

Me and My Big Mouth: Living through Australia's food revolution

Chapter 1

All in the family

My earliest memory concerns eating. It happened when I was still too young to sit at the table, not having yet turned two. I was the youngest member of an extended family who gathered together for "tea" on a Sunday evening. This weekly ritual involved four generations and took place at *Cartref*, a substantial residence in the respectable Melbourne suburb of Caulfield.

The house was built back in the days when houses had names, not just numbers, by my great grandfather, Sam Hollow. The building company of Hollow and Sons was responsible for quite a number of red-brick piles in the Edwardian style, all with old-country names like *Cregah*, *Redruth* and *Swinside*, dotted around the suburbs of Melbourne. Many were occupied by members of the family and the names generally reflected their origins. *Cartref*, for example, means "home" in Welsh, Wales being the birthplace of my great grandmother's parents.

It was a big, close family. When I was an infant, there was quite a clan at *Cartref*: five aunts and uncles of various generations. I lived at *Cregah*, immediately opposite, with another four or five Hollow descendents, including my parents.

Cartref was, for a small person, a huge and intimidating building, with ceilings that were unimaginably high, long corridors, and dark, heavy furniture covered with breakable knick-knacks. The large garden had a vast amount of buffalo grass lawn that prickled young, bare feet. Precisely in the centre of the lawn a large date palm reared up, all spikes and wind-tossed fronds. I suppose Grandpa saw it as a symbol of middle-class solidity and achievement; I saw it as a monster lying in wait for an unwary child.

I much preferred the central feature of the back garden, which was a stand-alone pavilion used as a billiards room. This exotic structure was all polished wood and dim lights, but its most fascinating feature was a stuffed cockatoo under a glass dome in the corner. This creature had been my great grandfather's close companion for many years and was credited with getting him to work on time each morning, with cries of "Sam, Sam, you're late".

Two small and very much alive dogs were also part of our domestic circle: Bunty, an inoffensive silky terrier who lived on our side of the road, and Spotty, an energetic fox terrier who resided with my Auntie Irene opposite. With no children of her own, Auntie Irene doted on me – and on that dog. Perhaps that's why Spotty and I never took to

each other: it was a case of mutual jealousy. Spotty is not actually a part of the tableau I hold in my memory, but was certainly the critical off-stage presence.

On the Sunday night in question, I was in the cavernous dining room at *Cartref*. The big table was set for tea, but the various adults were clearly occupied elsewhere – women in the kitchen, men (I now surmise) in the billiards room. I was strapped into a high chair. It was gloomy and silent as I toyed with my tiny toddler spoon.

At last, an aunt appeared. She set an enamel plate in front of me. I inspected the chopped up food with an uncritical eye and, evidently deciding not to wait for my elders, reached for the spoon. Then, as I conveyed the first spoonful to my lips, all hell broke loose.

Wild-eyed and with apron strings flying, Auntie Irene burst through the double doors crying “Jan’s got Spotty’s dinner! Jan’s got Spotty’s dinner!” My spoon froze in mid-air. In the nick of time, the offending plate was snatched from the high-chair tray. I’m not sure, now, whether she was worried that I might eat something dangerous or (as is more likely) that poor Spotty would be deprived of his lovingly prepared chopped ox heart.

Fortunately, this experience did not permanently mar my relationship with food. I’m not a person who lives to eat but neither am I someone who eats simply to live. It’s the conviviality I love. A conversation had around a table beats cocktail party chit chat any time. Sharing good food gives me a sense of being blessed. Although I’m a card-carrying atheist I can understand the tradition of saying grace. Maybe those feelings reach back to Sundays at *Cartref*, the unfortunate dog food episode notwithstanding.

Those gatherings at the family home had been going on for many years before my birth. While the food was invariably simple, the atmosphere had always been lively. It was a time for the young men to introduce new girlfriends, who were subjected to the scrutiny of the extended family.

Sam Hollow had four daughters, one son and five grandsons. While three of the daughters were of a pious inclination the youngest, Irene, was something of a black sheep and the favourite aunt with all five nephews. Family gossip has it that she’d been seen cavorting at New Year’s Eve parties in her cami-knickers. Some fifteen years after the Spotty’s dinner episode she was certainly instrumental in my introduction to gin and cigarettes.

True to character, Irene was happy to join the boys in a game of cards on Sundays while the other daughters dutifully reported with their parents for Evensong at St Mary’s Church of England. Irene was always ready to vamp out a popular song on the piano – an energetic performance that was rapidly transformed into a sedate “Bringing in the Sheaves” as the rest of the family returned from church.

This is the stuff of legend. The family gatherings I remember were less rollicking. The highlight of the evening was the distribution of our “wages”. Very much the stern patriarch, Grandpa Hollow would produce the pay envelopes, one for each great-grandchild and each containing a shiny two shilling piece. We children were vaguely afraid of Grandpa, but unaware that that the rituals and politeness of Sunday evenings concealed a family scandal.

Widowed at the age of 66, within two years Grandpa had Married Again. This left his family aghast. His second wife had been in domestic service in their household and was 18 years his junior. Known scornfully by the family as Ginger owing to her shocking use of henna hair dye, she never made an appearance on these Sunday evenings. She had the last laugh, though, by outliving every one of Sam Hollow’s children, thus ensuring that none of them benefited from the sale of his substantial estate. Grandpa himself died shortly after my fourth birthday and the supply of two shilling pieces stopped abruptly.

Certain Hollow traditions, however, lingered on through my childhood. Among these was the Cornish Pasty. As a youth, Sam Hollow had emigrated with his family from Redruth in the heart of Cornwall’s tin-mining region. The pasties were traditional miner’s fare. A miner ate half his pasty mid-morning and saved the rest for lunch. The pastry carried a distinctive mark, so he could identify his own half-eaten meal, while the crimped crust allowed him to hold the pasty with his filthy fingers, without contaminating his food. The crust was discarded afterwards. In 2011, the Cornish Pasty received Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status from the European Union. This means a true Cornish pasty must follow the traditional recipe – and be made in Cornwall.

The Hollow family pasties qualified on the first count, at least. They were produced every Saturday, according to the time-honoured family recipe handed down from mothers to daughters. They were goliaths of their kind. Their ends hung over the edges of the average dinner plate. The convention was to cut off a corner and put it aside for morning tea on Sunday, a warm-up for the lunch-time roast. When my father’s extended family gathered for Cornish pasties, whoever was cooking marked each one with a symbol that identified an individual’s preferences. Bill – light on the onion, plenty of meat. Marie – not too much salt.

Saturday mornings during my childhood saw a pasty production line, with my grandmother (a Hollow born and bred) chopping the potatoes and the onions while she kept a sharp eye on her daughter-in-law, my mother, who was making the pastry. The shortening used in the pastry had to be beef dripping, and preferably beef dripping that had been enriched by the juices of several Sunday roasts. After mixing, the pastry was divided into fist-sized lumps that were allowed to rest for an hour or so before being rolled into an oval shape the width of the aforementioned dinner plate.

The only permissible fillings for your genuine Hollow pasty were half-inch cubes of skirt steak, cubed raw potato, chopped onion and salt and pepper. In rare, adventurous moments, a touch of Swede turnip might be included, but the very thought of adding carrot or a green vegetable was heresy. The pasty was constructed strictly to formula: first a handful of potato, then a fairly substantial spoonful of onion, then a handful of meat, distributed over the top. By now, the ingredients were nicely mounded. After a sprinkling of salt and pepper (pre-ground white pepper, which was then the staple in Australian kitchens) and a smattering of flour to help produce the gravy, the pasty was closed.

This was where one's skill in the art of pasty making was revealed (and where the pastry itself revealed its quality or lack thereof). It was necessary to draw the edges together over the distinctly lumpy filling, crimping along the top to produce the distinctive Cornish pasty frill. All too often, a piece of onion or potato would burst through the delicate pastry, leading to muttered imprecations and a hasty patch over the hole.

There is controversy about whether the true Cornish pasty has the frill on the top or on the side. According to the Cornish Pasty Association, who should know, the crimp is along the side and the pasty is D-shaped. Well, our pasties always had the frill at the top, and since the family was Cornish through and through I regard this as optional.

After the closing (and, maybe, patching) it was into the oven for an hour and three quarters, of which the last hour or so was exquisite torture as the aroma from the baking pasties drifted through the house. It drew several of the neighbourhood children like a magnet. They loitered around the back door, feigning interest in playing with my little brother, inhaling deeply and trying to conceal their watering mouths. My mother once relented and sent the little boy next door home with his very own pasty. Alas, his mother, clearly without a drop of Cornish blood in her veins, pronounced it starchy and lacking in gravy. Exactly.

Another of my earliest memories is of my second birthday party and the thrill of sitting at the head of the table in the big dining room at *Creagh*. All I can visualise through the haze of years is that stretch of white tablecloth, loaded with various plates of colourful food, with aunts hovering over their offspring, my cousins, along either side. The table seemed vast and I revelled in being the star of the show.

I can't remember whether I actually ate anything. No doubt there would have been fairy bread (that party standard of white bread and butter sprinkled with colourful hundreds and thousands), probably cupcakes and possibly saveloys. I certainly didn't eat any birthday cake, because no-one remembered to cut it. My mother is still lamenting the fact that it was left on the sideboard and was found the next day crawling with ants.

Well, they couldn't just pop it in the fridge. There wasn't one. In the late forties, the refrigerator was a new-fangled device. Instead, just outside the kitchen door on our back

verandah, we had an ice chest. Ice chests had been a feature of Australian homes since the late 19th century, when ice-making plants sprang up in major cities and towns.

Our ice chest was a wooden cupboard with two insulated compartments lined with tin. In the upper compartment, a corrugated metal tray sat on a larger tray which had a drip pipe to funnel off water. Twice a week, the ice man would deliver a hefty block of ice wrapped in a hessian bag. This went into the top compartment. A newspaper draped over the top of the ice block helped to deflect the cold downwards. The chamber below housed perishables like meat, milk, butter and cheese. And, of course, the odd long-necked bottle of beer (cans were not to make an appearance until 1958).

The beer was Abbots Lager, a brand favoured at the time by the white-collar drinker. The days of imported and interstate beers selling freely alongside those of the local brewing group, Carlton & United, were long in the future. Victoria Bitter, Fosters Lager, Melbourne Bitter and Abbots were the only options. Strangely Victoria Bitter was the working man's beer of choice in Melbourne, while Melbourne Bitter was more favoured in the country.

My father was the beer drinker of the family, while my mother could occasionally be tempted with a shandy (a mix of beer and lemonade). My grandmother was, at the time, a teetotaler and remained so until well into her '70s. I was strictly a milk drinker. The fifth member of our household, Uncle Bob, liked a tot of whisky: Scotch by preference, locally made Corio if the budget dictated.

This kind of multi-generational household was not unusual in the post-war years. With the shortage of housing, many young couples lived with relatives until they could find a place of their own. My parents moved in to *Creagh* and it was there that I spent my first two years. However, while the household could cope with one child underfoot, the imminent arrival of my younger brother called for a change of address.

As it happened, my grandmother still owned a house in a nearby suburb. Widowed at an early age, she had moved with my 12-year-old father and his younger brother into the family enclave, renting out the house she had shared with my grandfather, Cyril Trezise. Now there was an opportunity to move back to this, Dad's boyhood home in Glen Iris, a suburb later established as the epitome of stuffy gentility by Barry Humphries' sad-sack character Sandy Stone.

The house in Tooronga Road was every bit as red-brick solid as the home we'd left behind. It was a Californian bungalow, built on a block that sloped down to the road, its substantial front steps and hefty verandah pillars enhancing its dominance of the corner site. There had been renovations in preparation for our arrival. The original, graceful over-mantles had been ripped out and replaced with "modern" brick fireplaces. The bricks had a curious recessed honeycomb pattern on their faces – a host of tiny squares that just cried out to be coloured in by any child with a nice, sharp lead pencil. This was

to result in both myself and my brother incurring our parents' wrath on a number of future occasions.

The house was filled with monumental imitation Queen Anne furniture, all French-polished mahogany with turned legs and bulbous feet. The wall-to-wall carpet had a fetching pattern of hydrangeas: maroon, blue and pink on a fawn background. Sandy Stone would have been right at home. Fortunately, my parents resisted the urge to paint the dark wood panelling that decorated the entrance hall and main living rooms, and the deco-style stained glass windows were left intact, so the house retained at least some of its original character.

My grandmother moved with us; it was her house after all. And someone had to superintend the pasty-making. Here the family fell into a routine. We children would eat early with my grandmother. My father often came home via the RSL Club and he and my mother would eat together later.

Sometimes we would be in bed when Dad came home. For these occasions he developed a ritual that delighted us but did little for our dental health. In each of the two small bedrooms my brother and I occupied, the foot of the bed faced towards the door. Dad would stand in the doorway and conjure up a pack of peppermint Lifesavers from his pocket. We would lie in bed with our mouths wide open while he attempted to lob a Lifesaver from the doorway into each waiting mouth, a distance of some four metres. Naturally, when my mother realised what was going on she put an end to the practice, possibly saving us from death by choking as well as protecting our teeth.

The kitchen at Tooronga Road had all mod cons: attractive green swirly-patterned linoleum on the floor, a brand new Silent Night gas refrigerator and an early Kooka gas stove, with its green bow legs and trademark kookaburra logo on the door. There was also an old wood-burning stove in the corner. I never saw it used other than as a storage cupboard for old newspapers. There were cupboards under the single-bowl sink, but the only other storage was a free-standing wooden dresser. This single item of furniture contained store-cupboard food, crockery, cutlery and even bread, in its own glass-lined cubbyhole.

There was no bench space. All food preparation took place on the kitchen table, a solid wooden affair topped with a slab of Laminex. All meals were eaten in the kitchen. Although we had a large table in the adjacent dining room, during my childhood years I can't remember anyone ever actually sitting at it. My parents never had dinner parties; any entertaining they did was buffet style (think sausage rolls, asparagus rolls, casseroles... and rice).

My early memories of that kitchen include the usual childhood experiences of scraping the last, sweet dregs of cake mixture out of the bowl, the smell of freshly baked scones or cakes coming out of the oven, and eating your cake from the bottom up, so the last

thing you tasted was the icing. Cakes, as you can see, feature quite heavily, even though I am now neither a cake maker nor cake eater.

I'm sure those sweet treats of my childhood were healthier than today's salty, oil-laden snack foods. They were all made fresh, from real butter, flour, sugar, eggs and milk. The only additives were a touch of vanilla essence, some cocoa or a few drips of cochineal. What's more, they were special occasion (or at least weekend) occurrences, not daily fillers.

Along with the cooking aromas, the kitchen periodically smelled of silver polish and Brasso, as the family treasures were buffed to brilliance at the kitchen table. Then there was the distinctive odour of hot starched collars, as the same table served as an ironing board. During daylight hours, the kitchen was the hub of the house – a place of busyness, conversations and endless cups of tea. For me, it was the place that felt most like home.

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