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# Relations for the Back Country: Sensory Landscapes

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## Bush Damper *(with or without a camp oven)*

### INGREDIENTS

3 cups of SR flour

or

ordinary flour with baking powder (1 teaspoon for each cup of flour)

### METHOD

1. Mix enough water with the flour to make a dough.
2. When mixed and kneaded put it in a camp oven or wrap in greased foil and cook in fire for 20 to 30 minutes.

Beer can be used instead of water for variation and to give the damper a lighter texture. In the bush a fire with plenty of red-hot coals is the best for cooking damper.

This simple recipe I use on extended bush walks of a week or more when it is easier to carry the flour than bread which can go stale or mouldy and takes up too much room in a full backpack.

## Farm Scones

### INGREDIENTS

250g SR flour

50g butter

25g raw sugar

1 egg

125 mls milk and yoghurt (mixed)

### METHOD

1. Rub butter into flour and sugar.
2. Whisk egg into milk and pour into well in flour. Gently mix to form a dough but don't over mix.
3. Roll dough out on a floured board to 2.5 cm. thickness.
4. Place on oiled baking tray and bake at 200°C for 15 minutes until golden.

I call my recipe 'farm scones' because the result approximates my childhood afternoon tea experience although I remember being more impressed by the jam and cream than the actual scones.

DIANA WOOD CONROY

## Rations for the Back Country: Sensory Landscapes

Discovering a relationship to country in inland and northern Australia through eating and taste, rather than sight and sound, is the subject of this essay. European settlers, with a highly organised literate culture, had to develop a sensory orientation in surviving the vast spaces of the country, and came to emphasise a distinctive pattern of eating. By contrast Indigenous peoples moving through the same country perceived another diversity of foods, often plants and animals invisible to the Europeans. For a primarily oral, non-literate society the taste of food was bound up with understanding the land through the intricacies of family relationship and story. The interplay between the senses is a crucial marker in understanding cultural difference, argues Constance Classen. 'Sensory models are conceptual models, and sensory values are cultural values' (Classen 161). European explorers, soldiers and settlers travelled over the country in 'norms' of travel that were quite rigidly established in military and settler history. Shod in heavy boots, following a designated map, carrying supplies, aware of the passage of time in numbered hours, their sensory mode contrasted to the Aboriginal experience of stepping barefoot through the bush on meandering tracks, touching and tasting the land with another focus of sensibility. Cultural concepts of time and space are revealed in the choice of food — is it freshly gathered and perishable? Dried? Brought from far away? In archaeology the varieties of containers, whether of ceramic, metal or wood, the steel knives, tin plates or silver utensils unearthed through excavation are like clues in a detective story that reveal sensory needs and predilections.

I thought of those earlier travellers when driving at high speed across the flat plains of western New South Wales one January, which is a journey through heat and light. The road is like a perspective exercise, vanishing into a point both in front of the vehicle and behind it, with the sky an immense bowl of white metal. The road trembles in the heat — a few smudges indicate other vehicles on the far horizon almost like boats on a mirage of oceanic space. The car's air conditioning is not working: hot air and dust pour through the car into every crevice. Bodies sweat and stick to the car seats. Food is not of great interest, but water and cool drinks seem like the prime goal of the journey.

In the boot of the car are Styrofoam and plastic vessels for carrying water — a five litre container in a cone shape with a wide cap and a screw-on plastic cup. The outer Styrofoam casing is chipped and battered, a dirty white, but the

inner lining is smooth and clean. The shape of this water container has hardly changed since it first appeared in the early 1970s, carried then as it is now on rough vehicles all through the back country. I have observed in archaeology that humble functional forms such as the water vessel, the cooking pot or cup hardly change over centuries. The ancestor of the modern lightweight Styrofoam container is the unbreakable water bag, made from a kangaroo skin that was once carried by Aboriginal people across these plains. Each vessel developed from a separate historical trajectory, but the lightweight modern container echoed the ancient solution to carrying water for survival without the weight of the container contributing to the burden of travel.

When you are very thirsty, the taste of water is unimaginable, ineffable; a craving of a different order to that for food. The water in the dry western plains of New South Wales has its own taste, the almost brackish mineral quality of bore water is a last resort; much preferable is the slightly opaque water of the lower Murray River, where there is only a slight tang of salt. The problem of salt pervades the major rivers and wetlands of the Murray-Darling River Basin of New South Wales and Victoria, making stretches of country into desert pierced with the trunks of dead trees. A shimmering crust of white salt forms over lakes that have entirely evaporated, and because of the minerals in the earth these ovoid dry lakes are sometimes pink and crystalline, bordered by red samphire. Thirst and salt wrinkle the membranes of the mouth. The memory of being in that country is the memory of the sense of a bitter taste in the mouth.

I fill the Styrofoam container with ice and lemon juice, and it remains cool and drinkable throughout the journey. Also in the boot are: a billy for boiling tea; a basket with enamel mugs and a plate; and a few old knives, a salt canister, spoons and forks, much used and kept only for trips. Sometimes on such journeys there is meat to barbeque beside the road — chops and sausages — and a few potatoes to roast in the ashes. Matching this need for cooking meat and boiling water, roadside picnic stops provide fireplaces and often neatly stacked wood. Travelling along these remote routes seems to necessitate a reversion to the bush picnic foods of my childhood, that were always cooked by my father. As the sun sets, low raking rays catch and light up discarded drink bottles that line the road like a ritual trail of thirst, glittering votive offerings to the dangers of this country where so many have died of dryness.

The food carried in cars in the twenty-first century echoes patterns of travel set up in the first years of the British colony before agriculture and exploration had established reliable food resources. The search for water inland was the great task of exploration. Rations were supplied in the early difficult years — salt meat, flour, some oatmeal, a little sugar and tea, sometimes rice. Most of these substances were imported from other countries, kept dry and desiccated in tins and calico bags that were used to make new items in the material culture of settlement and 'making do'. Utensils for eating were very scarce — George

Thomson, an early colonist observing convicts working in 1792 wrote: 'They have neither bowl, plate, spoon or knife but what they make of the green wood of the country; only one small iron pot being allowed to dress their poor allowance of meat and rice' (qtd in Walker & Roberts 7). Food was cooked on open fires, and because of its plainness it was seasoned with salt that seemed to have been always plentiful. Meat, flour, rice and sugar remained the profoundly familiar foodstuffs of country Australia, with a minimal use of fresh fruit and vegetables. The ritual around the drinking of liquid centred on tea, as much as on beer or spirits. Fire, meat, bread, salt and billy tea have an iconic status; they are the source of comfort and conviviality in a hostile environment. Such foods, particularly salt meat, are associated in European society with characteristics of strength, virility and aggression in a long military and colonial history. Classen's contention that 'The way a society senses is the way it understands' (161) might explain the Europeans' complete misunderstanding and bafflement at the ease of Aboriginal survival in what seemed to early explorers a starving desert. They literally could not see or taste the hidden roots of yam and waterlily bulb as proper sustenance.

The taste of tea for British colonists was as important to survival as the taste of water in the remote bush communities because of its resonance with tradition and gathering together, and its mild stimulus. Tea is the iconic substance, the focus of daily ritual. The cup of tea as a constant of settler life was mirrored in the rations given out to Aboriginal workers by missions and stations until as recently as 1970. Along with a tin billy, the stores included: Sunshine powdered milk in green and white tins; packets of Bushells or Billy tea; and big white packets or calico sacks of white sugar and flour. Christian missionaries followed the settlers throughout rural and remote Australia and set up small communities that attempted to ease the dispossession of the Aborigines through education into the mores of the dominant society. The interaction between the two cultures could become a conflict between widely diverse patterns of sensory behaviour.<sup>1</sup> The colonial and military pattern of eating and sleeping was about the division of time into comprehensible units and about the ordering and sequence of provisions, and Christian missionaries' structures of organisation mirrored this patterning and control of appetite.

In colonial times, people assumed that all food would be carried with the traveller, since it could not be reliably found along the way. The kinds of food carried reflected the colonist's dependence on introduced European foods, while the roots, leaves and berries of the bush foods that sustained Aboriginal people who had intimate knowledge of the terrain were practically invisible to the stoic settlers who colonised and cut down the bush. The country was often seen as improvident and indifferent, despite the evidence of Aboriginal people living adequately in shimmering arid lands.

When Australia was at war in the Middle East in 1940–41, the same qualities were evoked by the rations given to troops, where it may be argued the fight against

enemy forces in the desert had resonances of the battle to colonise Australia. My father remembers being in the western desert in Libya, when fighting at Bardia and Tobruk, that the battle rations for the five-week campaign were individually supplied to each man. They consisted of bully beef and hard biscuits, with a tot of rum before going into action. He remembers the comfort of black sweet tea, boiled on a billy with any fuel that could be found. Each man carried a metal water bottle, a pannikin, a mug, a white enamel plate, knife, fork and spoon.

The spartan simplicity of this diet was miraculously changed for a few weeks, when Mussolini's troops surrendered and the inspired commander of the Sixth Division, Sir Ivan McKay, allowed any Italian prisoners who were qualified to become cooks for the thousands of Australian troops.<sup>2</sup> The Italians had what seemed like extraordinary food in their captured reserves — dehydrated vegetables and herbs of all kinds, with bottles of mineral water — and they transformed bully beef into 'wonderful food'. 'We lived like lords'. Such amicable relationships were established between the Australian soldiers and the Italian cooks that many of them emigrated to Australia after the war. This story surely foreshadows the great changes to Australian society, through the basic elements of food and the fundamental observances of eating and cooking across languages and cultures. Vegetables and herbs, could add to the savours of meat, prefiguring a more nuanced cuisine that might soften the harsh purities of the traditional military regime that underpinned a 'masculine' tradition that had curtailed the sensory experiences of taste.

Even in my own household, faint mimicries of the campaign tactics of British soldiers and the rituals of colonial tea-making still survive. In the picnic basket near the esky and the plastic drink bottles sit the fire-blackened billy, the chipped enamel plate. As Nadia Seremetakis writes, historical experience and sensory memory are embedded in such persistent objects of everyday life, in the material artefacts that form the shape of a particular culture and time. 'The artefact is the bearer of sensory multiplicity ... a catchment zone of perceptions, a lens through which the senses can be explored from their other side' (11).

I experienced an unfamiliar sensory world that stretched my perceptions while working as an arts co-ordinator in an Aboriginal (Tiwi) settlement called Nguiu on Bathurst Island north of Darwin in the Northern Territory. Nguiu had been chosen by Bishop Gsell in 1911 as the site of the Sacred Heart Mission. I went with the flatbed truck that took thirty women and children from the mission settlement out to a wild beach called Kilimiraka, forty kilometres away to stay for a week or so of 'bush holidays'. After depositing everyone in the sand dunes the truck then departed back to the mission.

Going camping changed all my confident assumptions about the ordering of daily hours, the regular provision of food and norms of sleep. The sense of taste was transformed by another knowledge of food, into a kind of stratigraphy or layering of flavours, textures and colours derived from the living bush. The

difficult tracts of coastal bush and dunes on western Bathurst Island became an unfamiliar sensory landscape, endowing a fresh patina, a different vocabulary of taste in the search for food and the performance around eating. No one had much luggage — a few blankets, some tea, flour and sugar. That night I sat with Milly and her daughter Rose looking out over a wide beach full of moonlight, campfires lighting up figures wrapped in blankets on the sand or sitting up talking quietly, while children whirled and sang. Ruth, with all her nine children, told me this was her country, here. Her family in the War (World War II) used to walk from the Mission along the beaches in one night, she said, carrying sacks of flour, tea and sugar. The Air Force people at Cape Fourcroy gave them many provisions, but at first they had been too nervous to approach the white people and had hidden themselves in the mangroves.

The main provisions had to be found in the bush, so hunting took up most of the next day. I set out with Milly, walking quietly and slowly in the crackling palm tree undergrowth, tall trees overhead. She carried very little, a long stick for digging and hitting. Any food collected would be wrapped in her skirt. She intently looked for tracks and traces, staring at the crowns of trees to catch the glint of a bee's wing as it went to its nest full of honey. (This honey, or 'sugarbag', is packed in red wax, and tastes ambrosial, a mixture of honey and lemon.) Her feet had never worn shoes and they embodied a sensitivity and muscular fineness that enabled her to gain knowledge from the tactile qualities of the ground. She could tell from footprints on the track which group had passed by, how they were feeling, and what they were carrying. At every fallen log she would kneel down and shine the lid of a milk tin into the hollow, to search for snake or possum, and then walk on. Margaret Mary and Ruth joined us, cutting palm leaves to eat, mainly the soft top part where young leaves branch out. 'It's good medicine too'. It tasted astringent, sharp like the smell of the bush, with the texture of fresh cabbage heart. Milly said there seemed to be nothing much around, so we went into a patch of 'jungle', of rainforest where 'pumpkins' or yams grow, but the ground was too hard to dig.

Then suddenly there was a big hullo from the other women — they had found a fallen tree with sugarbag and a snake. I saw the coils of the big coppery snake through a hole in the hollow log, but it was very difficult getting it out. They took turns with a big stick picked up from the ground. 'Poor thing, look at that great scaly head,' said Milly, 'poor snake, look, she's cryin for her husband, opening her mouth like that'.

That night the snake, a python more than a metre long, was cooked in the hot ashes of the fire and tasted delicious, like fish soaked in honey. Tea was made by boiling together in a large billy of water half a packet of tea, about three cups of sugar, and half a tin of Sunshine milk powder, and was very sustaining. We sat round holding enamel and plastic cups as dark came and a group of little girls all told me stories at once, about *mopaditi* spirits and ghosts, about stars and the strange crucifixion that the nuns had mentioned.

Pauline, a senior woman, was yawning while everyone was talking about the turtles that often came to this beach to lay eggs. People were already in their blankets when suddenly a small group of women decided to walk along the moonlit beach and see if there were turtles arriving with the incoming tide. Pauline said, 'the old people say when you yawn at night the turtles are coming in'. It was enchanting walking in that cool glimmer under the dome of night by the sea. Then, we could see there were fresh tracks and a great mound of sand full of eggs. The women realised all in a moment that there was only one track, and no second track returning to the sea. There she was, in the loose sand a bit further up the dune, a huge circular beast, a mysterious creature hidden in a dip of the ground, just discernible in the moonlight digging slowly with deliberate clumsy movements of her flippers, her hooded watery eyes fixed ahead. The women were delighted and amazed at their luck. I walked back to get the others, by myself. When the rest of the camp heard about the turtle there were screams of excitement, everyone surging up the beach with no thought of knife, rope, or torch. The turtle resisted strongly — and the only knife sharp enough to quickly slit her throat happened to be the old kitchen knife I had brought. In the end the animal was dragged on its back by the women, up to the beach camp. A great fire was built the next morning under the shady trees that lined the beach, and the turtle was slowly cooked in its shell, feeding everyone for several days. Her unlaidd eggs were soft and leathery, a great delicacy even though their texture had an intestinal slipperiness.

I made notes of what was eaten over four days at Kilimiraka, a mixture of mission stores and bush tucker.

Saturday: mussels and some wallaby brought by people returning from Cape Fourcroy further to the west.

Sunday: porridge from oatmeal, tea, carpet snake and a bit of sugarbag. Pauline and Anna also got carpet snake (*illinga*) and two possums. Snake got cooked mid-afternoon, everyone ate, also possum. Damper for snack at midday, also before bed, with more snake. Hunted for yams about 3pm, found red nuts with Millie and some more sugarbag. Ruth got another possum. Then turtle in the night.

Monday: Cooked turtle all morning, big feast about midday. Then hunting about 3, because people felt sick with too much turtle fat — sugarbag cured this. They didn't find any snakes as it was 'too late', but got a lot of sugarbag in old bloodwood tree. Margaret Mary and Mel got bandicoot, and Millie cut palms (*mipara*). At night there was damper and roasted palm, which the children liked a lot. All said they felt better after a big feed of sugarbag when they got back from hunting.

Tuesday: Millie opened a tin of stew and veg, and ate it with damper. Off to hunt about 9.30 am, found carpet snake, sugarbag and possum in the big ironwood tree as well as a beautiful bright snake in a difficult log. Millie got pandanus nuts and chopped them open to eat on the spot. Margaret Mary cut more palm. Pauline tried for yams, but said the wallabies had got there first. Ruth and Miranda walked to Moantu for yams, all day, and got some possums

too. Lunch was about 3, more carpet snake and possum, sugarbag at tea time. Millie made damper at night, although flour was running short. Ruth's mob finished up the turtle as they were short of all tucker — the women who found the turtle only had a 'little bit', they said, rather grumpily. The 50 odd turtle eggs were boiled and eaten as snacks by whoever felt like it.

What struck me about being with the Tiwi women was their calm assurance in the certain existence of food, the lack of concern about how far the few tins of meat and packets of flour would stretch to feed so many. They knew that if they walked a few miles back along the coast they could get to the mangroves, to find crabs, mussels and mangrove worms. *Mipara* palms and pandanus would always provide vegetable food. The country would look after them if they observed custom. Mealtimes depended on what was available. I was often told 'You can only hunt properly if you are properly hungry'. Sometimes I would wake at two in the morning to sounds of quiet laughter and see two older women, suddenly peckish, cooking possum steaks on a fire by the sea, causing a smell of roasting meat and ash to drift over the camp. The country was experienced through the soles of the feet and through the tastebuds, through the physically tiring search for animals and plants. The food is the country itself, eaten and consumed with knowledge and affection, sustaining the sense of self as well as the physique.

Thinking about living in the wild with a sensitivity to the interplay of taste and touch brought me to consider the influential journals of Henry David Thoreau in nineteenth-century America. Thoreau stepped aside from the normal patterns of society to live off the land at Walden. 'Walden, or Life in the Woods' was first published in America in 1893. According to Victor Carl Friesen who has reassessed this classic text for its sensory acuity, Thoreau became 'inspired through his palate', constantly 'nibbling from plants', experiencing the 'wild and primitive fragrance of the Dicksonia fern' or the 'froth from pitch pines' so that he discovered an 'edible religion', where eating became an 'ecstatic experience' and drinking water was a 'tonic of wildness'. In a sparsely populated stretch of woods he explored even the 'commonly gross' sense of taste. His experience, unlike the grounded pragmatism and kinship of the Tiwi hunters and gatherers, was a lonely, even a stoic one similar to the masculine isolation of Australian explorers and settlers (Thoreau 1906, qtd in Friesen 253, 259–60). But because of an entirely different geography, his sensory evocation of the stretch of woods evokes a distinct vocabulary of taste embedded in a particular place and time.

To conclude, the choice of food in moving across country in Australia shows how the sense of taste relates to a sensory model of home and imbued custom in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Eating the dry, hard rations of military survival or colonial settlement, rations that were manufactured at a distant base, was to consume and imbibe histories of conquest and journeying, strengthening the resolve to uphold particular structures of power. 'By imbuing sensory values with social values, cultures attempt to ensure that their members will perceive the world aright' explains Constance Classen. Aboriginal traditions are just as clear

about the centrality of bush food in understanding a web of cultural practices. Despite the fact that most remote communities are now, in 2007, only nomadic for brief seasons, the sensory patterns of generations are as deeply engrained, and as emotional as the customs of European settlers. To stand in the country is to taste and feel it, to absorb it through a multitude of sensations into the self. Classen's persuasive insight is that the standard western model of the senses is unable to comprehend the sensory diversity of non-Western societies as forming a whole cosmology of perception (Classen 162). My experiences suggest that exploring the geography of taste and feeling is a vital, eminently 'sensible' risk for artists and writers in discovering unimagined landscapes in what we thought we understood.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The history of missionaries in Australia is documented in John Harris, *One Blood; 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity: A Story of Hope*.
- <sup>2</sup> Each Australian company of about 100 men received a cook from the 150,000 Italian prisoners-of-war.

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## Desert Seed Damper

1. Collect half a jam tin of wild grass seeds. The panicum species, known as wakati is considered by the Pitjantjatjara people to be especially delicious.
2. Winnow the seeds in a wooden dish or coolamon, by tipping or tossing seeds into the air so that the wind blows away the husks.
3. Grind the seed with a small stone on a larger flat grinding stone, gradually adding water to form a slushy paste.
4. Make a fire until the ground is hot. Move aside the large coals and burn fine mulga twigs to make a powdery white ash.
5. Place the paste of seeds on the ash, and place more twigs on top of the loaf and burn to a fine ash. The whole loaf is covered with hot coals and left to cook for half an hour.

Half a jam tin of seeds makes a small loaf about 2 cm high by 11 cm in diameter. It tastes like a dark rye bread, and is extremely nutritious.

This recipe was collected by Winifred Hilliard who lived at Ernabella, Northern Territory in the mid twentieth century. See Jennifer Isaacs, *Bush Food: Aboriginal Food and Herbal Medicine*, pp. 116–17. (Diana Wood Conroy was research assistant and photographer for the book.)