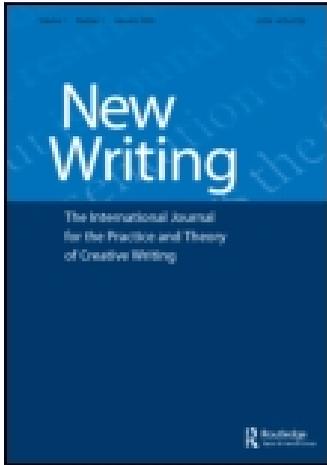


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# Lovelight Chocolate Chiffon Cake: Remembering a Post War Australian Childhood and an American Chocolate Cake

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## Foreword: Food and Memory

Stories are very important in order to understand who we are and where we have come from ... Many stories can make us nostalgic for the food of our childhood or for some other happy time. (Alexander 1988, vii)

‘Lovelight Chocolate Chiffon Cake’ is a distinctively Australian story that fits into a subgenre of food memoir. The food memoir is an established and important subgenre of the memoir, with American writer M.F.K Fisher described as its mother (Waxman 2008, 364). Food memoir is traditionally seen as ‘modest and incomplete in comparison to the monumental, self promoting *autobiography*’ (Pettinger 2008, 135). Reflections on childhood are frequent in memoirs – childhood occupies a central position in the emerging notion of ‘self’ (Protschky 2009, 373) – and in food memoir, the story frequently traces the author’s passage from child to adult and their discovery of a passion for food (Fulton 1999; Alexander 2012; Wood 2012).

But the food memoir has the capacity to go way beyond the child and the personal – the food and the memory it evokes are connected to an audience and all three have agency. Food is an individual experience of taste as well as a sign of cultural distinctiveness. This may be coded as familiar and strange (Pettinger 2008, 137). Descriptions in the memoir invite the reader to ‘widen out into the enormous complexities of social experience’ (Geertz as quoted in Pettinger 2008, 144). Protschky (2009, 383), in her analysis of the memoirs of Marguerite Schenkhuizen and Karina Schaapman, states emphatically that both women learned, as children growing up in colonial Indonesia, a repertoire of historically specific subjectivities, piecemeal, through mouthfuls of food. Ultimately their stories help historians to identify now, both conditions in

colonial culture (Asian culture was recognised but subordinate to European culture) and their residues in post-colonial culture (the adoption of an Indonesian, rather than a European identity by both women) (383–384).

'Food' argues Protschky, 'carries the flavour of memory forging material continuities between past and present and connecting the personal to the collective' (Protschky 2009, 371). 'Lovelight Chocolate Chiffon Cake', although the boundaries of history and memory are blurred, evokes an era in Australian history and explores a number of historically significant social and cultural aspects – especially Australia's relationship with America and the influence of American foods and marketing techniques on Australian food culture. This in turn challenges a collective belief about the origins of Australia's diverse culinary traditions. American influences on Australian foods (canned foods, frozen foods, kitchen appliances and building materials) have largely been ignored, with the collective memory of Australians preferring a story that recognises instead the influence of post war migration from southern Europe. Recently Australian food studies scholars have recognised the adaptive nature to new foods by Australian women (Santich 2012), but the collective narrative about Australia's culinary heritage and culture acknowledges and values the contribution of post war migrants from Europe but largely overlooks American influences.

America's influence on Australia was felt during World War II when one million American servicemen were stationed in and passed through Australia. They were made welcome in Australian homes and for many Australians this was their first encounter with luxury goods (Khamis 2007, 40). After the war, between 12,000 and 15,000 Australian women married American servicemen and moved to America. Australian war brides sent glowing reports of life in the USA to friends and family in Australia, and their accounts of American modernity, dream homes and kitchens, foods and recipes, reached Australian housewives through letters, magazine articles and newspaper reports.

Australian companies adopted sophisticated American marketing methods to promote new American manufactured foods to Australian housewives eager to access these new products and foods. Australia had its own version of Betty Crocker (Betty King) and the Pillsbury Bake Off (The Dairy White-Wings Bake Off) (Adams 2013). The story is situated in a city that has a large European migrant population due to its post war industrial development. Despite this it is the American processed food, the cake mix and the Quick drinking chocolate, that are dominant in this memory.

The food memoir is also intricately linked to nostalgic remembering of the past. Many of my collected cookbooks start with a tribute to things past. *Just Like Mother Used to Make: Food from the '30s and '40s* is just one example. 'Do you remember that steamed treacle pudding your mother used to make?' ask its authors (Nilsen and Weatherall 1980, 11). This book even *looks right* with its black and white photographs of food 'coloured by the almost forgotten art of colour spraying – remember those seaside scenes on postcards?' (11). Ray McVinnie writes in his foreword to *Ladies, a Plate*, a book of recipes for cakes and biscuits and the tradition of *bringing a plate*, 'there is a consciousness that something as ephemeral as a recipe for an excellent cake or an irresistible

biscuit carries tradition and significance that is to be celebrated, enjoyed and preserved' (Johnston 2008, 6).

The child, and returning to the safety of childhood, is very much a part of this nostalgia. As Jean Duruz observes:

So, in celebrating the 'terrific' of fifties food ... are we seeking a blissful domain of childhood, characterised by nurturance, innocence, security and freedom from responsibility ... (238)

This story goes beyond seeking the safety of childhood. Underpinning it is the story of dementia and its impact on family life. It seeks to reverse forgetting. This writing does not interrogate dementia – it leaves it open for the audience to work with, but in so doing, it does show clearly that 'the things we eat are already key players in the negotiations and confrontations of everyday life' (Pettinger 2008 146). As well as capturing a time and place through the remembering of the cake, this piece is set before and after dementia robs the family and the memoirist of her mother. The cake is a symbol of the family as it was before dementia. Its recreation is in one sense a denial of the ability of this disease to take the essence of her mother and, in another, an understanding that the mother will be there, but not the same. It is this aspect of the piece that places it in a sub genre of the food memoir. Many food memoirs can be broken down further into subgenres: cooking; travel; and, more recently, anorexia. This piece has the qualities of a food memoir but as it is a shorter piece and includes a quest to find a particular (the recipe for a lost cake, as well as recalling a childhood memory) it could be classified as belonging to a subgenre of the food memoir. 'Within the quest', says Alasdair Pettinger as he describes this subgenre, 'is the desire to repeat an experience – to repeat and revisit and taste again – something not tasted since childhood' (136).

Duruz cautions, 'In constructing narratives like these for our contemporary cultural imagery it is tempting to ask: are we "raiding" the figure of fifties women for a fantasy return to childlike, embodied pleasures' (233). She cites Deborah Lupton who in *Food Body and the Self* (Lupton 1999), explores the significance of nostalgic remembering of childhood foods, together with memories of being fed, as a route to comfort:

Commodities such as food act as storehouses of meaning, serving as reminders of events in one's personal past. Childhood foods with their dense codes of meanings may arouse feelings of longing – a desire to return – this is not dependent of a happy childhood but recreates the fiction of one ... and remembering produces a comforting narrative of the past and the earlier self eliminates conflict and smoothing out other disquieting contradictions. (237)

Nostalgia aside, this story works on a number of other levels inviting deeper thought on a range of cultural and economic issues in Australia in the 1950s and the way that housewives engaged with them. In so doing it demonstrates how food and cooking are intricately connected to our lives – from the intimate

(our memories) to the global – the influence of American foods and advertising on Australian cuisine in the 1950s. Through remembering and reconstructing the American chocolate cake, significant events in the life of a family (illness, financial issues, daily life) a community (migration, industrialisation, modernisation) and global events (changing food cultures, globalisation) are recalled: the global is connected to the mundane and new links between previously unlinked events and objects are laid out for examination.

The piece also demonstrates the skill involved in cooking. To arrive at a remembered chocolate cake recipe requires memory – sensory memory – and only then after a search through old cookbooks can the cake be reconstructed after many attempts at combining ingredients from many recipes, baking and assembling many cakes then tasting, adjusting and repeating the process. Luce Giard refers to the level of tacit skill, advanced by the story, involved in this process in her work on cooking:

Yet, from the minute one becomes interested in the process of culinary production, one notices that it requires a multiple memory: a memory of apprenticeship, of witnessed gestures, and of consistencies, in order, for example, to identify the exact moment when the custard has begun to coat the back of a spoon and thus must be taken off the stove to prevent it from separating. It also calls for a programming mind: one must astutely calculate both preparation and cooking time, insert the various sequences of actions among one and other, and set up the order of dishes in order to attain the desired temperature at the right moment. ... Sensory perception intervenes as well: more so than the theoretical cooking time indicated in the recipe, it is the smell coming from the oven that lets one know if the cooking is coming along and whether it might help to turn up the temperature. (de Certeau et al. 1998, 157–158)

Sian Supski has a similar story to mine and as I read it, in a collection of stories about 'what our family recipes tell us about who we are and where we have been' (Berzok 2011, Cover) I feel, not only a connection with her story, but an instant connection to her. She too has a 1950s memory. In her case it is her grandmother's kitchen 'with apple green cupboards and pearlescent black door knobs' (Supski 2011, 4). Like me, Supski has a spot where she sat and observed her grandmother cooking. Her story is about Alzheimer's, and a lost recipe. Reading it I realise that the food memoir has yet another possibility. It has the capacity to link memoirists who have nothing else in common but whose writings create instant and shared friendships through a smell, or a taste, or a spot on a bench in the kitchen.

Here is my story ... and recipe.

## Lovelight Chocolate Chiffon Cake

I signed my books and my packet of Texta Colours, 'Jill Adams, 9 Karoomba Avenue, Geelong, Victoria, Australia, The World, The Universe', but in reality my childhood in the 1950s was confined to a much smaller place. Our house naturally was at the centre and if I had to nominate the epicentre, it was the

window seat in the kitchen, a spot in the house from where everything that seemed important could be viewed, heard or experienced. I remember sitting there watching my mother prepare food at the adjoining bench. When she peeled green apples, the skins coiled in one piece, falling free at last to drop onto her wooden board. When she chopped through celery, her knife rocked against the board as her fingers grasped and retreated up the increasingly shorter sticks. We ate our meals there – the bench provided seating for the dinner table – and in my memories I am always there with the wireless on, in the background, and my mother close by cooking or on the telephone in our living room where she never seemed to speak but responded with extended exclamations – mmmmmm, ohhhhhhhh, ahhhhhhh, ohhhhhh – reaching a crescendo only to fall and build again.

From the house, my local area radiated in increasingly bigger circles: up the street to the local milk bar, the butcher and the fruit and vegetable shops; down the street to the swings, the monkey bar, the slide and the oval; into town with Mum every Thursday to Dickens, where she restocked the grocery cupboard and then to Brights' Emporium for dress fabric and ham and pineapple sandwiches. Sometimes afterwards we would visit my dad at his work, with its smell of printer's ink and paper. First we would stop at reception and slide the glass window that rolled open on round metal balls to say hello to Beth his office girl, and then inside where the clanking great machines either spewed out and stacked printed paper, or made a pile of curled crumpled metal as letters were pressed and compiled. We learned how to swim at Eastern Beach and collected shell grit for our chickens at Limeburner's point. Sometimes we drove into the night to visit my grandparents at Rochester; stopping for fish and chips at Daylesford on the way. It was dark when we arrived and my grandparents met us, in their pyjamas, and speaking in hushed night-time voices. I slept in the sleep-out in my father's old room and it was always hot.

The only sounds I remember from that time are the sound of *Blue Hills*, a serial my mother listened to every day with the same reverence as she now applies to *The Bold and the Beautiful*; the changing sounds the car engine made with a moment of silence in between, as she moved gears up and down on the way to and from town on Thursday, the only day she had the car; and the noise the gum trees in our back yard made when the wind swept them up and blew their branches and leaves around.

Geelong, Victoria's second largest city, officially became a city in December 1910 and two years later a tram line was opened connecting residents in its growing suburbs with employment at its woollen mills to the wool auction houses and commerce at its centre and expanding industry at North Shore. (I don't remember trams, they were disbanded in 1956 but I do remember the tramlines). When I was born, Geelong was booming. By the mid-1950s the majority of Australian cars were American-made or made in Australia by one of two American owned companies, General Motors or The Ford Motor Company (Davidson 2004, 16). Ford's company headquarters was still in North Geelong, and was reaching its capacity at this time (Davidson 2004, 83). This was not the only American company in Geelong. International Harvester was producing 300 tractors a month at its new plant at North Shore (Anon 1950, 4),

turning out the largest series of tractors in Australia and employing the most modern facilities and procedures (Anon 1954, 6). Anglo-Dutch oil and gas company Shell had a huge refinery at Corio. Along with this these companies were the Corio Distillery and the Phosphate Cooperative Company of Australia (<http://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/north-shore-geelong-boom-town/> accessed 25 February 2013). With American, Dutch and British owned companies, and work for an abundance of unskilled and semi-skilled work for post-war migrants from Europe, Geelong already had a distinctive mix of people.

In my grade-two class at primary school I remember Art, a Dutch boy, Ninke, a Dutch girl and Teresa, an Italian girl who wore a calliper on her leg and whose family had a fruit and vegetable shop in town. There was a girl from America, but I don't remember her ... I just remember her Barbie-doll-face and blonde hair and the way she spoke. The only American I remember with any clarity was a cake. At the intersection of the very small world I inhabited, the much bigger world of Geelong, and an even bigger world beyond Australia, was our chocolate cake. Not just any old chocolate cake, but an American chocolate cake, made from a packet cake mix and 'frosted' not 'iced' between its four layers and all over its top and sides with a rich creamy chocolate mixture made with Nestlé Quick.

The cake recipe, written in my mother's recipe book and attributed to 'Thelma', represents a time, a place, a person, and a friendship. Thelma moved to Geelong from the country and somehow connected with my parents. She was a housekeeper/nanny to an American family temporarily in Australia, most likely connected to the Ford Motor Company.

Mum wrote the recipe in her recipe book. It called for a packet cake mix, made according to the instructions, and a chocolate cream frosting made by making a thick syrup with melted butter, icing sugar, cocoa, Nestlé Quick and vanilla essence, then folding it when it cooled, through whipped cream. This was an era when a woman expressed who she was by what she made, and to make a cake with a packet was not regarded as cooking. But this cake was the exception. It was so spectacular that she could admit to using a packet. 'It has to be made with a packet cake mix!' she would say in her ohhh-arhh phone voice expressing boast and horror at the same time – boast that she was modern enough to use a packet, and horror that the cake was not homemade. Regardless of its packet origins it quickly became our 'event cake', taking centre stage at family birthday celebrations, special dinner parties and buffet dinners in the rumpus room.

The cake was made in three stages. First the packet cake was mixed and baked in two sponge tins. The filling was made while the cakes cooked. Once everything was cool, the chocolate sponges were split and the base set on a cake plate and spread with the chocolate frosting. The next layer was placed on top and spread with frosting, then the third, and finally the fourth layer, right side up. The remaining frosting had to be spread over the top and sides of the cake with a spatula making 'attractive swirls and ridges with the outer ridge to shape up the cake' (Crocker c 1955, 172). Then it sat in the refrigerator overnight where it set and the flavours settled.

When the cake was cut, and a slice was laid on its side on the plate, it displayed its contrasting dark moist cake and sweet mocha-coloured cream layers. No one would have ever guessed it was a packet cake mix (although my mother always announced it). This was such a special cake in every way that its taste and texture stayed with me, making the job of recreating it some 50 years later – after my mother's recipe book was thrown out and replaced with more modern recipe books – much easier.

For my mother's 80th birthday present my sisters and I decided to make a book of all our favourite recipes. Along with our children, who also had memories of their grandmother's cooking, we came up with a list of dishes we wanted to include. The book would be something for our children to take with them when they left home and set up kitchen for themselves, to replace the handwritten recipe folders my sisters and I each received from Mum when we left home. More importantly, it was a fitting tribute to our mother who gave us all a love of cooking. Even when our family's finances were stretched and she announced, 'its sausages for dinner every night this week', we knew if she cooked sausages they would be crumbed with freshly grated breadcrumbs, fried crisp brown and served with her special tomato sauce. She produced memorable meals and we toyed with the idea of calling the book *There is Always Something Delicious to Eat at Nana's*, but settled on *Family Favourites: Memories of Mum's Cooking*.

After collating the list we asked Mum to find the recipes. This was a more devious side of the project. Fearing that Mum was in the early stages of dementia – undiagnosed – we felt that this would be a good task for her and would help her with her declining memory. This was when we discovered that her handwritten recipe book had been thrown out along with her recipe (and her memory) of the American chocolate cake.

I tried to recreate the recipe using just my memory of its taste and her exclamations. I found the packet cake mixes in the supermarket too dry and not nearly chocolaty enough; the cake I remembered was dark and moist, almost sticky. A picture of Donna Hay's chocolate layer cake recipe looked promising. Baked, her cake was moist and had the same crumb texture and richness but the filling made with chocolate and cream cheese was nowhere near right (<https://www.donnahay.com.au/recipes/four-tier-chocolate-layer-cake> accessed 12 June 2012). I tried chocolate ganache with the layer cake recipe but it was too dark; the icing had to be light and sweet but still rich, and its colour had to contrast with the cake. Like the Betty Crocker advertisement, I baked and assembled and sampled recipe after recipe and cake after cake after cake.

And then I found Betty Crocker, not her packet cake mix, her 1950s cookbook. Betty Crocker, who, according to American culinary historian Laura Schapiro, 'still watches over home cooking from a unique perch in the nation's collective imagination ...' (2004, 180), provided me with our cake. Schapiro writes that 1950s American housewives put their faith in Betty Crocker, a woman who had good ideas and gave reliable advice. Betty Crocker cake mixes were first available in America after World War II (<http://www.bettycrocker.co.uk/The-Betty-Story> accessed 26 Feb 2013) and, as with many of the new food products, housewives had to be persuaded that a box could produce a cake. In

Australia, packet cake mix was available from as early as 1948 but not the Betty Crocker brand. Downyflake Fully Prepared Cake Mixes 'Quick Easy and Delicious with all ingredients in the mix ... you just add water', were marketed to women. These new mixes were available in chocolate, white and orange flavours and housewives could see them demonstrated at Coles and the Myer Emporium (or you could ask your grocer). A packet cost one shilling and seven pence and made a loaf or a sandwich cake (Advertisement 1948, 7).

The recipe I finally settled on was not a packet, but came from *The Betty Crocker Picture Cookbook: Revised and Enlarged*. The first edition of this book was available in Australia in 1953 and could be bought or borrowed. Rigby's Bookshop in Adelaide sold it (Advertisement 1953, 9) and Country Women's Association (CWA) members could borrow it (and other American cookbooks) from the United States Information Service Library (USISL) (Anon 1953, 9).

In America, one of the features of Betty Crocker's recipes was that they were given to housewives to test before they were ever considered for publication in her cookbooks. This, according to Laura Schapiro, was something that set Betty Crocker's recipes apart in the 1950s: they never failed after this three-phase testing. Her recipe for Lovelight Chocolate Cream Cake (Crocker c. 1955, 159) was pictured – four-layers of chocolate cake, frosted between each layer and swirled and ridged over the top and sides – just as I remembered it. Its cocoa fluff topping had cream, cocoa and confectioners' sugar and a pinch of salt (not exactly the ingredients I remembered) and the cake, although more complicated than using a packet, had melted chocolate, oil, buttermilk, separated egg whites and yolks, flour, soda, and sugar.

Finally I was back in our old kitchen. Here was the cake as I remembered it in every detail; light in texture yet moist and rich; and the cream filling was so close in taste and colour to the Nestlé Quick version. Finally I cut a slice and tasted it, remembering that the best way to eat it – leaving the best until last – was from the top corner where the cake was thin, across to the fatter outside with its thick layer of cream.

Although Mum had no memory of our American Chocolate Cake, *Family Favourites* was a book of our memories and Betty Crocker's Lovelight Chocolate Chiffon Cake went into the book along with a shorter version of this story, an acknowledgement of Thelma's role in bringing the cake to us, and the photograph I took after taking out the first slice and laying it on its side to reveal its four 'richly storied' layers.

## Special Occasion Chocolate Cake

### Frosting

- 2 cups chilled whipping cream
- 1 cup sifted icing (confectioners) sugar
- ½ cup sifted cocoa
- Pinch of salt

### Method

- Beat ingredients together until stiff

## Cake

- 1¾ cups plain flour
- 1 cup castor sugar
- ¾ teaspoons bicarbonate of soda
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 4 tablespoons cooking oil
- 1 cup buttermilk
- 2 eggs separated
- 100 grams (3 ounces) melted chocolate
- ½ cup extra sugar

## Method

- Line two 12 cm (8 inch) cake tins.
- Preheat the oven to moderate.
- Sift flour, sugar, bicarbonate of soda and salt into the bowl of an electric mixer.
- Add oil and buttermilk and beat for a minute.
- Add egg yolks and melted chocolate and beat for a further minute.
- Whisk egg whites and add the additional ½ cup of sugar slowly, beating until it is dissolved.
- Fold egg white mix into the chocolate mix.
- Alternately use a chocolate cake mix.*
- Divide cake mix between the cake tins and bake for 10–15 minutes.
- Turn out when completely cool.

## To assemble

- Split the cakes and frost between the layers.
- Spread the frosting over the top and sides of the cake, using the spatula to smooth it. Then pat it all over with a knife to give the finished cake a rippled appearance. Refrigerate for at least two hours before serving (Adams 2012).

## Correspondence

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