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Re-cooking ‘the canon’ of Australian literature?: classic 1960s Australian food writing

Abstract:

This paper focuses on Australian food writing from the 1960s to investigate a key moment in the development of Australian writing, reading and publication practice. Internationally, food writers from this period such as Elizabeth David and MFK Fisher are not only lauded as genre writers, but are also accepted as important contributors to their respective national literary canons. This paper focuses on two prominent magazine writers of the 1960s to suggest that this archive contains a buried literature of 1960s food and wine writing that is both a precursor to today’s significant creative industry of food writing and publishing, and valuable in its own right. This archive reveals histories of writers, writing, publishing, reading and the consumption of publications that contributes to understanding why and what we read, as well as what and how we eat. Moreover, while the food writing published in popular magazines is often thought of as providing useful, but relatively banal, practical skills-based information, recent reassessments suggest that food writing is much more interesting and valuable than this. This is because, in the 1960s, as today, Australian food writers such as Margaret Fulton and Graeme Kerr were not only media commentators on important societal issues, but were also forward-thinking activists, advocating and campaigning for change.

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Keywords:

Food writing—Margaret Fulton—Graham Kerr—*Australian Gourmet Magazine*—*The Epicurean*

Introduction: food writing as literature

This paper focuses on 1960s Australian food writing to begin to investigate this key moment in the development of Australian writing, reading and publication practice. Internationally, food writers from the 1960s such as Elizabeth David and MFK Fisher are not only lauded as exemplary genre writers (in the identified genre of food writing), but are also accepted as important contributors to their respective national literary canons. Indeed, in these and many other cases, this writing is often clearly classified as literature—specifically as ‘food-’, ‘culinary-’ or ‘gastronomic literature’. Although there are an increasing number of publications that include literary food writing, and a dedicated specialist serial *Alimentum: the literature of food*, a bi-annual that has been published since 2006, what is clear from this and other such publications is that food literature is more than fiction, poetry and scripts (that is, creative works that are identifiable as literature) that takes food as its subject as, for instance, in the groundbreaking collection edited by Margaret Atwood in 1987. In many cases, this food literature can be classified as the kind of food/culinary journalism that blends a wide range of topics and approaches that can include: history, memoir/autobiography, biography, anthropology, travel writing, restaurant criticism and recipe writing, as well as writing about nutrition, science, health and the environment.

Today, moreover, there is rarely and dividing demarcation between ‘literary’ and ‘journalistic’ food writing. As the *American Journalism Review* noted in 2004, Western newspapers and magazines are dedicating their leading writers to what could be termed “the food beat” (Brown 2004) and respected, high profile ‘literary’ writers, such as acclaimed novelist Julian Barnes are also working as food writers¹. Nigella Lawson is another good example. Before writing a food column for UK *Vogue* as well as articles for US *Gourmet* and *Bon Appétit* magazines and publishing her first cookbook (*How to Eat* 1998, which sold 300,000 copies in the UK), Lawson graduated from Oxford University with a degree in medieval and modern languages, worked in publishing, then wrote book reviews for *The Spectator* and was the deputy literary editor of *The Sunday Times*. Lawson’s second book, *How to be a Domestic Goddess*, won her the award of author of the year at the 2001 British Book Awards (Hollows 2003; Smith 2005; *Sunday Times* 2006). Another example is Gay Bilson, who had an esteemed career as a chef and restaurateur for more than two decades at major Sydney restaurants *Bon Gout* and *Berowra Waters Inn* before turning to writing. Her first book, *Plenty: Digressions on food* (2004), won several literary awards including *The Age* Book of the Year Award and the Kibble Award for Women Writers alongside the Australian Food Media Award and the Simon Johnson Award for Excellence in a hardcover food-related book. Bilson has identified her motivation for writing as literary, rather than content: “I wrote it because I want to write, and surely the best food writing ... is written by people whose main interest is in words” (qtd. in Koval 2009).

While 1960s Australia has its own luminaries in relation to book length publications of food writing—with Margaret Fulton and England-via New Zealand expatriate Graham Kerr’s work among the best known—this paper will concentrate on these authors’ work in 1960s popular magazine archive (see also, Bannerman 2001). This investigation suggests that this archive contains a buried literature of 1960s food and

wine writing that is both a precursor to today's significant creative industry of food writing and publishing, and valuable in its own right.

1960s magazine food writing

A primary concern for food writers in the 1960s, as with many today, was with food itself and how various meals could be prepared and eaten. In this, it is difficult today for many younger Australians, and present day visitors to Australia, to imagine the pervasiveness of the classic weekday 'meat and three veg[etables]' evening meal and roast lamb for Sunday lunch regime of the 1950s/early 1960s that many Anglo-Australians regularly, and repeatedly, consumed. It was, indeed, really only in the 1960s that these domestically common dishes began to be significantly replaced by waves of what were radical innovations for this restricted palate—with new choices from pastas and fondue, to salmon and chocolate mousses, and American, European and Asian-inspired and fusion cuisine (see, Bannerman 2008). Notably, also, although closing time was extended in Tasmania in 1937 and New South Wales in 1955, six o'clock hotel closing (and the notorious 'six o'clock swill'—where hotel patrons attempted to consume as much as possible before the premises closed) was only repealed in Victoria in 1966 and South Australia in 1967 (Luckins 2007).

In 1966, the editor of the first issue of the new food and wine magazine, *Australian Gourmet Magazine*, indeed identified magazine writing as central to these changes towards a more sophisticated and international palate:

The former traditional fare of Australians of fish and chips, stews, pies and the ubiquitous pumpkin and steak and egg is now giving way, slowly but surely, to new dishes, cooked with ingenuity and understanding. Women's magazines vie with each other to portray new, existing and exotic foods in their pages, while weekend chefs compete in creating dishes par excellence and discuss wines with the authority of connoisseurs (Geiringer 1966: 7).

Although other factors, such as the high level of non-British post-war immigration to Australia, growing affluence, increasing travel outside Australia and changes in the food industry itself (Symons 1982), are widely acknowledged as important components of these changes to the national taste profile, magazine and other food writers were instrumental in introducing and popularising these changes to a broad audience.

Margaret Fulton

Margaret Fulton can formally be classed as a food writer from the time of her work on Australian weekly magazine, *Woman*, from 1954 to 1955. With over four decades of further work as food writer and editor of weekly publications *Woman's Day* 1960-1979 and *New Idea* 1979-2000, and still active in food writing and publishing today, Fulton has written thousands of articles supported by a long series of extremely popular cookbooks, in the process becoming trusted as a reliable source of food-

related advice. This is principally in matters of food preparation, but includes many other areas related to food as well.²

It was when Fulton commenced her twenty-year association with *Woman's Day* as weekly cookery writer and food editor in 1960, that she quickly became established as an authority in this area in Australia. Her food writing in this, as later, magazines usually comprised an accessibly written, informative introduction (often including some relevant historical, agricultural or other relevant information) followed by recipes comprising readily available ingredients. These articles have consistently promoted the use of fresh, seasonal produce; methods for reducing waste by thrifty shopping and the creative use of leftovers and, while at times promoting the use of timesaving 'convenience foods' and products, she also encouraged shoppers to resist the lure of the new supermarkets to some extent, and to continue purchasing from local purveyors such as greengrocers and fishmongers.

She also began to expose her (mostly women) readers to revolutionary new ingredients and food preparation techniques from an increasingly broad range of international cookery alongside more traditional dishes. Fulton, indeed, had the self-professed aim of exposing Australian home cooks to a wide range of (largely then unknown) international cookery, and revealed later in her memoir how she reveled in being paid to travel all over the world in her role as food editor, learning about various cuisines, foods and preparation methods, information which she then translated into her articles and books (Fulton 1999). This work provided a solid foundation for the on-going development of today's broad-based cosmopolitan food culture in Australia, a development which can be likened to others in areas of Australian culture such as visual and performing arts. Food historian Barbara Santich, who worked with Fulton at *Woman's Day*, describes Fulton as "the acknowledged leader/style-setter" in her introduction of the [then] "exotic cuisines of India, Italy, France, Scandinavia, South-East Asia and the Middle East" to Australian readers (Santich 2007: 34, 38). Moreover, Fulton showed Australians how to confidently consume these exotic foods as well—with her line drawings for how to eat spaghetti in the *Margaret Fulton Cookbook*, for example, remembered by many as enabling a new way of eating.

An indication of her achievement of an important role in Australian culinary literature is provided by the success of her first cookbook, *The Margaret Fulton Cookbook*, in 1968. Fulton describes her own amazement at its popularity:

[The publisher] said that 10,000 was a bestseller, so the print run was going to be 10,000. Then the orders kept coming in and it went to 20,000 and then it went to 30,000 and then it went to 40,000. It ended up the first print run was 100,000, and when it came out it was just so exciting ... [People] were queued for miles down and around the block to get this book (Fulton 1997).

The volume's first print run was a record for any kind of book in Australia, but the book also unexpectedly sold out and ran to another large second printing the next year (Fulton 1999: 159). This level of sales was even more surprising in an Australian publishing context wherein food writing played a much less significant part than it does today. Women's magazines and the women's pages of newspapers contained

comparatively much smaller recipe sections than they do today, and cookery books were a quite insignificant segment of local and imported book publishing. As an (admittedly inexact) indication of this, there were only 178 locally and imported cookbooks collected by the National (deposit) Library of Australia for the four years of 1966 to 1969 inclusive. In comparison, it holds some 1120 from 2005 to 2008 (NLA 2009). In 1968, the year the *Margaret Fulton Cookbook* was published, there were only 36 cookbooks deposited in the NLA, and six of these were imported. Of the thirty published in Australia, almost a quarter were published under the auspices of the then leading print press vehicles: with five from *The Australian Women's Weekly*, as well as volumes featuring recipes from *The Courier* (Brisbane) and *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney)³.

In the later 1960s, Fulton also began writing for one of the first post-war Australian special interest popular magazines dedicated to food and wine, marking a significant moment in the development of the *Australian Gourmet Magazine*. Established in 1966, the *Australian Gourmet Magazine* was struggling to find a sustainable format and stable of writers. Fulton brought a food information driven inflection to the magazine, which until then had focused on elitist and male-identified concerns such as setting up a wine cellar, choosing cigars and fine restaurant (which was then French) dining. In her columns, Fulton instead promoted the possibility of the act of home cooking as gourmet, as well as what Australian fine dining outside the home might be; that is, as not necessarily French. Susan Sheridan has similarly discussed how the most popular Australian women's magazine from this period, *The Australian Women's Weekly*, similarly brought the domestic kitchen into focus as a site of 'ethnic' food preparation in the post-war period, noting that this took place in the home kitchen sometime after it was popularised in the pages of magazines and on the tables of (fine dining) restaurants (Sheridan 2000: 322).

Graham Kerr

Graham Kerr was born in London and gained experience in the food industry from an early age, working with his family who were hoteliers. His formal culinary training began at 15, when he became a trainee-manager at the historic Roebuck Hotel in East Sussex. Kerr then entered the British Army as a Specialist Catering Officer, before taking up the position of General Manager of the Royal Ascot Hotel (Kerr c.1970). In the late 1950s, Kerr relocated to New Zealand to become a catering consultant to the New Zealand Air Force. His television debut was in 1960 on the second day of New Zealand television broadcasting, in uniform, demonstrating how to prepare an omelet as a part of Battle of Britain Day anniversary celebrations (Dietrich 2003). This well-received live performance led to a number of radio and personal appearances (Kerr c.1970) and to him establishing a business promoting food grown and manufactured in New Zealand (Anon 1969b). This combination—media experience and food knowledge—served as a stepping-stone into regular television appearances, and led to the production of his first major series, *Entertaining with Kerr*. In 1963, he also published the first edition of the cookbook of the same name in both Australia and New Zealand.

Relocating again in 1965, this time to Australia, Kerr honed his already highly successful program format, further mobilising his compelling blend of humour, energy and British sex appeal into the service of cooking demonstration. In Australia, *Entertaining with Kerr* ran from 1965 to 1967 on Channel 10 before moving to Channel 7 in 1968. Kerr and his agent, the New Zealand impresario Harry M. Miller, were among the earliest in Australia to understand the marketing power of linking television programs with print publications, and thus, during this period, Kerr, would produce a number of groundbreaking cookbooks, as well as magazine and newspaper articles. The *Graham Kerr Cookbook* was published in Australia in 1966 and, by 1968, *Entertaining with Kerr* was in the fifth reprint of its second (1966) edition.

In 1966, Kerr also began writing for the second (and also new) Australian food and wine magazine *The Epicurean* (subtitled *a journal dedicated to the appreciation of the finer things*), publishing in all issues from the second to the seventeenth issue (from July 1966 to February 1969). In the first issue of the magazine, Kerr was featured in a lead article described as an interview with “TV’s number one chef” (1996: 32). This included the interviewer quizzing Kerr on his celebrity, cooking skills and food knowledge including questions as diverse as where saffron comes from, and how moussaka and mousseline are made. In the second issue, Kerr provided a quiz for readers on gourmet knowledge, and took up a regular advertorial space as spokesman for the Australian Dairy Produce Board (see, iss. 2: 40 and following issues). The third issue included an article calling for an “Australian and New Zealand cuisine” (iss. 3: 27, 34-5), a plea that was picked up in his articles on the Barossa Valley at the vintage festival (iss. 7: 18, 40-4), his principles for an Antipodean Christmas (iss. 10, 1967: 24-5, 59), an introduction to New Zealand food and wine for Australian readers (iss. 11, 1968: 24-5) and his own favourite recipes (iss. 5: 16-17; iss. 6, 30-3). Other articles focus on demystifying (fine) dining out (iss. 4: 32-3), international cuisine (iss. 8, 1967, 19, 55; iss. 9, 1967: 15-16; iss. 12, 1968: 27-8; iss. 14, 1968: 18-19, 40; iss. 15, 1968: 14; iss. 16, 1968: 22; iss. 17, 1968: 16).

At this time, and assisted by his multi-platform media profile, Kerr also became what could be called ‘a celebrity connoisseur’. In 1967, he co-authored *The Galloping Gourmets* with wine writer, Len Evans, the pair travelling to international ‘celebrated centres of fine cuisine’ (8)—to report upon both the meals of these areas and how they were presented. In this period, Kerr also edited *Graham Kerr’s Guide to Good Eating in Sydney* in 1968, and *Graham Kerr’s Guide to Good Eating in Melbourne* in 1969, the only texts at this time that sought to rate and recommend the best restaurants in each city, and the precursors to today’s bestselling *Good Food* guides.

In 1969, Kerr signed a \$4 million contract to produce 650 half-hour episodes of *The Galloping Gourmet* in Canada for North American audiences and left Australia. Premiering on the CBC Network in February that year, *The Galloping Gourmet* was syndicated to hundreds of US and Canadian stations and he soon became the most successful cooking show on TV, earning his wife, Treena Kerr, two Emmy Award nominations as daytime programming producer of the year. The details of the contract—not only the largest offered to an Australian television personality (as Kerr was known in the US), but also one of the single largest agreements signed by a television performer anywhere in the world—were widely discussed in the Australian

press. Although they were to pay all production costs, the Kerrs predicted they would make some A\$2 million profit from the series, with this record-breaking amount expected to be at least equalled by cookbook sales, product endorsements and Kerr's appearances in commercials (Anon 1969a). Despite its success, the show ran only until 1971, after a road accident in California left both Kerr and his wife seriously injured. After recuperating in the United Kingdom, Kerr returned to work in Ottawa, but, finding he could not stand for lengthy periods, changed his show's format to a discussion of food and cooking with celebrity guests. 200 episodes of this program, titled *Critics' Choice*, were filmed.

Gourmet for every day, and everyone

Although only two books from 1968 deposited in the NLA named an interest in domestic gourmet cookery in their titles—*Is there a Chef in the Kitchen?* and *The Young Gourmet's Cookbook*—eating well was obviously a principal theme running through both Fulton and Kerr's writing (magazine and book) in the 1960s. It was, indeed, in the later 1960s, that Fulton established the Chicken and Chablis Club in Sydney. This was a women's gourmet club, in which she performed the role of the 'food mistress' who designed the menus and provided information about these meals for the club's female members. This group, as women's gourmet clubs in other Australian cities—including the Chicken and Chablis Club in Adelaide and the Brides of Bacchus Club in Melbourne—suggested the then quite revolutionary idea that women could participate in formal gourmet activities (Evans 1966). Like the male-only clubs, these women's clubs' activities included adventurous menu selections, lectures on the ingredients and cooking methods, and related information about the wine served at its regular luncheons.

Joanne Hollows (2003) and Charlotte Bunsdon (2005) have written of the complexity involved in feminist analyses of cooking and celebrity chefs. In this vein, Fulton's gourmet club activity—as elitist as it may seem—actually picks up on another progressive thread in her magazine writing, which has, since the 1950s, not only affirmed the importance of creativity for personal fulfillment, but in encouraging the use of time-saving products and appliances, was an early recognition of women's changing roles and increasing desire to work outside the home. Fulton's magazine writing from the 1960s has certainly assisted in not only making women's domestic work more visible, but also in actively encouraged other women to take up meaningful work (even if, ironically, it meant less time in the kitchen), not least by positing that other career paths were possible for women (including her own in journalism, advertising and publishing). Kerr was an early advocate for men sharing domestic duties: "We have a rule in our house—if I do the cooking my wife washes up; if she does it then I wash up" (1966, *Epicurean*, iss. 1: 33).

Concluding remarks

Although this discussion has focused on work produced in the 1960s, throughout the entirety of her almost sixty year career in food writing, Fulton's message has

remained remarkably clear—buy fresh seasonal produce, support local producers and food businesses, reduce waste, be open to the cultures of others, drink responsibly, and respect the work-life choices we all make. By 1975, Kerr also had a mission—to teach people how to ‘care for their bodies, their budgets and their efforts’ (qtd. in Akerman 1975: 11)—this new motivation reflected in magazine articles, as well as in a series of five minute television segments and a book (both titled *The New Seasoning* 1976). By then, Kerr judged *The Galloping Gourmet* as a “self-indulgent, selfish program ... positively lethal, with three basic ingredients fat, sugar and salt” (qtd. in Morgan 1976: 9). In 1986, in reaction to his wife’s stroke and heart attack, Kerr developed a low-fat cooking style he called ‘Minimax’: food with minimum health risks (in this case, minimum fat, cholesterol, cream, alcohol and eggs), but maximum taste, aroma, texture and colour. Since 1990, Kerr has produced magazine pieces as well as almost annual television series and tie-in publications based on his healthy gourmet philosophy.

These messages have certainly resonated with readers. Fulton’s influence was so pervasive over the decade after the 1960s that, by 1982 she was judged to have had ‘more impact on the Australian kitchen than any thing or person since the refrigerator’ (Ward 1982: 16). The *Margaret Fulton Cookbook*, having largely been kept in print since 1968 to meet reader demand, has to date achieved lifetime sales of over 1.5 million copies and has contributed to the some four million copies of Fulton’s twenty-four cookbooks that were estimated as having been purchased nationally and internationally by 2007 (Gibbs *et al.* 2007). A new edition of *The Margaret Fulton Cookbook* (rewritten with daughter and food editor Suzanne Gibbs) was released in 2004 to excellent reviews and ongoing sales success. Kerr was similarly said to have made all “Australian TV viewers gourmet conscious” (Anon 1969a: 11). At the height of his fame, Kerr was one of the first global television celebrities in any field, famously circling the world 28 times in 1969 and 1970 (Dietrich 2003). *The Galloping Gourmet* was viewed by some 200 million people in 38 countries including Australia and New Zealand and prompted the sale of 14 million cookbooks with “galloping gourmet” in the title. Episodes of *The Galloping Gourmet* also continue to air regularly on cable channels in North America and the United Kingdom.

Endnotes

1. Barnes’ ‘The Pedant in the Kitchen’ column in *The Guardian* (UK) was so popular a selection of these appeared in a book of the same name (Barnes 2003).
2. In the last decades, Fulton has attracted considerable public and institutional recognition for her work. In 1983, she was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia, and in 1997 she was inducted into the World Food Media Awards Hall of Fame and named as one of the National Trust’s original 100 Living Australian National Treasures (Negus 2004). In 2006, Fulton was named by then-prominent current affairs magazine, *The Bulletin*, as one of the 100 most influential Australians ever (Austin 2007). The next year, the National Library of Australia chose Fulton for its annual ‘celebration’ of a leading Australian. This event, which drew renewed attention to both Fulton’s contribution to Australian culinary heritage and the respect she has among peers and the reading public, drew what was stated to be ‘unprecedented’ interest (FNLA 2007: 1, Wright 2007). Since then, recognition of Fulton’s contribution has increased with similar events at major institutions, including at the National Museum of Australia.

3. The other Australian published cookbooks include five community cookbooks a single textbook, *Day to Day Cookery for Home Craft Students*. *The Margaret Fulton Cookbook* was joined by what could be classified another 'general' cookbook by another author who went on to become very famous over the following decades: UK-based Marguerite Patten's (with Betty Dunleavy) *Entertaining at Home*.

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