

SURVIVAL OF THE PIKELET

The New Zealand Blini

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In 1871 the New Zealand population was made up of English 49.7%, Scottish, 27.3%, Irish 22%, and Welsh 1%.¹ These early settlers brought with them their food traditions and recipes. Many have survived but new recipes have evolved. The New Zealand blini, which evolved from a pikelet recipe illustrates this process.

Traditional New Zealand pikelets are a 'griddle bread' which is cooked on a flat surface, browned on both sides and characterized by spongy holes. But early immigrants knew this 'bread' by different names. The Welsh word *bara pyglyd*, or 'pitchy bread' was used to describe a product having spongy holes and able to absorb butter.² The description also fits the yeast pikelet, or muffin, recipe which appeared in a New Zealand cookbook in 1894. The cookbook also included a recipe for drop scones with similar characteristics but raised with baking powder and cream of tartar.³ Mason in her cookbook on traditional British food described a comparable product with a chemical raising agents as a drop scone.⁴

The blini was described by *The Womans Day Encyclopedia of Cookery* (1966) as a Russian or Polish version of a pancake, usually small, made with buckwheat flour, raised with yeast, and served as an appetizer with various toppings or stuffings such as salmon, cottage cheese and best

1 'British and Irish immigration 1840-1914', <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/culture/home-away-from-home>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 8-Apr-2008.

2 McNeill FM. *The Scots Kitchen*. Edinburgh: Mercat Press; 1993.

3 Miller EB. *Improved Economic Cookery Book*. 2nd ed. Dunedin: Mills Dick & Co. Printers; 1894. p. 129.

4 Mason L. & Brown C. *Traditional food of Britain*. An Inventory. Devon: Prospect Books; 2004.

of all caviar. The encyclopedia gave two recipes. One was made with buckwheat flour and raised with baking powder, cooked on a greased griddle, about two inches in diameter, browned on both sides and served with sour cream and caviar. The second recipe also used buckwheat flour but was raised with yeast and served with similar toppings.⁵

Ken Albala, in *Pancakes: a Global History*, included a recipe for blini made with buckwheat flour and raised with baking powder or yeast. He referred to blini as 'the most fashionable of all sophisticated pancakes.'⁶

Helen Leach has suggested that all recipes have a common ancestor.⁷ This paper examines how the New Zealand blini, which are common today on New Zealand café and catering menus, evolved from the New Zealand pikelet recipe which first appeared in cookbooks in the 19th century.

THE PIKELET

The 'pikelet' in early NZ cookbooks referred to a product made from flour, milk and eggs, sometimes melted butter, and varying raising agents such as yeast, baking soda and cream of tartar or baking powder.⁸ Today, the basic NZ pikelet recipe uses mainly baking powder.

Baking powder was used in New Zealand from an early period as a raising agent and was imported from overseas, but was often unreliable. Hence in 1879 a Christchurch grocer, Thomas J Edmonds, produced his own, and in 1911 published his first promotional cookbook to help market the product. A pikelet recipe using baking powder was included.⁹

The ingredients, and their proportions, determined the mixing method and these were combined to form a pourable batter.

In 19th century New Zealand this mixture was cooked on a griddle

5 *Womens Day Encyclopedia of Cookery* 2nd ed. vol. 2. N York: Faucett Publications; 1966. p. 205.

6 Albala, K. *Pancakes a Global History*. Chicago: Reaktion Books; 2008. p. 94.

7 Leach, H. *The Pavlova Story. A slice of New Zealand's culinary history*. Dunedin: Otago University Press; 2007. p. 158.

8 Miller, E. (1894)

9 'Edmonds cookery book', URL: <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/photo/edmonds-cookbook>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 2-Oct-2009.

(English) or girdle (Scottish), heated on top of a coal range to obtain an even heat. The girdle was greased with suet, mutton fat or dripping. Spoonfuls of the mixture were dropped onto it and the mixture cooked until brown on the underside and bubbles, formed by carbon dioxide, contributed by the raising agent, appeared on the topside. It was then turned with a spatula, browned on the opposite side, removed, wrapped in a clean tea towel to keep warm and soft, then served with butter.¹⁰

The early electric ranges had a solid element suitable for cooking pikelets but, when coiled elements replaced the solid, recipe instructions began suggesting using a frypan as the cooking surface. The advent of the electric frypan in the 1960s with its own element and a flat surface became a popular alternative and today, as most electric ranges have a ceramic top, a non-stick frypan is often suggested.

Pikelets in New Zealand have always played a role in the domestic environment as an item associated with hospitality. Most New Zealand women could easily produce a batch of pikelets for guests at short notice. They were also an inexpensive dish to produce when 'ladies a plate' was a common request for social functions, when they might be served with jam and cream.¹¹

Pikelets were also a dish children learned to cook at home from an early age. They were simple to prepare, easy to cook and very edible with butter and jam. Andre Taber's son James in 2014 was keen to make pikelets as he liked the sound of the name.

Pikelets also had a place in the wider community in the 20th century. Pastoral and horticultural shows included pikelets as a competition item. In 1904 Mrs. Smith won a prize for her pikelets at the Manchester Horticultural Show in Fielding.¹² They were also important as a fundraiser. In 1918 pikelets were sold at the Helping Hand shop in Greymouth which reported a great demand for home made products,¹³ while in 1942 two Hokitika women who buttered and sold them at a penny each in Greymouth, to raise money for the war effort, made

10 Miller, E. (1894)

11 Herda P. Ladies a plate. In J. Park ed. *Ladies a plate. Change and continuity in the lives of New Zealand women*. Auckland: AUP; 1991.

12 Manchester Horticultural Show. Papers Past. *Fielding Star*. 10/12/1904.

13 Helping Hand Shop. Papers Past. *Grey River Argus*. 9/2/18.

sixteen hundred pikelets.¹⁴ Today pikelets are produced commercially and are available packaged in the bread section of supermarkets.¹⁵

THE BLINI

Blini are a traditional Russian dish, but in the 1960s recipes began to appear in English language cookbooks.

English cookbooks such as *Mrs Beeton's Cookery and Household Management* (1960s—a modern version) contained a section on Russian cookery which stated in the introduction 'it is probably to the Russians we owe the idea of serving small savoury canapés at cocktail parties... before dinner, while vodka is drunk.'¹⁶ The recipe for Bliny (Beeton's spelling) was made with rye flour and yeast, fried as a pancake in butter and served with ice cold caviar and butter. More recently English media cook Jamie Oliver (2014) demonstrated how to make blini using a pikelet mixture as the base, with smoked salmon and crème fraiche as a topping.¹⁷

In the USA, the *The Complete Hors d'oeuvre Book* (1960s) suggested that blinis were suitable for a cocktail party where there were a large number of guests. 'Russian Buckwheat Blinis' were listed as a hot hors d'oeuvre made with buckwheat flour, risen with baking powder and baking soda and cooked on a plattar pan, (a skillet with 2.5 inch diameter depressions) kept hot, then spread with sour cream.¹⁸ The 2006 edition of *Joy of Cooking* included two recipes for mini-blinis made with buckwheat flour, raised either with baking powder or yeast, and decorated with sour cream and smoked salmon or crème fraiche and caviar.¹⁹

14 Made and sold 1600 pikelets. Papers Past. *Evening Post*. 19/5/1942.

15 Pikelet production relocated 'without a hitch.' www.odt.co.nz/news accessed 5/7/2015.

16 *Mrs Beeton's Cookery and Household Management*. London: Ward Lock & Co. Ltd; 1960. p.258.

17 James Oliver shows Emma Willis how to make Xmas blinis. www.heart.co.uk. Accessed 4/7/2015.

18 Waldo M. *The Complete Hors d'oeuvre Book*. London: Faber & Faber; 1964.

19 Rombauer IS, Becker R & Becker E. *Joy of Cooking*. N. York: Scribner; 2006.

In New Zealand, cookbooks began to publish recipes for pikelets/blini towards the end of the 20th century. *The New Zealand Bread Book* (1989) included a blini recipe that was yeast raised, used buckwheat flour and was served with a topping that included sour cream and smoked salmon.²⁰ *The Best of Annabel Langbein* (2007) included a recipe for pikelets in a section called appetizers and snacks, served with savoury toppings such as artichokes and caper berries.²¹

Recipes for blini were also found on New Zealand internet sites, broadcast on radio and in specialized food magazines. For example in 2012 National Radio broadcast a pikelet based recipe for blini by Alison and Simon Holst, which was raised with baking powder and topped with a cream cheese mixture and smoked salmon.²² In 2014, *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* cookery page suggested blini could be a small pikelet made super light with leavening and served with a with salmon salsa.²³ In 2014 *NZ Taste* magazine included a recipe for blini topped with smoked salmon and marscarpone.

Commercially produced blini were also sold in supermarkets and promoted as an item to serve in cafes. In 2011 the New Zealand Baking Industry Association described blinis as 'a trendy up-date on the pikelet for the café brunch menu.' The blini recipe it published was yeast raised, and included lemon zest and caraway seeds. The instructions suggested cooking spoonfuls of the batter on a solid plate, turning the mixture when the bubbles began to burst and serving them to the customer warm with toppings which could be either sweet or savoury.²⁴

20 Brown M. Leach H. & Tichbourne N. *The New Zealand Bread Book*. Auckland NZ. Heinmann Reed; 1989.

21 Langbein, A. *Best of Annabel Langbein: Great food for busy lives*. Auckland: Annabel Langbein Books; 2007.

22 Smoked-salmon-on-herbed-pancakes. Recipe by Dame Alison Holst, Simon Holst as heard on Nine To Noon, www.radionz.co.nz/collections/.../ Monday 7 May 2012. Accessed 4/7/2015.

23 Wholemeal blini with salmon salsa. www.nz.womens.weekly.co.nz/food-recipes. 15/7/2014. Accessed 4/7/2015.

24 A trendy up date on the pikelet for the café brunch menu www.bianz.co.nz/

Blini were also advertised for sale 'conveniently snap frozen and in a freeflow pack of 48' by Marcel's on the Internet. The producer claimed they originated from Russia and looked and tasted like a small plain pikelet. Serving suggestion included sour cream and salmon.²⁵

Internet sites also revealed blinis were on the menu of many New Zealand cafes and were listed on catering menus as finger foods suitable to serve at drink parties.

The evolution of the pikelet to blini suggests that the 20th century New Zealand blini was modelled on the Russian blini but, more like the pikelet, did not include buckwheat flour or yeast as did the traditional Russian blini, nevertheless it had similar characteristics such as size, shape and a holey surface. Similarly it was cooked on a hot griddle and functioned as a hospitality item. Its 19th century New Zealand ancestors may have included the yeast raised Welsh 'pitchy bread' which may have contributed to its name and the Scottish drop scone which may have determined its ingredients.

Today, recipes for pikelets continue to be published in New Zealand cookbooks but few include recipes for blini. It appears the concept of the blini is conveyed to the public by newer media such as the internet, cooking shows, radio interviews and specialized food magazines.

Changes in New Zealand social and eating patterns after the 1960s also contributed to the evolution of the pikelet. Pikelets were no longer important in the home as a quickly prepared hospitality item for serving at morning and afternoon teas. Many women were now in paid work and New Zealanders lived their social life in the public rather than the domestic sphere. These changes facilitated the adoption of pikelets with savoury toppings such as sour cream and smoked salmon, now described as 'blinis' into public dining. They were found in cafes and on catering menus as an item served with drinks.

The production of new savoury toppings contributed to the evolution of the pikelet. Traditionally pikelets were served with butter, or for special occasions with jam and cream, while the traditional blini was served with a savoury topping such as sour cream and smoked salmon. In the 1960s

bakery-cakes-muffins accessed 21/12/11.

25 Marcel's blini. www.marcel.co.nz/recipes. Accessed 5/7/2015.

New Zealand milk companies began to produce dairy products other than milk, ordinary cheese and butter. Meadow Fresh, established in 1964 began to produce sour cream and later crème fraîche.²⁶ Salmon was farmed in New Zealand from the 1980s.²⁷ Hence toppings that would facilitate the evolution of pikelets into ‘blini’ were available.

CONCLUSION

Leach (2007) has cited the concept of adaptation if a product is to survive in different environments. She also suggested recipes have a common ancestor.²⁸ Adoption of the name pikelet perhaps referenced its Welsh ancestor ‘pitchy bread’ and adaptation of the Scottish drop scone recipe endorsed this claim. Hence the New Zealand pikelet in the 20th century was the result of a ‘fusion’ food based on traditional Scottish and Welsh recipes. But at the beginning of the 21st century it merged in another ‘fusion’ form—from pikelet to blini. The concept of the New Zealand blini that evolved from the pikelet was based on a Russian dish which had similar characteristics and a similar cooking method but was distinctive because of its toppings. Adoption of new toppings by the NZ pikelet helped to change the pikelet from a popular domestic food to an item associated with public entertaining. This adaptation has allowed it to survive, in a new form, into the 21st century.



26 [www.fonterra.com/nz/en/about our product](http://www.fonterra.com/nz/en/about-our-product).

27 [en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/aquaculture in NZ](http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/aquaculture_in_NZ).

28 Leach, H. (2007) p. 158.