

DINNER WITH FRANK

Dave Veart



Frank Sargeson was the most influential New Zealand writer of his generation. From the 1930s until the 1960s his short stories and novels achieved international if not financial success.

Born Norris Frank Davey in 1903 he grew up in Hamilton and trained originally as a lawyer. He practiced briefly and in 1927 set off for London. He stayed a year, writing and exploring France, Switzerland and Italy and his sexuality along the way. On his return to New Zealand he worked in Auckland and in 1929 was convicted of ‘homosexual behaviour’ and as a condition of his suspended sentence was directed to live with an uncle in a remote part of the country.

In 1931 he returned to Auckland, changed his name to Frank Sargeson and moved into the family bach in Esmonde Rd, Takapuna. Here he made friends, gardened and wrote and by 1940 had published over 40 stories.

He was to live at the Esmonde Rd address with his partner Harry Doyle until his death in 1982. Harry had predeceased him in 1971.¹

During the 1950s and 60s Sargeson gathered around him a group of writers who became known as the ‘Sons of Sargeson’, although the most famous was not a son, it was Janet Frame who stayed in an old army hut behind Frank’s bach where she wrote *Owls Do Cry*.

One of the things which held this group together were the social occasions held at the cottage, dinners cooked by Frank washed down with a cheap fruit wine called Lemora were recalled by poet (and ‘son’) Kevin Ireland.

*Giving pleasure to friends
With food, brilliant talk and praise,
Tributes from the garden,
Glass of citrus wine upraised,*

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Sargeson accessed 14/8/2015

*He would be generous, open, kind,
Then suddenly go for the jugular,
Bristling with gossip and mischief.
Standing behind the wooden bar*

*That marked the kitchens frontier
And served as table, workbench,
Secular pulpit, refuge,
He would hack the peppers, wrench*

*Lettuces apart, put tomatoes
To the knife, and feed the multitude.
A lectern where books were read from,
The place where tea was brewed, 2*

One of the things participants in these gatherings remembered is that they ate things which were very different to what their fellow New Zealanders were eating in the 1950s and 60s. Very little meat and a huge variety of vegetables from Frank's famous garden. He grew on his ¼ acre many types of vegetables, common ones like tomatoes and cucumbers and more unusually aubergine and most famously peppers. There were also subtropical fruits such as Pawpaw, Kiwifruit, Loquats and Cherimoya. Then there were the avocados grown from a cutting taken from Gauguin's garden in Tahiti.³

And what he did with them differed from more common Kiwi recipes. From Sargeson's autobiography we have a recipe of one of his favourites, cooked for his friend Elizabeth Pudsey Dawson at her beachside cottage at Mt Maunganui.

Here is Frank's description and a detailed recipe. The pair have tossed for who will cook, Frank has lost and has insisted Elizabeth (called 'K' in the story) who is famished must wait while he makes a decent meal.

2 Ireland, Kevin, 'A New Alphabet' from 'Mr Sargeson at Home' p58 in Shieff, Sarah (ed) *Speaking Frankly, The Frank Sargeson Memorial Lectures*, 2003-2010, Cape Catley Ltd., 2011

3 Sheiff, Sarah, Risotto with Pipis: Frank Sargeson in Italy, 2008, in *Journal of New Zealand Literature*: JNZL No. 26 (2008), p49

She has pipis but does she have rice? No. But I have my rucksack. Has she oil. No, but my rucksack is like a widows cruse. Now, will she bring me one hot and two sweet peppers from the garden, and two large cloves of garlic? I run for the kitchen and turn everything on the stove to high. I look in the cupboard and shout for joy when I find a bowl of soup. K. comes in and protests it is ancient history, but I pay no attention. I add some water to the soup (oh God I hope not too much) and put it in a saucepan to heat. Oil, butter, salt and cut up garlic all go in the big iron frying pan. Six tablespoons of rice, but I add another two out of gluttony. I rinse the rice ten times, leave it a moment to drain-then into the pan it goes. With one hand I keep the rice moving, and with the other deflower the sea-garden by pouring off the water: (the pipis have been soaking with flour, making shapes that look like flowers?) I rattle the shells into the baking dish and into the oven they go. I pause to tell K. that I am now quite intolerable-and ask her to cut up the peppers. I wait until the rice has turned a rich harvest brown, and then add the soup. While I stir I look in the oven and see the pipis are opening-so will K. please hand me the peppers and take out the pipis and remove them from their shells? I add the peppers to the rice which is thickening. I can't leave it but I have an idea and ask K. to get a tin of mussels out of my rucksack. She protests. It is decadent. She won't go. She will refuse to eat one bite. I say someone gave me the mussels years ago-they must be used up. Don't be such a puritan K. I say-it's the world we live in. She brings the tin but is almost in tears. She opens the tin and the smell suggests a whole heaven of sensual delights: it almost knocks us down: a sort of phosphorescent vapour plays over the surface and makes us think of rat poison. K. is about to heave the tin out the window, but I snatch it in time and empty it into the pan. To console K. I ask her to get out Jimmy's beer and open that. Will the rice take up all the liquid? For some minutes I am anxious, but fear dissolves and I feel I am on the point of being beatified. I add the pipis and again tell K. I am intolerable. Now two large plates, two forks, two glasses. The mixture is beautifully stiff. I taste and K. tastes too. This is the peak. Each grain of rice is firm and separate, not sticky. The flavour is ambrosial. We drink while I am serving out the helpings. A moment or two later and a reverse mechanism of the embodied spirit is beginning to operate...' 4

A meal to remember as obviously Frank did and probably quite unlike anything anyone else in New Zealand was eating that day. But where

4 Sargeson, Frank, p30-31, *Sargeson*, Penguin Books, Auckland, 1977

did it come from?

The standard reason offered for the Sargeson cuisine is that he had spent time in Italy and had during an affair with an Italian stone mason lived with an Italian family for a while. It appears however that this was only for a few days and a more likely origin was the reported presence on Sargeson's bookshelves of an early edition of Elizabeth David's *Mediterranean Food* which has a recipe for *Risotto Aux Fruits de Mer*,⁵ allowing him to recreate a memorable cuisine associated with a holiday romance reinvented with local kai moana, pipi with the help of Mrs. David.⁶

While a few New Zealanders may have been experimenting with these recipes (my mother had a copy) it seems that Sargeson adopted them as his everyday cuisine, *La Cucina Povera* for a vegetable growing literary pauper on Auckland's North Shore.

Sargeson's cookery provides a metaphor for his writing and our place in the world. Frank needed to go to Britain to make the connections those of us who felt dislocated by our education system, (English monarchs and Welsh coal production and Shakespeare at school), but with a realisation we didn't fit there either, so developed a romantic antipodean Grand Tour relationship with the Mediterranean all filtered through an English recipe writer, our way of viewing the world.

Most of our early culinary adopters, the literati of Sargeson's circle, Kiwi nationalists compromising with pipi in Elizabeth David's recipes, replacing the European shellfish, absorbed these recipes through literature rather than direct contact, the difference in Sargeson's case is that he adopted fully, a literary gardening peasant on a Harbour Bridge onramp cooking and living in a way that remembered a Mediterranean past while anticipating a future late 20th century diet.

SOURCE

Frank Sargeson and Christine Cole : <https://teara.govt.nz/en/photograph/23334/frank-sargesons-garden>

Frank Sargeson in his garden, Takapuna, Auckland, 1932 : <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/frank-sargeson-in-garden>

5 David, Elizabeth, p 94, *Mediterranean Food*, Penguin Books, 1973 (my edition)

6 This is described in detail in Shieff, op cit p50



Frank Sargeson and Christine Cole sit among the tomato vines outside Sargeson's house in Takapuna, Auckland, around 1950