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A great culinary catastrophe

Kirsten Lawson

Twenty-five years ago, food historian Michael Symons published a detailed and damning history of Australian food over two centuries. Our cuisine, he concluded, was a "great Australian catastrophe", a long decline towards mass production and the takeover of food by monster monopoly companies which made it artificial and inedible in the name of profit.

Symons called his book *One Continuous Picnic* and he didn't mean this in any benign, bucolic sense.

Australia's cuisine was a contender for the world's most artificial and careless, he wrote, lightweight and portable, like a picnic. Our cooking had no coherent style, except for lots of beef and lamb. The only indigenous crop for almost 200 years was the macadamia, and our proudest names were Vegemite, Violet Crumble and Milo.

Now, 25 years later, Symons has updated and reissued his *One Continuous Picnic*. The picture he paints is still not pretty.

Symons's new gripe is artificial foods sold under the health banner low-fat milks, margarines, sports drinks, "weird products" full of additives that cram the shelves all of which he attacks with passion.

"I was pessimistic then and I'm fairly pessimistic now," he said in an interview with *The Canberra Times*. "It is possible to eat much much better than we could 25 years ago, but at the same time, it's just as easy or easier to eat worse than 25 years ago."

Today's nutritionists get a hefty dose of Symons's blunt criticism. Nutritionists have defamed meals, reducing them to calorie counts, glycemic indices and chemical analyses, he says.

"Nutritional advice has been really used by the [commercial food] industry to mask inferior products. I think the example's clear with milk," he says, pointing to the huge range of low fat milks really "reconstructed milk-like beverages", with names like Lite, Skinny, Hi, Active, Rush, and Shape.

"The standard of milk really has dropped in the name of quantity and convenience for the manufacturers, who admit to using powdered milk in the low fats."

Similarly with margarines: "I've never bought margarine and I don't know why anyone would. Originally, they used whale in margarine, and ever since, they've put in all sorts of things that aren't too clear. They have to use chemical processes to make it solid that have proved disadvantageous not only to your health, but they don't make an attractive product."

And the "kaleidoscopic frenzy" of new-age drinks sports drinks, energy boosters, iced teas, spring water, boosted with scientific additives and drugs, packaged as nutrition.

Symons, who is living in Wellington, New Zealand following his wife who has taken an academic post there buys a local organic milk, and has his butter shipped from Christchurch. He's really enjoying the excellent coffee, brought to New Zealand by a few local enthusiasts who went overseas, learned and cared.

"In Australia, if you talk to some of the old Italian hands, they accept the fact they came to Australia without much coffee culture themselves and they got into bad habits," Symons says.

Coffee franchises are another mass supplier on Symons's hit list, along with religious groups involved in food such as the Seventh Day Adventist church which produces Sanitarium cereals (and an "Up&Go Liquid Breakfast", promoted as health but which consisted of fibre from chicory inulin, starch from a strain of maize, and a slurry of water, soy, oil and milk powder), Exclusive Brethren, which manufactures McAlpin's flour, and the Sydney Hillsong church that is behind the Gloria Jean's coffee chain.

"When you get people who are doing it for God, their mind's off the coffee. They believe in a prosperity gospel at Hillsong, and



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"deskilling" of home cooking, the rising health fetishes and food anxieties, and in other ways. But perhaps the most notorious indicator is obesity, a result of unsatisfying meals that have us "mournfully stuffing the slot, caught up in culinary pokies".

Symons' solution is for shoppers and eaters to find local suppliers and use them, not the supermarket, not the false market of the huge conglomerates, but the true market such as the local farmers' markets, and small suppliers.

"Big business has all but destroyed the free market, which must urgently be redeemed. Extolling the life-and-death importance of the market might seem as unfashionable as freshness did a generation ago.

Yet foodies already love the colour, conversation, and the stacks of artichokes and apples. In a market, the grapes sell themselves, a sliver of cheese is sampled, and a cut of beef comes with the butcher's recommendation. A real market makes the friendliest of outings."

Symons finds big malls "offensive", and it was one of the things he hated about living in Canberra. He calls on local government to stop supporting new malls. Something he loved about his time in Canberra was the Silo Bakery in Kingston, which gets a mention in the new edition of his book.

Symons's current project is a history of dining out in Australia.

Source: The Canberra Times

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