

**Terra Nullius, Culina Nullius:
The contradictions
of Australian food culture**

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

In addressing the contradictions of Australian food culture, this project asks four questions. First and most importantly: how is it that after more than 225 years, we have no Australian or regional Australian food culture, nor even any evidence – through recipes and dishes – of its more tangible and visible vector, cuisine? Secondly: what are the consequences for a nation and its people of having bypassed this important stage in the evolution of a society? Thirdly: why in over 200 years living here do we eat practically nothing that grows locally but those fish, birds, crustaceans and shellfish analogous to European produce? And finally, if we do not have a food culture in the historical sense, what do we have? The second third and fourth questions will be answered during the course of the project. The answer to all these questions will require, firstly, an exploration of the history of European occupation of this land and its occupiers.

In 1788, eleven ships, carrying 987 mainly Anglo-Celtic convicts, guards and officers from a society going through tremendous social and economic upheaval arrived on our shores. The vast majority of the convicts were, in one way or another, victims of that upheaval. What greeted them was an alien landscape unlike any, even the few who had travelled, had ever seen.

They arrived with their own food and methods of agriculture. In pressing ahead with planting and stocking, they destroyed the food sources and agricultural practices of the indigenous people. The land appeared inhospitable, and, for the most part, the new arrivals clung to the coast. Gradually, land was taken up in the interior, where the animals they brought with them were grazed, eventually very successfully. Soon, there was more meat being produced than could be eaten by the population, and, although the vast bulk of it was exported (it was produced specifically for exportation to overseas

markets), this over abundance of meat shaped the diet of the Anglo-Celtic Australians. But the ways in which it was cooked, and the diet that surrounded it was, until the 1950s, stubbornly based on the diet they had left behind. But change was on the horizon.

In the 1950s Australia faced a second invasion of refugees from a war-torn Europe. They too brought their food cultures and ingredients with them. At first Anglo-Celtic Australia rejected the food of the newcomers. Then a post war economic boom and the arrival of the Boeing 747 saw millions of Anglo-Celtic Australians leaving the country and travelling to Europe and Asia for the first time, arriving home with a fresh perspective on food and food culture. There followed an explosion of new food, new produce, restaurants and wine. And now, in the 21st Century, this concatenation of events has resulted in Australia having one of the most innovative, multiculinary high (public) tables on the planet.

Lévi-Strauss wrote that food is 'good to think [with].' In thinking with food in the context of this work, I have made connections not previously made which will be helpful in thinking about Australian culture generally. Australia does not have a food culture in the traditional sense of the word. And neither does it have a cuisine or cuisines in any sense of the word. Curiously, the very same set of societal circumstances that prevented us from having a cuisine in the traditional sense has resulted in our having something in many ways richer: we enjoy diverse, eclectic and original offerings from culturally unconstrained chefs at our high tables, an unmatched multiculinary on our low tables and, paradoxically, mostly mundane dishes on our home tables. As for the long term rejection of our native produce, and whether it contains an element of food racism, this could well be the subject of future research. In sum, these are the major contradictions of Australian food culture.

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