novel food encounters were simply tucked away as nostalgic war memories.

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