

Roasting jacks and sugar choppers: what convict women put up with in the kitchen

Almost all convict women were assigned as domestic servants, and for many this meant cooking. What exactly did they do in their kitchens? Very little was written about this at the time, as anyone writing letters or a diary seemed to take cooking for granted, but by looking at what ingredients and implements were advertised for sale, a picture of kitchen activity can be developed.

Much cooking seems to have been basic. Inns provided mainly fried steak, chops and eggs. Convict rations comprised meat, flour, sugar and tea. However, a wider variety of foods was available for home kitchens.

Basically, cooks prepared local produce. Robert Knopwood's diary shows that he was growing a variety of fruit and vegetables in his garden from the earliest period. People grew and ate flour and barley; vegetables such as potatoes, onions, cabbages, peas, beans, cauliflowers and so on; fruit such as apples, pears, stone fruit and small fruit, as well as nuts; milk, cream, eggs, butter and cheese; honey; and meat, mainly kangaroo, mutton, beef and pork, ham and bacon, with some poultry.

In the 1820s imported ingredients were tea and sugar, both staples; salt beef and pork; some coffee; rice, oatmeal, sago and arrowroot; dried fruit such as raisins and currants (no sultanas until the 1850s); spices – nutmegs, pepper, cinnamon, ginger, cloves, as well as curry powder; mustard, vinegar, pickles and 'fish sauces'; preserved herrings and anchovies. There were the beginnings of convenience foods, with the preserved fish and meat, prepared sauces, and curry powder. Essentially, these were much the same ingredients that our great-grandmothers cooked with.

However, cooking implements were much more basic than a century later. At first, cooking was done over an open fire, with a gridiron on top to support frying pans and saucepans. Dutch ovens, or colonial ovens, were much in use: a large pot on three legs which stood over the fire, and was used for stewing, pot roasting, and perhaps making bread. A roasting jack or turnspit was a machine which rotates meat roasting on a spit, probably using human power rather than steam, though these had been invented. Implements were saucepans, frying pans, kettles; pots; knives, forks and spoons. Settlers could buy a caboose, which consisted of a tea kettle, stewpan, saucepan, salad dish and lamp, with burners for those going into the country. At any place they could strike fire and boil a kettle in a few minutes, the advertisement promised. What fuel this used is not known, but perhaps oil or alcohol (like a modern Trangia). Kerosene and methylated spirits were not yet available. No fridges of course, but meat safes were used to keep meat as cool and fresh as possible.

Wealthy households had kitchen ranges. There was one advertisement for 'A capital 6-foot kitchen range, with ovens, copper, boilers, crane, and every apparatus complete.' Ranges, only recently invented once cast iron was available, were something like Agas, and must have made cooking much easier for the lucky few who could afford

them. However, in summer all cooks must have been very hot, so near roaring fires. In winter the kitchen would be a warm, comforting place.

There was different equipment for various tasks. Mincing knives; pepper and coffee mills for grinding these ingredients; toasting forks; sugar choppers for cutting up blocks of sugar (anyone who has chopped bits off blocks of palm sugar for Asian recipes knows how hard a block of sugar is); egg slicers; nutmeg graters; jelly moulds for setting jelly – having first boiled up the calves feet to make the setting agent (no prepared gelatine); cream skimmers; cullenders for draining; pudding pans and fish pans. All these implements point to a huge amount of hard manual labour for cooks – chopping, mincing, grinding, grating, beating, stirring and so on.

What did they cook? In 1845 Eliza Acton in England published *Modern cookery for private families*, which gives some indication of cookery in England, and most people in Van Diemen's Land were English and used the recipes they had at home. Acton showed some French influence, but not much, and most recipes were traditional English. Many sorts of soup, meat and vegetable, often economical: 'A cheap Green Pea soup'. Fish and meat were boiled, baked, fried and stewed, with every part of the carcass used. Sauces included egg sauce, common lobster sauce, caper sauce for fish and so on. 'Store sauces', which could be kept, included chutney, mushroom catsup and tarragon vinegar. Curries were well known, since England ruled India. Vegetables were boiled or stewed. Puddings comprised pies and tarts, and many boiled and baked dishes: 'small and very light Plum pudding', 'rich bread and butter pudding'; 'Kentish suet pudding', 'the poor author's pudding'. There were also stewed fruit, jellies ('modern varieties of calf's feet jelly') and many custards, blancmanges and even meringue. There were a few cakes, but cakes would be challenging without equipment for beating, and these were plain: almond cake, gingerbread, soda cake. Recipes for jam and bread rounded off the book. Again, these fairly plain recipes are much what our grandmothers and great-grandmothers cooked.

In 1864 Edward Abbott of Tasmania published Australia's first cookery book, but it is not much help as a guide to what convict cooks prepared. Abbott has a section on Tasmanian fish and how to cook them – fried, baked, boiled and so on. For example, flathead is the best fish for soup, and is excellent fried. However, much of the book is taken up with excerpts from English newspapers, and Abbott includes many French recipes (Aiguillettes de Ris de Veau, Lamb a la Poulette and so on). The book seems rather grand for the usual colonial home to use, and in any case was written when there were few convict cooks left.

Was there any change by the 1850s? In the 1830s and 1840s a few new ingredients appeared. Salad oil; preserved and pickled vegetables; bottled fruit; licorice; candied citron for baking; more sauces such as 'India soy', Reading sauce (a pickle containing India soy) and Harvey sauce (India soy again, with anchovies).

The 1850s saw the beginning of manufactured food. Jelly powder and blancmange powder; tinned meats and fish (salmon, anchovies, herrings and sardines); confectionery like jujubes, acid drops, pontefract cakes (licorice) and Fry's chocolate; rising agents for cakes, such as cream of tartar, bicarbonate of soda and tartaric acid,

which would be very useful; prepared calves-foot jelly. Ginger-beer corks for sale show that ginger-beer was made. How much such items were used is not known. The preserved items were probably expensive, and there is little mention of them at the period. There were only a few new ingredients, and these were of limited use, such as treacle, sultanas and semolina.

Chemists sold many of these ingredients, as well as the fascinatingly named poor-man's-friend ointment, 'old women's teeth', and morphia lozenges.

I was expecting a few more convenience foods, such as condensed milk, custard powder, tinned condensed soup, dried coconut, but they were not yet available. Even more disappointing is that there were few new implements for cooks by the 1850s. There were urns with taps for using hot water; small items like egg boilers and coddlers, but nothing much else. Basically, throughout the convict period, cooking remained the same for women convicts sent to the kitchen.

Some idea of cooking at government house comes from the diaries of Jane Franklin, chatelaine there from 1837 to 1843. She employed a series of cooks, including a number of convict women such as Susan Adams and Marianne Galey, a trained cook who had worked for Lord Sidmouth. She who was the only convict Jane Franklin praised, mildly – Galey 'has contrived to send us up some very fair dinners'. Jane rarely described meals, but she did write about the food at an 1840 ball, when she was employing a French cook, Charles Napoleon.

The Ball & Supper in the evening went off well – We supposed there might have been near 500 people present. The number of invitations sent out was between 11 & 1200, being more extensive than they ever were before. – The music was indifferent in the Dancing room, but the military band made up for its deficiencies. – The supper-tables were covered with the productions of M. Charles Napoleon, of very unequal merit. – He had contrived to prepare all the poultry in such a way that it looked like creams & blancmanges, & nobody could have guessed there was any poultry on the table, on which account I had tickets describing the disguised dishes, & disclosing the contents of the covered pies, attached to them severally. – There was not the same refinement observed in many other things. – 2 sprawling pigs & a sprawling kid were instances of this. – The solid meat dishes predominated, as rounds of beef, ribs of beef, saddles of mutton, pork hams, large poultry pies, (one of which was in the form of a bastion mounted with guns) &c. It was very clear when the supper was over that there was meat enough left to last the whole family for a week.

Diary, 27 May 1840

In 1839 Jane Franklin had a convict cook, Margaret (surname unknown), and Jane herself made a brief appearance as an assistant, and apparently not very willing, cook:

I was busy for 3 hours this morning in Margaret's confectionary room, learning of her preparatory to the changes that are about to take place in our establishment the art of making sponge cakes, Naples or finger biscuits & drops, cheese-cakes, tartlets & puffs – With a white muslin apron on, prepared for me by Margaret, I practised some of the manual arts of her profession, half-smothered & smoked however by the oven of this ill-constructed room.

5 Nov 1839

Later she watched Margaret make jelly and blancmange 28 Nov, but she was obviously not inspired, and that was the last lesson. To make a sponge cake, Margaret must have beaten the eggs with two forks – right up to the 1850s I couldn't find an advertisement for a whisk of any sort. This was a long, tiring and tedious task which from Eliza Acton's recipe for a sponge cake would take a good twenty minutes if not longer. To me this epitomises the difficulties of cooking in Van Diemen's Land in the first half of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, I would prefer even this to housework, with the implements of the period.

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