

New Light on the Lamington

- A View from New Zealand

Helen Leach

From the start, let me assure Australian readers that New Zealand lays no claim to the iconic lamington. However, new evidence shows that a recipe for the cakes was circulating here only two months after the first known Australian recipe was published in January 1902. Digitised and searchable newspapers (available through *Trove* in Australia, and *Papers Past* in New Zealand) have now revealed that lamington recipes existed on both sides of the Tasman, well before the first appearance of the recipes in cookbooks. This evidence justifies a new look at the cake and its origins.

There are probably as many myths about the origins of lamington cakes, as there are of pavlovas. Janet Clarkson ('The Old Foodie') summarised the facts as she knew them in her column for 4th January, 2006: the earliest recipe appeared in the weekly newspaper *The Queenslander* on that day in 1902; the nature of its association with Baron Lamington, governor of Queensland from 1896 to 1901 is not clear; there is a possibility that the cake was named after a locality in Britain (Clarkson, 2006).

Two years after Janet Clarkson's column appeared, Jackie French (2008) published the results of her nationwide request for early recipes and information in the *Braidwood Times* (21st February, 2008). She suggested that Amy Schauer who taught cooking at the Brisbane Technical College from 1895 to 1937 was responsible for the recipe and named it after Lady Lamington. In support of this view, *The Queenslander* (12th May, 1900) confirms that Lady Lamington opened the new cookery classroom there in the previous week. Jackie French believed that the early recipe was for a single cake, covered in chocolate icing and coconut, not for cubes of cake. On that premise she dismissed the origin myths concerning cubes of cake accidentally falling into chocolate icing. Her views may have been influenced by Colin Bannerman (1996:218) who noted that in the first edition of *The Schauer Cookery Book*, published in 1909, the lamington recipe was for a plain slab cake, iced with chocolate and sprinkled with coconut. However I have located an earlier recipe submitted by Amy Schauer to *The Queenslander* (26th November, 1904), which explicitly states

'When cold cut [cake] into squares and spread the top and sides of each piece with chocolate icing, and roll in desiccated cocoanut'.

Both the myths and the accepted facts imply that at the beginning there was a single recipe from which all later recipes are derived. My newspaper search showed that in 1902 there were two recipes in existence, the first published in Brisbane on 4th January, and the second published in Dunedin on 12th March, and again in Perth on 1st November. The two recipes have little in common other than their name 'Lamington Cake'. Between January 1902 and December 1920, nine different lamington recipes have been recorded, five of which were published on more than one occasion.

The earliest recipe, from *The Queenslander* (4th January, 1902), starts with the instruction to take 'The weight of two eggs in butter, sugar, and flour, two eggs, half-teaspoonful baking powder.' The butter was to be creamed, then the sugar and egg yolks beaten in, followed by the stiffly beaten whites, and lastly the flour and baking powder (see Table 1). This style of recipe writing, linking the quantities to the weight of the eggs, was common for cake recipes in the early decades of the 19th century, both in America and Britain. The recipe follows pound cake principles in having equal weights of eggs, butter, sugar and flour; however the baking powder must be a post-1860 addition (Oliver, 2004). This is not a sponge recipe, but would have been more like an 18th century seed cake in texture. It was also a small cake compared to many of the lamington cakes that followed. I have found only one other publication of this recipe - in the *Sunday Times* (Perth) of 31st January, 1904.

The second recipe from 1902 is currently earlier in New Zealand than in Australia; however, given its name, there is no reason why it should have been developed in New Zealand. I have found it in eight newspaper cookery columns between 1902 and 1916 (I stopped my search at 1920), with a variant appearing in 1916, and repeated in 1919. Only the first and last of these recipes are from New Zealand newspapers, and this suggests to me that the lamington was not as popular in New Zealand as it was in Australia, at least in the first two decades of the 20th century. This widely distributed recipe deserves to be given in full:

Lamington Cake

Take one cup butter, three cups flour, two cups sugar, five eggs, leaving out the whites of two for icing, one small cup milk, one small teaspoonful of carbonate of soda, two small teaspoonsful cream of tartar. Rub the butter and sugar together,

add the eggs and the milk with the flour in which the soda has been mixed. Bake for 20 minutes in long flat tins, and when cold cut into small blocks and ice all over with an icing made as follows —1/4lb butter, 1lb icing sugar, beaten well together. Add the whipped whites of the two eggs with three large tablespoonsful grated chocolate (or cocoa of a dark colour), essence of vanilla to taste. Cover the blocks all over, and immediately roll them in desiccated cocoanut. (*Otago Witness*, 12th March, 1902, p.63[§])

Technically speaking, this was a butter cake—not a butter sponge, which would have less flour and butter, and would include instructions to melt the butter. All the later lamington recipes I recorded up to 1920 were butter cakes. Among recent commentators on the cake’s origins, only Jackie French (2008) observed that early lamingtons were not sponge cakes.

The style of writing used in this recipe provides important clues as to its origins, which appear to be from two sources. The important point is that the quantities for the cake ingredients are given in cups, while the icing ingredients are in imperial weights. In late 19th century America, popular and influential cookbooks normally gave cake ingredient quantities in cups, unless the recipe was an heirloom. This practice began when the Americans developed the cup cake. Writing about its composition, Stephen Schmidt noted that the formula ‘most commonly used for cup cake was the one that was simplest to remember: one cup of butter, two cups of sugar, three cups of flour, and four eggs plus one cup of milk and one spoonful of soda...’ (Schmidt, 2004:159). A typical example of an American cup cake from *Miss Parloa’s New Cook Book* is Ames Cake, which begins ‘One generous cupful of butter, two of sugar, three cupfuls of pastry flour, one small cupful of milk, the yolks of five eggs and whites of three, one teaspoonful of cream of tartar, half a teaspoonful of soda...’ (Parloa, 1884:318). As in the lamington recipe cited above, the remaining egg whites were used in the icing. The quantities and proportions of the cake components are virtually identical in Ames Cake and this second lamington recipe. In contrast, the recipe writing style of British recipe books was to use weights, except in recipes that were borrowed from American publications. It seems likely that the part of the lamington recipe detailing the icing was derived from a British source. In Australian and New Zealand recipe books and columns published in the late 19th century, I have found a more even representation of

[§] Because of error in the *Paperspast* optical digitisation the recipe was only searchable as "Laming ton cake" in <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast> on 1st October 2011.

Recipe	Eggs	Butter	Sugar	Flour	Milk
1. 1902 <i>Brisbane</i>	2	weight of 2 eggs	weight of 2 eggs	weight of 2 eggs	nil
2. 1902 <i>Dunedin</i> & <i>Perth</i>	5 yolks, 3 whites	1 cup	2 cups	3 cups	1 small cup
3. 1904 <i>Schauer</i> , <i>Brisbane</i>	4	1 breakfast cup	1 breakfast cup	3 breakfast cups	½ teacup
4. 1911 <i>Perth</i>	4	1 cup	1 ½ cups	3 cups	1 cup
5. 1912 <i>Launceston</i>	4	¼ lb	¾ lb	1 lb self-raising	1 cup

Table 1: Ingredients and quantities in five different recipes for lamingtons, 1902–1912.

the two styles of measurement, indicating that Australasian cooks were drawing recipes from both countries.

The third lamington recipe was attributed to Amy Schauer when published in *The Queenslander* on 26th November, 1904. Again it is a butter cake, but with a lower proportion of sugar than in the other cakes. I could find no evidence that it was republished. The quantities were given in breakfast cups, unlike the lamington recipe in her long-running cookery book, which reverted to weights (Schauer, 1939:489). In contrast, the fourth lamington recipe appeared six times before 1920. It was first published in Perth's *Sunday Times* on 10 September, 1911 and was reproduced in Wellington's *Evening Post* on 8 June, 1912. It was also published in the *Kookaburra Cookery Book* from Adelaide (Anon, c.1916:242). As in the earliest lamington recipe, the cake ingredients were measured in cups, and the icing ingredients in pounds and ounces.

One more lamington recipe deserves attention, because it was the first to use imperial measures for the cake ingredients. It is similar to the fourth recipe, except for the unit of measurement and a reduction in the amount of butter. For the first time, self-raising flour was specified. This recipe was first published in the *Launceston Examiner* on 6th April, 1912, and repeated in *The Mail* from Adelaide on 20th September, 1913.

The discovery of five different lamington recipes from the first decade of the cake's existence reveals that the essential concept behind the lamington was not a new recipe but a process whereby a cake was cut into cubes, dipped in chocolate icing and sprinkled or rolled in desiccated coconut. The process could be applied to any suitable cake, and clearly Australian and New Zealand cooks were prepared to use a range of recipes, at this stage none of them true sponges.

My earlier study of the iconic pavlova showed it to be a renamed meringue cake, of no particular recipe (Leach, 2008). We need to ask whether lamington cakes have a similar history of renaming, and whether the idea to cut a cake into chunks and ice the pieces separately was a notable innovation. The evidence against significant innovation comes in the form of a recipe published in both the *Otago Witness* (11th March, 1897) and the *Traralgon Record* (Victoria, 18th March, 1898). The recipe was entitled 'Small Chocolate Cakes with Chocolate Icing'. As with lamingtons, there was no chocolate in the cake mixture, only in the icing; however, unlike early lamingtons, this dish was prepared as a true sponge without butter. After baking the cake for half an hour in a flat buttered tin, it was cooled then 'cut into small squares' which were then iced with

chocolate icing. The same recipe was printed in 1890 in an American periodical *The Rural and Workman*, with the heading 'Little Cakes with Chocolate Icing'.

Americans also made what they called 'Dominoes' over the last two decades of the 19th century. These started as slabs of sponge cake that were cut into rectangles, iced and decorated to look like dominoes. Though much thinner than lamingtons, they may have served as a prototype (e.g. Gillette, 1887:275). Given these prior types, 'happy accident' theories of lamington origins are unnecessary and give little credit to the international awareness of Australian and New Zealand cooks at the turn of the 20th century. The newspaper cookery columns accessed through *Trove* and *Papers Past* demonstrate a long-standing popular demand for American recipes, and rapid exchange of recipes between Australia and New Zealand.

Web-sites

Australian newspapers:
<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/home>

New Zealand newspapers:
<http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast>

References

- Anon 1916 *The Kookaburra Cookery Book of Culinary and Household Recipes and Hints*. Melbourne: E. W. Cole.
- Bannerman, Colin 1996 *A Friend in the Kitchen. Old Australian Cookery Books*. Kenthurst, NSW: Kangaroo Press.
- Clarkson, Janet ('The Old Foodie') 2006 The Baron's hat and other mysteries. On-line column, 4 January, 2006. <http://www.theoldfoodie.com/2006/01/barons-hat-and-other-mysteries.html>
- French, Jackie 2008 Another History of the Lamington. *Braidwood Times*, 21 February, 2008. On-line version. <http://www.braidwoodtimes.com.au/news/local/news/general/another-history-of-the-lamington/464816.aspx>
- Gillette, Fanny L. *White House Cook Book*. Chicago: R. S. Peale & Co.
- Leach, Helen M. 2008 *The Pavlova Story. A Slice of New Zealand's Culinary History*. Dunedin: Otago University Press.
- Oliver, Sandra L. 2004 'Chemical Leavening'. Entry in Andrew F. Smith (ed.) *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 217-9.

Parloa, Maria 1884 *Miss Parloa's New Cook Book, A Guide to Marketing and Cooking*. Boston: Estes and Lauriat.

Schauer, Amy 1939 *The Schauer Cookery Book*. Improved 8th edition. Brisbane: W. R. Smith & Paterson Pty. Ltd.

Schmidt, Stephen 2004 'Cakes'. Entry in Andrew F. Smith (ed.) *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 157–65.



Advertisement from Carter's N.Z. Cookery Book and Household Guide, Tauranga, (1891).

Advertisement from the first edition of the Edmonds' Sure to Rise Cookery Book, Christchurch (1908).