



ANYONE FOR SEED CAKE?

Touching on the Library's latest publication, Colin Bannerman muses on what is fashionable to eat—and what is not

Ask the above question rhetorically. I have never found an occasion when I could serve seed cake to a group of friends or acquaintances without provoking controversy. Typical responses range from a bemused 'What?' to an offended 'Yuk!'. There has always been at least one person willing to damn caraway seeds and declare them the ruination of an otherwise perfect pound cake. A century or more ago, an offer of seed cake would have elicited very different responses—certainly murmurs of appreciation all round and possibly, even in the politest of circles, a display of enthusiasm bordering on the unseemly.

Sadly, this wondrously rich, aromatic, close-textured confection has become a pleasure best confined to the empathetic bosom of one's family affections. Fortunately, that of mine is as fond of it as I am. Unfortunately, the expansionary tendencies of anything in the pound cake line are such that neither I nor said bosom are willing to eat too many pounds of it. Hence it is not only a private passion, but a rare one.

I cannot think why these delicious seeds should be so maligned; discerning people have been enjoying them since prehistoric times. The Romans were so fond of caraway that they ate the roots as vegetables. (Sceptics will no doubt say they did this to prevent the plants from seeding; don't believe a word of it.)

The use of caraway seeds to flavour buns, cakes and biscuits was well established in England by late medieval times. They were

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(1868–1936)
*Bush Picnic on Sandstone Ledge
Overlooking Sydney Harbour ... 2*
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PRINTED FOR R. BALDWIN NO. 47, IN PATER-NOSTER-ROW.
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above:

Title page of *The Experienced English Housekeeper* by Elizabeth Raffald (London: printed for R. Baldwin, 1782 edn)

right:

Recipe for 'a good seed cake' reproduced from the *Australasian*, 2 October 1869 (Melbourne: Hugh George, 1869)

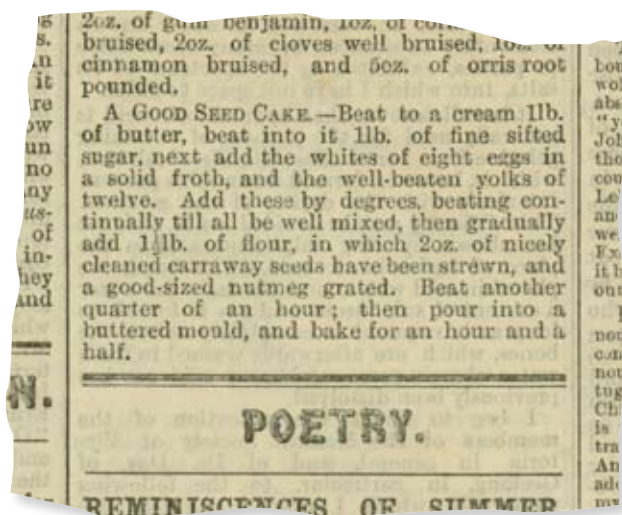
also made into a kind of confectionery in which the seeds were coated with several layers of sugar (comfits). Since caraway was known for sweetening the breath, they were sometimes called 'kissing comfits'. By the eighteenth century, seed cake was an expected item in the repertoire of accomplished pastry cooks. Edward Kidder (c.1665–1739), who ran a cookery school in London, compiled a collection of recipes for the use of his students; he gave two recipes for seed cake: the following, and a 'leight seed cake' made in much the same way.

Take 2 pound of smooth Carraways, 6 pound of flower, ½ a pound of sugar, an ounce of sweet spice with Citron, Lemon peelee; then make an hole in ye flower & put in ½ a pint of yest

& 8 eggs well beat, ½ a pint of sack, a little Orange flower water, a pt of Cream & 2 pound of butter warm'd together, then strew a little flower thereon, let it lye to rise then put it in an hoop and strew over it double refin'd Sugar & rough Carraways.

Kidder's recipe is a useful (though of course arbitrary) point from which to start exploring food fads and fashions. English enthusiasm for caraway was well illustrated by the proportions in his recipe: seeds made up more than one sixth of the weight of the cake! The inclusion of 'yest' was unremarkable; leavening with yeast (or barm skimmed from the top of fermenting ale) was the common method of raising cakes at that time. However, an alternative—and much richer—form of seed cake was gaining acceptance. It was based on the pound cake which, theoretically, is made from a pound each of butter, sugar, eggs and flour and is therefore very rich. Its only leavening is from the tiny bubbles of air beaten into the mixture by an energetic cook. Elizabeth Raffald's 1769 book, *The Experienced English Housekeeper*, recognised both the popular method, in her recipe for 'common seed cake' raised with barm, and the rising fashion (pun intended). She gave a second recipe, for a 'rich' cake which, she warned her readers, 'will take two hours beating'. Unlike Kidder's, both were merely speckled with seeds, not thick with them. Popular opinion was clearly favouring a lighter hand with seeds, though a light hand with the wooden spoon would have been a distinct disadvantage in beating a pound cake to perfection.

Almost a century later, the redoubtable Mrs Beeton also offered two kinds of seed



cake: a 'common' one made of bread dough, 'good dripping', moist sugar, caraway seeds and egg, and 'a very good' one of roughly pound cake proportions. The goodness of the latter was helped along with a wineglassful of brandy.

In the antipodes, Hobart parliamentarian Edward Abbott compiled Australia's first cookery book (*The English and Australian Cookery Book*, 1864) before Isabella Beeton had achieved much fame for her monumental labours. He subtitled his work 'Cookery for the Many as well as for the "Upper Ten Thousand"', though it could be argued that his treatment of seed cake demonstrated the tyranny of his distance from the centre of food fashion. Abbott included in his selection a recipe for 'common seed cake' for the many; quite properly, it was raised with yeast and fashionably light on seeds. However, he failed to give a 'rich' pound cake version for the uppers. Yet it was the upper-class kind that scaled the peak of popularity and remained a firm favourite for decades into the twentieth century.

Of course, the popularity of seed cakes does not mean that every one of them was beaten by hand for two hours. Another fad—chemical raising agents—reached housekeepers in the second half of the nineteenth century. By 1900 it was possible to produce a fashionably light cake with a spoonful of baking powder and only 10 or 20 minutes' beating.

Seed cake seems to have been as popular in Australia as in Britain; recipes for it were among those more frequently asked for in the correspondence columns of newspapers or recommended by food columnists to their readers. The *Australasian* of 20 October 1869 gave a recipe for 'a good seed cake'. From 1894 to 1904, the Melbourne *Herald* ran a daily column of menu suggestions for dinner; seed cake featured several times in the menu for Sunday dinner—which, in those days, was celebrated at midday. (The column was described in my article 'The Daily Dinner', *National Library of Australia News*, January 2002.) In 1918, 'Penelope' of the *Sydney Morning Herald* selected sponge cake and seed cake as examples of what she described as "'useful" or "cut-and-come-again" cakes', which 'are invaluable for afternoon teas, for tennis parties, and for similar occasions'. You could expect to find

a recipe for it in just about any reasonably comprehensive cookery book published in Australia up until about 1950.

After World War II, the seed cake swiftly disappeared from Australian tables, swept aside by wave after wave of fad cakes from America. The English *Cassell Food Dictionary* now dismisses it as 'an old-fashioned rich cake, akin to Madeira, containing caraway seeds and flavoured with lemon and/or vanilla.' Australia's *Macquarie Dictionary of Cookery* doesn't even mention it.

Seed cake figures in the title of my latest book—*Seed Cake & Honey Prawns, Fashion and Fad in Australian Food*, to be published by the National Library in 2008—precisely because it has fallen out of favour. The book is not about seed cake, nor is it a catalogue

Jim Fitzpatrick (b.1916)
*Mrs Robert Wharton Making
a Cake in Her Kitchen, Drouin,
Victoria, 1945*
gelatin silver photograph
15.9 x 21.5 cm
Pictures Collection
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above:
Colin Bannerman
The Cake Tin 2007
Courtesy Colin Bannerman

below right:
Cover of *Seed Cake and Honey Prawns* by Colin Bannerman
(Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2008)

of current food fashions. It is a discussion—at times serious, irreverent, nostalgic, even hopeful—about the forces that shape what we choose to eat in Australia. My hope is that readers will find it both entertaining and thought-provoking.

Before the seed cake disappears entirely from memory, there is another sort that deserves mention. Buried in the Library's collection of *culinaria* is an unpublished 29-page booklet rejoicing in the title *Wakati Pirdijirri-kirli*. It was produced for an Indigenous pre-school project at Yuendumu (NT) in 1981, to teach 'the little children how to collect and prepare local foods in the traditional manner'. 'Many children', it said, 'had never seen the preparation of seed-cakes and had never tasted them before'. It was, in fact, a one-recipe cookery book; it documented in simple words and pictures the gathering of edible seeds and their processing into a cake. I am glad to say that foods native to Australia, and once the traditional fare of its people, are making a comeback. What may have begun as the next fad after Thai will,

I hope, eventually provide the basis for an authentic Australian cuisine.

And what about *honey prawns*?

In the 1970s, my wife and I haunted a succession of 'ethnic' restaurants—Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Vietnamese, Cajun and Thai. Like most foodies of the era, we were exploring the world beyond the pale of dreary chops and sausages. Our favourite Chinese eatery was casual enough for our little girl to sit up in a high chair and litter the floor with fried rice, or to curl up beside us and sleep. We went there looking for two dishes in particular: honey prawns and sesame prawn toast. Prawns with honey now seems an unlikely combination. It did even then, but there was magic in it; the Chinese had a knack for bringing unrelated flavours together in mystic union.

Honey prawns was just a passing fad, but it helped chart the course of our culinary evolution. Much more than just a flavour thrill, it spurred us on to explore other unlikely dishes and food combinations. Many have become lifelong favourites. I wonder how honey prawns would go with a light sprinkling of caraway?

COLIN BANNERMAN is an independent scholar whose research interests include food history, culture and communication. His previous books for the National Library are *Acquired Tastes: Celebrating Australia's Culinary History* (1998) and *The Upside-Down Pudding* (1999)

