

52Ancestors 2021 Week 5 - In the Kitchen

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My mother was not a good cook. She often said that Dad taught her to cook on their honeymoon, but his repertoire was limited so I wonder what they ate? Fish probably, as they were at Brunswick Heads. He loved fish and she didn't much like it but would have eaten it anyway. And apparently her first landlady, at the tiny flat she and Dad lived in during the first year of their marriage, taught her to make custard.

Despite this, she did a few things well. Roast lamb with all the baked vegetables for Sunday lunch. Monte Carlo biscuits. Enough to fill an ice-cream container for us to take back to University in our luggage after the holidays. Pavlova on special occasions like afternoon tea parties for the wives of Dad's staff members. If you were very lucky, there might be a spoonful left over to share.

Frankly I'm amazed that she managed to put a meal on the table every night especially during the years when there were three pre-school children plus one at school and a husband and father who came home and expected dinner to be ready.

To be fair, Dad often did Sunday night dinner, which was always a laid-back affair. He was good at pancakes and scrambled eggs and leftover roast lamb and veg on toast. And his signature dish was a concoction known as “onion, onion and tomatoes”, which I remember eating a few times when Mum was in hospital having babies.*

Neither of my grandmothers was much of a cook either. When I think about it, I realise that they had a limited range of ingredients. There was always lots of meat - especially lamb - in Australia, and steak and sausages were staples. They were always served very well done. There wasn't much pork and it was always fatty. Chickens were for special occasions and came out of the backyard - yours or the neighbour's. Someone had to chop its head off and pluck it. Rabbit could be shot and fish could be caught and they both needed to be prepared by the cook.

My paternal grandfather had an enviable vegetable garden when I was a child, but that range was limited too. Tomatoes, carrots, beans, pumpkins, cucumbers. No zucchini, no broccoli, no garlic, no capsicum, no herbs. Beetroot and asparagus came out of tins. Lettuce was always iceberg.

Typically of her generation, my grandmother always managed to destroy these fresh vegetables by cooking them to death. I remember the beans being boiled for ages and emerging grey and mushy. I don't remember cauliflower but it would have been cooked to a sludge too. She was good at jam making, and pastry.

All of us children remember her sago pudding. We would get a finger-wagging lecture from Mum before we arrived at my grandmother's house. We had to eat everything that was put in front of us, and no complaints. That included sago pudding, which we dreaded!

Funny, I quite like sago now.

Josie, Mum's mother, prided herself on her damper, which had allegedly won a Blue Ribbon at the local show at some time in the past. I don't recall ever eating it.

What I do remember of our visits to her house in her later years was Mum's surreptitious cleaning of her pantry. “Don't eat the Vegemite,” she would warn us. “It's 6 years past its use-by date.” (Vegemite is possibly indestructible so that probably didn't matter.) Mum and her sister, who was often visiting at the same time, would conspire to get their mother out of the house – their husbands would be enlisted to take her to the cemetery for a visit – and then they would frantically clean everything in sight, throwing out old food from the fridge and pantry and replacing old jars with new ones.

My generation came of age at a time of abundance and multi-culturalism. We have access to exotic ingredients from all over the world, and cook books and television cooking shows to teach us how to use them. And if we still don't feel like cooking, there is always the take-away.

*I make it myself now as Sunday night comfort food. Very gently sauteed onion rings in butter with chopped tomato added and then stewed gently until the whole thing is like thick soup. Delicious on toast, with cracked black pepper.

