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From Waste to Superbrand: The Uneasy Relationship between Vegemite and Its Origins

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This article investigates the possibilities for understanding waste as a resource, with a particular focus on understanding food waste as a food resource. It considers the popular yeast spread Vegemite within this frame. The spread's origins in waste product, and how it has achieved and sustained its status as a popular symbol of Australia despite half a century of Australian gastro-multiculturalism and a marked public resistance to other recycling and reuse of food products, have not yet been a focus of study. The process of producing Vegemite from waste would seem to align with contemporary moves towards recycling food waste, and ensuring environmental sustainability and food security, yet even during times of austerity and environmental concern this has not provided the company with a viable marketing strategy. Instead, advertising copywriting and a recurrent cycle of product memorialisation have created a superbrand through focusing on Vegemite's nutrient and nostalgic value.

John Scanlan notes that producing waste is a core feature of modern life, and what we dispose of as surplus to our requirements—whether this comprises material objects or more abstract products such as knowledge—reveals much about our society. In observing this, Scanlan asks us to consider the quite radical idea that waste is central to everything of significance to us: the “possibility that the surprising core of all we value results from (and creates even more) garbage (both the material and the metaphorical)” (9). Others have noted the ambivalent relationship we have with the waste we produce. C. T. Anderson notes that we are both creator and agent of its disposal. It is our ambivalence towards waste, coupled with its ubiquity, that allows waste materials to be described so variously: negatively as garbage, trash and rubbish, or more positively as by-products, leftovers, offcuts, trimmings, and recycled.

This ambivalence is also crucial to understanding the affectionate relationship the Australian public have with Vegemite, a relationship that appears to exist in spite of the product's unpalatable origins in waste. A study of Vegemite reveals that consumers can be comfortable with waste, even to the point of eating recycled waste, as long as that fact remains hidden and unmentioned. In Vegemite's case not only has the product's connection to waste been rendered invisible, it has been largely kept out of sight despite considerable media and other attention focusing on the product.

Recycling Food Waste into Food Product

Recent work such as Elizabeth Royte's *Garbage Land* and Tristram Stuart's *Waste* make waste uncomfortably visible, outlining how much waste, and food waste in particular, the Western world generates and how profligately this is disposed of. Their aim is clear: a call to less extravagant and more sustainable practices. The relatively recent interest in reducing our food waste has, of course, introduced more complexity into a simple linear movement from the creation of a food product, to its acquisition or purchase, and then to its consumption and/or its disposal. Moreover, the recycling, reuse and repurposing of what has previously been discarded as waste is reconfiguring the whole idea of what waste is, as well as what value it has. The initiatives that seem to offer the most promise are those that reconfigure the way waste is understood. However, it is not only the process of transforming waste from an abject nuisance into a valued product that is central here. It is also necessary to reconfigure people's acculturated perceptions of, and reactions to waste.

Food waste is generated during all stages of the food cycle: while the raw materials are being

grown; while these are being processed; when the resulting food products are being sold; when they are prepared in the home or other kitchen; and when they are only partly consumed. Until recently, the food industry in the West almost universally produced large volumes of solid and liquid waste that not only posed problems of disposal and pollution for the companies involved, but also represented a reckless squandering of total food resources in terms of both nutrient content and valuable biomass for society at large. While this is currently changing, albeit slowly, the by-products of food processing were, and often are, dumped (Stuart). In best-case scenarios, various gardening, farming and industrial processes gather household and commercial food waste for use as animal feed or as components in fertilisers (Delgado et al; Wang et al). This might, on the surface, appear a responsible application of waste, yet the reality is that such food waste often includes perfectly good fruit and vegetables that are not quite the required size, shape or colour, meat trimmings and products (such as offal) that are completely edible but extraneous to processing need, and other high grade product that does not meet certain specifications—such as the mountains of bread crusts sandwich producers discard ([Hickman](#)), or food that is still edible but past its 'sell by date.'

In the last few years, however, mounting public awareness over the issues of world hunger, resource conservation, and the environmental and economic costs associated with food waste has accelerated efforts to make sustainable use of available food supplies and to more efficiently recycle, recover and utilise such needlessly wasted food product. This has fed into and led to multiple new policies, instances of research into, and resultant methods for waste handling and treatment (Laufenberg et al). Most straightforwardly, this involves the use or sale of offcuts, trimmings and unwanted ingredients that are "often of prime quality and are only rejected from the production line as a result of standardisation requirements or retailer specification" from one process for use in another, in such processed foods as soups, baby food or fast food products (Henningsson et al. 505). At a higher level, such recycling seeks to reclaim any reusable substances of significant food value from what could otherwise be thought of as a non-usable waste product. Enacting this is largely dependent on two elements: an available technology and being able to obtain a price or other value for the resultant product that makes the process worthwhile for the recycler to engage in it (Laufenberg et al). An example of the latter is the use of dehydrated restaurant food waste as a feedstuff for finishing pigs, a reuse process with added value for all involved as this process produces both a nutritious food substance as well as a viable way of disposing of restaurant waste (Myer et al). In Japan, laws regarding food waste recycling, which are separate from those governing other organic waste, are ensuring that at least some of food waste is being converted into animal feed, especially for the pigs who are destined for human tables (Stuart). Other recycling/reuse is more complex and involves more lateral thinking, with the by-products from some food processing able to be utilised, for instance, in the production of dyes, toiletries and cosmetics (Henningsson et al), although many argue for the privileging of food production in the recycling of foodstuffs.

Brewing is one such process that has been in the reuse spotlight recently as large companies seek to minimise their waste product so as to be able to market their processes as sustainable. In 2009, for example, the giant Foster's Group (with over 150 brands of beer, wine, spirits and ciders) proudly claimed that it recycled or reused some 91.23% of 171,000 tonnes of operational waste, with only 8.77% of this going to landfill (Foster's Group). The treatment and recycling of the massive amounts of water used for brewing, rinsing and cooling purposes (Braeken et al.; Fillaudeau et al.) is of significant interest, and is leading to research into areas as diverse as the development microbial fuel cells—where added bacteria consume the water-soluble brewing wastes, thereby cleaning the water as well as releasing chemical energy that is then converted into electricity (Lagan)—to using nutrient-rich wastewater as the carbon source for creating bioplastics (Yu et al.).

In order for the waste-recycling-reuse loop to be closed in the best way for securing food supplies, any new product salvaged and created from food waste has to be both usable, and used, as food (Stuart)—and preferably as a food source for people to consume. There is,

however, considerable consumer resistance to such reuse. Resistance to reusing recycled water in Australia has been documented by the CSIRO, which identified negative consumer perception as one of the two primary impediments to water reuse, the other being the fundamental economics of the process (MacDonald & Dyack). This consumer aversion operates even in times of severe water shortages, and despite proof of the cleanliness and safety of the resulting treated water. There was higher consumer acceptance levels for using stormwater rather than recycled water, despite the treated stormwater being shown to have higher concentrations of contaminants (MacDonald & Dyack). This reveals the extent of public resistance to the potential consumption of recycled waste product when it is labelled as such, even when this consumption appears to benefit that public.

Vegemite: From Waste Product to Australian Icon

In this context, the savoury yeast spread Vegemite provides an example of how food processing waste can be repurposed into a new food product that can gain a high level of consumer acceptability. It has been able to retain this status despite half a century of Australian gastronomic multiculturalism and the wide embrace of a much broader range of foodstuffs. Indeed, Vegemite is so ubiquitous in Australian foodways that it is recognised as an international superbrand, a standing it has been able to maintain despite most consumers from outside Australasia finding it unpalatable (Rozin & Siegal). However, Vegemite's long product history is one in which its origin as recycled waste has been omitted, or at the very least, consistently marginalised.

Vegemite's history as a consumer product is narrated in a number of accounts, including one on the Kraft website, where the apocryphal and actual blend. What all these narratives agree on is that in the early 1920s Fred Walker—of Fred Walker and Company, Melbourne, canners of meat for export and Australian manufacturers of Bonox branded beef stock beverage—asked his company chemist to emulate Marmite yeast extract (Farrer). The imitation product was based, as was Marmite, on the residue from spent brewer's yeast. This waste was initially sourced from Melbourne-based Carlton & United Breweries, and flavoured with vegetables, spices and salt (Creswell & Trenoweth). Today, the yeast left after Foster Group's Australian commercial beer making processes is collected, put through a sieve to remove hop resins, washed to remove any bitterness, then mixed with warm water. The yeast dies from the lack of nutrients in this environment, and enzymes then break down the yeast proteins with the effect that vitamins and minerals are released into the resulting solution. Using centrifugal force, the yeast cell walls are removed, leaving behind a nutrient-rich brown liquid, which is then concentrated into a dark, thick paste using a vacuum process. This is seasoned with significant amounts of salt—although less today than before—and flavoured with vegetable extracts (Richardson).

Given its popularity—Vegemite was found in 2009 to be the third most popular brand in Australia ([Brand Asset Consulting](#))—it is unsurprising to find that the product has a significant history as an object of study in popular culture (Fiske et al; White), as a marker of national identity (Ivory; Renne; Rozin & Siegal; Richardson; Harper & White) and as an iconic Australian food, brand and product (Cozzolino; Luck; Khamis; Symons). Jars, packaging and product advertising are collected by Australian institutions such as Sydney's Powerhouse Museum and the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, and are regularly included in permanent and travelling exhibitions profiling Australian brands and investigating how a sense of national identity is expressed through identification with these brands. All of this significant study largely focuses on how, when and by whom the product has been taken up, and how it has been consumed, rather than its links to waste, and what this circumstance could add to current thinking about recycling of food waste into other food products.

It is worth noting that Vegemite was not an initial success in the Australian marketplace, but this does not seem due to an adverse public perception to waste. Indeed, when it was first

produced it was in imitation of an already popular product well-known to be made from brewery by-products, hence this origin was not an issue. It was also introduced during a time when consumer relationships to waste were quite unlike today, and thrifty re-use of was a common feature of household behaviour. Despite a national competition mounted to name the product (Richardson), Marmite continued to attract more purchasers after Vegemite's launch in 1923, so much so that in 1928, in an attempt to differentiate itself from Marmite, Vegemite was renamed "Parwill—the all Australian product" (punning on the idea that "Ma-might" but "Pa-will") (White 16). When this campaign was unsuccessful, the original, consumer-suggested name was reinstated, but sales still lagged behind its UK-owned prototype. It was only after remaining in production for more than a decade, and after two successful marketing campaigns in the second half of the 1930s that the Vegemite brand gained some market traction. The first of these was in 1935 and 1936, when a free jar of Vegemite was offered with every sale of an item from the relatively extensive Kraft-Walker product list (after Walker's company merged with Kraft) (White). The second was an attention-grabbing contest held in 1937, which invited consumers to compose Vegemite-inspired limericks. However, it was not the nature of the product itself or even the task set by the competition which captured mass attention, but the prize of a desirable, exotic and valuable imported Pontiac car (Richardson 61; Superbrands).

Since that time, multinational media company, J Walter Thompson (now rebranded as JWT) has continued to manage Vegemite's marketing. JWT's marketing has never looked to Vegemite's status as a thrifty recycler of waste as a viable marketing strategy, even in periods of austerity (such as the Depression years and the Second World War) or in more recent times of environmental concern. Instead, advertising copywriting and a recurrent cycle of cultural/media memorialisation have created a superbrand by focusing on two factors: its nutrient value and, as the brand became more established, its status as national icon. Throughout the regular noting and celebration of anniversaries of its initial invention and launch, with various commemorative events and products marking each of these product 'birthdays,' Vegemite's status as recycled waste product has never been more than mentioned. Even when its 60th anniversary was marked in 1983 with the laying of a permanent plaque in Kerferd Road, South Melbourne, opposite Walker's original factory, there was only the most passing reference to how, and from what, the product manufactured at the site was made. This remained the case when the site itself was prioritised for heritage listing almost twenty years later in 2001 (City of Port Phillip).

Shying away from the reality of this successful example of recycling food waste into food was still the case in 1990, when Kraft Foods held a nationwide public campaign to recover past styles of Vegemite containers and packaging, and then donated their collection to Powerhouse Museum. The Powerhouse then held an exhibition of the receptacles and the historical promotional material in 1991, tracing the development of the product's presentation (Powerhouse Museum), an occasion that dovetailed with other nostalgic commemorative activities around the product's 70th birthday. Although the production process was noted in the exhibition, it is noteworthy that the possibilities for recycling a number of the styles of jars, as either containers with reusable lids or as drinking glasses, were given considerably more notice than the product's origins as a recycled product. By this time, it seems, Vegemite had become so incorporated into Australian popular memory as a product in its own right, and with such a rich nostalgic history, that its origins were no longer of any significant interest or relevance.

This disregard continued in the commemorative volume, *The Vegemite Cookbook*. With some ninety recipes and recipe ideas, the collection contains an almost unimaginably wide range of ways to use Vegemite as an ingredient. There are recipes on how to make the definitive Vegemite toast soldiers and Vegemite crumpets, as well as adaptations of foreign cuisines including pastas and risottos, stroganoffs, tacos, chilli con carne, frijole dip, marinated beef "souvlaki style," "Indian-style" chicken wings, curries, Asian stir-fries, Indonesian gado-gado and a number of Chinese inspired dishes. Although the cookbook includes a timeline of product history illustrated with images from the major advertising campaigns that runs across 30 pages of the book, this timeline history emphasises the technological achievement of Vegemite's

creation, as opposed to the matter from which it originated: "In a Spartan room in Albert Park Melbourne, 20 year-old food technologist Cyril P. Callister employed by Fred Walker, conducted initial experiments with yeast. His workplace was neither kitchen nor laboratory. ... It was not long before this rather ordinary room yielded an extra-ordinary substance" (2). *The Big Vegemite Party Book*, described on its cover as "a great book for the Vegemite fan ... with lots of old advertisements from magazines and newspapers," is even more openly nostalgic, but similarly includes very little regarding Vegemite's obviously potentially unpalatable genesis in waste.

Such commemorations have continued into the new century, each one becoming more self-referential and more obviously a marketing strategy. In 2003, Vegemite celebrated its 80th birthday with the launch of the "Spread the Smile" campaign, seeking to record the childhood reminiscences of adults who loved Vegemite. After this, the commemorative anniversaries broke free from even the date of its original invention and launch, and began to celebrate other major dates in the product's life. In this way, Kraft made major news headlines when it announced that it was trying to locate the children who featured in the 1954 "Happy little Vegemites" campaign as part of the company's celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the television advertisement. In October 2006, these once child actors joined a number of past and current Kraft employees to celebrate the supposed production of the one-billionth jar of Vegemite (Rood, "[Vegemite Spreads](#)" & "[Vegemite Toasts](#)") but, once again, little about the actual production process was discussed. In 2007, the then iconic marching band image was resituated into a contemporary setting—presumably to mobilise both the original messages (nutritious wholesomeness in an Australian domestic context) as well as its heritage appeal. Despite the real interest at this time in recycling and waste reduction, the silence over Vegemite's status as recycled, repurposed food waste product continued.

Concluding Remarks: Towards Considering Waste as a Resource

In most parts of the Western world, including Australia, food waste is formally (in policy) and informally (by consumers) classified, disposed of, or otherwise treated alongside garden waste and other organic materials. Disposal by individuals, industry or local governments includes a range of options, from dumping to composting or breaking down in anaerobic digestion systems into materials for fertiliser, with food waste given no special status or priority. Despite current concerns regarding the security of food supplies in the West and decades of recognising that there are sections of all societies where people do not have enough to eat, it seems that recycling food waste into food that people can consume remains one of the last and least palatable solutions to these problems. This brief study of Vegemite has attempted to show how, despite the growing interest in recycling and sustainability, the focus in both the marketing of, and public interest in, this iconic and popular product appears to remain rooted in Vegemite's nutrient and nostalgic value and its status as a brand, and firmly away from any suggestion of innovative and prudent reuse of waste product. That this is so for an already popular product suggests that any initiatives that wish to move in this direction must first reconfigure not only the way waste itself is seen—as a valuable product to be used, rather than as a troublesome nuisance to be disposed of—but also our own understandings of, and reactions to, waste itself.

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