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From mutton to MasterChef

FANCIFUL: Sunday supermarket shopping and Chiko Rolls would have been inconceivable to Tasmanian women of the 1930s.
Picture: MERCURY HISTORICAL ARCHIVE COLLECTION



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Browsing the shop at the Jervis Bay Maritime Museum at Huskisson on the NSW south coast I happened upon *A Timeline of Australian Food* and bought it.

That was entertainment covered for the train, airport wait, and plane home.

Author Jan O’Connell comes from a meat-and-three-veg background where beer or sweet sherry were the parents’ tipples. She says she is not a foodie or ambitious cook.

Her career has been largely in advertising and she does have an “ahem” moment in a 1982 entry, at which time she was responsible for the line “Yoplait. It’s French for yoghurt,” pronounced over pictures of two tubs of yoghurt standing in for the Arc de Triomphe.

The campaign brought yoghurt into the mainstream, whereas before you would find it in the health food shop.

Her advertising background probably is responsible for the short, sharp presentation of the information — “easily digestible chunks” as she says — and the plentiful illustrations.

The timeline covers 150 years, from 1860 to 2010 — or mutton to *MasterChef*.

Tasmania is in at the start, with newspaper owner, magistrate and politician Edward Abbott writing the first Australian cookbook, *The*

English and Australian Cookery Book, in 1864.

Other state firsts were introducing salmon and trout in 1864 (once released into the River Derwent the salmon disappeared but the trout stayed on); exporting apples to England in 1887; the first major food festival when the Taste of Tasmania started in 1988; and the introduction of truffle growing in 1993.

And in the pages of this very newspaper, in 1929, is the first recorded mention of fairy bread

— “hundreds and thousands” pressed into buttered white bread — to kick off a party for children at the Consumptive Sanatorium.

Tasmania was the first state to end the “six o’clock swill”. Temperance campaigners succeeded in having 6pm closing for pubs introduced in 1916 as a war measure.

Tasmania ended the early closing in 1937. South Australia was the last to drop it 30 years later.

In 1946, NSW was the first state to license restaurants to serve “light wine”. However, this did not extend to restaurants with seats in

alcoves along the wall, which, police feared, might open the way for “a great increase in promiscuous sexual behaviour”.

By the time Tasmania got its first licensed restaurant in 1968 — Martini in Burnie — such considerations seem to have been dropped.

In 1970 there were 1000 licensed restaurants in all Australia; by 1980 there were 5000. In some years since the opening of Mona in 2011 the number opening in just Hobart has hovered around 25.

When we shop for food and how we pay for it has changed greatly. In 1931 the first supermarket opened in New York; here former variety stores — Woolworths and Coles opened their first supermarkets in the early ’60s.

I was reminded that when Bankcards were first issued in 1974 you were not allowed to use them to buy food. In 1984, NSW was the first to allow supermarket shopping on Saturday afternoons; here it did not happen until 1995 and it was 2002 before we got Sunday trading.

In 1984, when Eftpos was introduced 90 per cent of

transactions were in cash. By 2013 just 18 per cent of all payments were cash.

The book springs many surprises. Who knew the first commercial olive oil was produced in 1870 behind the walls of Adelaide Gaol, where it was established as “something to keep the prisoners occupied”.

Or that Sanitarium in Australia made the world’s first commercially available peanut butter in 1898, several years ahead of US.

The biggest surprise to me was the truth behind “the authentic Italian touch” of Leggo’s. Leggo is not Italiano. It is a Cornish name and Henry Leggo, the son of Cornish immigrants, began selling his mother’s sauces and relishes to miners in the 1890s gold rush. By 1950 the company was struggling, but in 1975 Italian actor Gina Lollobrigida starred in the launch of Leggo’s new canned sauce range and the Italian “connection” was born (or fabricated).

The arrival of products from Tim Tams to the Sunbeam Mixmaster are noted and trends from food franchises to paddock-to-plate. Opposites of taste — Penfolds Grange and the Chiko Roll — both made their debut 1951.

***A Timeline of Australian Food* Jan O’Connell, NewSouth, \$34.99. See also australianfoodtimeline.com.au for 200 years of tasty trivia.**

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