

Margaret Fulton: A study of a 1960s Australian food writer as an activist

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Abstract:

Today, food writing makes up a significant proportion of the texts written, published, sold and read each year in Australia. While the food writing published in magazines and cookbooks has often been thought of as providing useful, but relatively banal, practical skills-based information to its readers, relatively recent reassessments suggest that food writing is much more interesting and important than this. In the contemporary context, when the mere mention of food engenders considerable anxiety, food writers play a number of roles beyond providing information on how to buy, store, prepare and serve various provisions. Instead, contemporary food writers engage with a range of important issues around food production and consumption including sustainable and ethical agriculture, biodiversity and genetic modification, food miles and fair trade, food safety and security, and obesity, diabetes and other health issues. In this, Australian food writers not only provide comment on any important issues in progress, they are also, I suggest, forward-thinking activists, advocating and campaigning for change. This paper focuses on prominent Australian food writer Margaret Fulton's career in the 1960s to begin to investigate her work as an activist: that is, one who advocates and campaigns to bring about change.

Keywords: Margaret Fulton; Australian food writing; food writers

Introduction: The complexities of thinking about eating

Current concerns about the environment and ethical/sustainable ways of living have ensured that contemporary eating and shopping practices are frequently imbued with complex moral choices. Should we, as one example, be buying locally produced foods, with all the benefits for our own regions, local areas and our health that this may provide? Or, should we be choosing Fair Trade branded and other such ethically produced goods, with all their benefits for producers in the developing world, but with a much larger carbon footprint in their transportation? The associated questions—of whether Fair Trade is 'fair' (Moore 2004), and what exactly 'local' means—add more complexity to this discussion.

In terms of how this complexity works in practice for consumers, the idea of 'local' in 'local food' provides a good example (see, for example, Ostrom 2007, Wilkins et al. 2002). 'Local' in such a usage can refer to food grown from within a radius of as close as twenty to as distant as more than five hundred kilometres away, while others variously define 'local food' as that from a region, state or even an entire country (Darby et al. 2008). While some have taken up sourcing all their food from within a certain distance as a project—as Barbara Kingsolver's family did in the year of growing all their own food, supplemented with only organic, neighbourhood-grown produce, an undertaking she recounts in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (2007)—this definition more commonly changes in relation to individual products (Durham, King and Roheim 2009). If, for instance, living on the New England high plains of Australia's New South Wales, I want to buy local trout, I need look no further than the farm business next door, but I would have to source local coffee from the Byron Bay area some four hundred kilometres to the north-east. This coffee would certainly be a more 'local' source, however, than purchasing Indonesian, African or other developing-world grown product. This choice of 'local to me' coffee would, however, raise the issue of removing my sales support (and the funds this might bring into local communities) from farmers in these latter countries and reallocating it to those in Australia.

Trying to make such a choice, as this example shows, quickly moves into the territory of food politics, concerned as this subject is with the ethical dimensions of food production and consumption and, in particular, the sustainability of food systems (see, for example, Lien & Nerlich 2004). Choosing which coffee to buy, for instance, raises the question of whether (when much coffee is produced by those labouring in slave and slave-like conditions) (Bales 1999)—and hence the advent of Fair Trade and other ethically based production and sales regimes—its producers are being employed in circumstances that I want to support with my purchase. This becomes an especially thorny question when the standard of living of these farmers/producers in developing countries is so much lower than mine as consumer. Then, there is the environmental impact of the farming practices to consider, as well as the cost in resources in transporting that product from its place of production to my kitchen. This is often more complex than it at first seems when the real environmental costs at farm level of such elements as water and fertiliser are factored into these costs, and when food produced nearby to a consumer may be shipped to warehouses far away before being transported back to local supermarkets, and still labelled 'local' (see, for instance, Pretty et al. 2005). Additional complicating factors in making a purchase choice can include such factors such as whether the food product has been irradiated before packaging and sale (Eyck 2002) and the amount and type of packaging itself (Thøgersen 1999).

The discussion below is not, however, focused on teasing out the complexities involved in sustainability or ethical eating, or in the ways these might be achieved. Instead, it starts from this example of suggesting the complexity of each of our food choices in order to frame the central assertion that food writers play an important role in assisting consumers in making these food choices. The below discussion also, specifically, suggests that food writers have been doing so for decades and uses the example of one particular Australian food writer, Margaret Fulton, and her writing in what many think of as the most banal of practical culinary literature: cookbooks and popular magazine writing, in order to explore a proposition that food writers not only are activists, but have been performing this role for many decades.

In this, the term activist is used in its commonly accepted meaning: one who campaigns to bring about change. In many cases, the desired change is political, social or cultural, although the term is widely utilised in a range of contexts. Food writing (as a sub-set of popular journalism) as a form of activism is significant to consider today both in and for itself, and especially because food writing makes up such a significant proportion of the texts written, published, sold and read in contemporary Australia. Tracing the background of this phenomenon, therefore, has value (see, for example, Bannerman 1996, 1998, 2001). Although the number of books sold each year in Australia has remained relatively stable for the past decade, (see, for example, Australian Bureau of Statistics reports on book publishing and sales), books on food have been selling in ever-increasing numbers over the past decade. Nielsen BookScan, which logs most Australian retail book sales, reports that in 2006, two million food and drink books, worth almost A\$60 million, were sold (Dunstan & Chaitman 2007, p. 334). Food and drink titles make up a similarly considerable proportion of the Australian magazine industry's annual sales of more than A\$1 billion. Of the six thousand different magazine titles currently available in Australia, many are from overseas but, in terms of circulation, most of those in the top hundred are Australian (Magazine Publishers of Australia n.d., More Magazines n.d.). In 2007, there were four food magazines in the top-selling twenty titles. This is unlike many other popular culture products—such as popular music, movies, television programs and computer games—consumed in Australia, most of which are designed and produced overseas. This level of purchase is also significantly ahead of some other Western countries, with Australian sales of food magazines six times higher per head of population than for the British (Magazine Publishers of Australia n.d.). The flow-on effects for Australian culture are significant: revenue from the sale of popular cookbooks, for instance, helping some publishing houses to subsidise the production of texts with smaller, and less profitable, levels of sales, such as some literary fiction, poetry and history.

Focusing on one food writer in the 1960s allows an initial reckoning of how the food-related issues that concern Australian consumers now were prefigured and discussed by Australian food writers then. A number of these are the issues animating our airwaves every day: around sustainable and ethical agriculture, water and other resource use, reducing food waste, and health issues such as obesity. Moreover, flickers of urging towards intercultural understanding, as well as suggestions of how women could forge and sustain new roles in society, were social concerns that were apparent in some Australian food writing in the 1960s.

In considering this, the primary concern of food writers in the 1960s (as it is currently) was with food itself and how it could be prepared and eaten. In this, it is difficult today for many Australians aged under fifty, and visitors to Australia, to imagine the pervasiveness of the classic weekday 'meat and three veg[etables]' evening meal and roast lamb for Sunday lunch regime of the 1950s/early 1960s that many Anglo-Australians regularly and repeatedly consumed. It was, indeed, really only in the 1960s that these domestically common dishes began to be significantly replaced by waves of what were radical innovations for this restricted palate—with new choices from pastas and fondue, to salmon and chocolate mousses, and American, European and Asian-inspired and fusion cuisine (see Bannerman 2008). Notably, also, although hotel closing time was extended in Tasmania in 1937 and New South Wales in 1955, six o'clock closing (and the notorious 'six o'clock swill'—where hotel patrons attempted to

consume as much as possible before the premises closed) was only repealed in Victoria in 1966 and South Australia in 1967 (Luckins 2007).

In 1966, the editor of the first issue of the new food and wine magazine, *Australian Gourmet Magazine*, indeed identified magazine writing as central to these changes towards a more sophisticated and international palate:

The former traditional fare of Australians of fish and chips, stews, pies and the ubiquitous pumpkin and steak and egg is now giving way, slowly but surely, to new dishes, cooked with ingenuity and understanding. Women's magazines vie with each other to portray new, existing and exotic foods in their pages, while weekend chefs compete in creating dishes par excellence and discuss wines with the authority of connoisseurs (Geiringer 1966, p. 7).

Although other factors, such as the high level of non-British post-war immigration to Australia, growing affluence, increasing travel outside Australia and changes in the food industry itself (Symons 1982), are widely acknowledged as important components of these changes to the national taste profile, magazine and other writers were instrumental in introducing and popularising these changes to a broad audience. However, as food writers did not use our current lexicon to discuss any of these issues, their interventions in these areas are not always immediately apparent.

Margaret Fulton and 1960s food writing

Margaret Fulton can formally be classed as a food writer from the time of her work on Australian weekly magazine, *Woman*, in 1954 and 1955. With over four decades of further work as food writer and editor of *Woman's Day* (1960-79) and *New Idea* (1979-2000), and still active in food publishing today, Fulton has written many hundreds of articles supported by a long series of extremely popular cookbooks, in the process becoming trusted as a reliable source of food-related advice. This is principally in matters of food preparation, but includes many other areas related to food as well. In the last decades, moreover, Fulton has attracted considerable public and institutional recognition for her work. In 1983, she was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia, and in 1997 she was inducted into the World Food Media Awards Hall of Fame and named as one of the National Trust's original 100 Living Australian National Treasures (Negus 2004). In 2006, Fulton was named by then-prominent current affairs magazine, *The Bulletin*, as one of the 100 most influential Australians ever (Austin 2007). The next year, the National Library of Australia chose Fulton for its annual 'celebration' of a leading Australian. This event, which drew renewed attention to both Fulton's contribution to Australian culinary heritage and the respect she has among peers and the reading public, drew what was stated to be 'unprecedented' interest (FNLA 2007, p. 1, Wright 2007). Since then, recognition of Fulton's contribution has increased with similar events at major institutions, including at the National Museum of Australia.

From 1960, when Fulton commenced her twenty-year association with *Woman's Day* as cookery writer and food editor, she quickly became established as an authority in this area in Australia. Her food writing in this serial, as later magazines, usually comprised an accessibly written, informative introduction followed by recipes comprising readily

available ingredients. These articles have consistently promoted the use of fresh, seasonal produce; methods for reducing waste by thrifty shopping and the creative use of leftovers; and, while at times promoting the use of timesaving 'convenience foods' and products, have also encouraged shoppers to resist the lure of the new supermarkets to some extent, and to continue purchasing from local purveyors such as greengrocers, butchers and fishmongers. She also began to expose her (mostly women) readers to revolutionary new ingredients and food preparation techniques from an increasingly broad range of international cookery alongside more traditional dishes. Fulton, indeed, had the self-professed aim of exposing Australian home cooks to a wide range of (largely then unknown) international cookery, and revealed later in her memoir how she was paid to travel all over the world in her role as food editor, learning about various cuisines, foods and preparation methods, information which she then translated into her articles and books (Fulton 1999). This work provided a solid foundation for the ongoing development of today's broad-based cosmopolitan food culture in Australia. Food historian Barbara Santich, who worked with Fulton at *Woman's Day* in 1973 (which then had a weekly circulation of 514,000), describes Fulton as "the acknowledged leader/style-setter" in her introduction of the [then] "exotic cuisines of India, Italy, France, Scandinavia, South-East Asia and the Middle East" to Australian readers (Santich 2007, pp. 34, 38). Moreover, Fulton showed Australians how to consume these exotic foods as well—with her line drawings for how to eat spaghetti in the *Margaret Fulton Cookbook*, for example, remembered by many as enabling a new way of eating as well as cooking.

An indication of her role in Australian food history is provided by the success of her first cookbook, *The Margaret Fulton Cookbook*, in 1968. Fulton describes her own amazement at its popularity:

[The publisher] said that 10,000 was a bestseller, so the print run was going to be 10,000. Then the orders kept coming in and it went to 20,000 and then it went to 30,000 and then it went to 40,000. It ended up the first print run was 100,000, and when it came out it was just so exciting ... [People] were queued for miles down and around the block to get this book (Fulton 1997).

The volume's first print run was a record for any kind of book in Australia, but the book also unexpectedly sold out and ran to another large second printing the next year (Fulton 1999, p. 159). This level of sales was even more surprising in an Australian publishing context wherein food writing played a much less significant part than it does today. Women's magazines and the women's pages of newspapers contained comparatively much smaller recipe sections, and cookery books were a quite insignificant segment of local and imported book publishing. Food writing targeted at male readers formed an even smaller part of the market. As an (admittedly inexact) indication of this, there were only 178 locally and imported cookbooks collected by the National (deposit) Library of Australia for the four years of 1966 to 1969 inclusive. In comparison, it holds some 779 from the four-year period from 1996 to 1999, and some 1120 from 2005 to 2008 (NLA 2009). In 1968, the year the *Margaret Fulton Cookbook* was published, there were only 36 cookbooks deposited in the NLA, one less volume than in 1966. Six of these were imported, with two volumes from the Thailand (in Thai), one from Indonesia (in Indonesian), two from the USA (*The Presidents' Own White House Cookbook* and *Jim Lee's Chinese Cookbook*), and a single volume from the UK (*Oysters with Love*). The remaining 30 were published in Australia. These Australian published volumes include

five community cookbooks, five volumes published under the auspices of popular magazine, *The Australian Women's Weekly*, as well as two featuring recipes from newspapers, *The Courier* (Brisbane) and *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), and a single textbook, *Day to Day Cookery for Home Craft Students*. Two books could be said to reflect an interest in gourmet cookery: *Is there a Chef in the Kitchen?* and *The Young Gourmet's Cookbook*. There were also what could be called two 'general' cookbooks by authors who went on to become very famous over the following decades: UK-based Marguerite Patten's (with Betty Dunleavy) *Entertaining at Home* and Margaret Fulton's *The Margaret Fulton Cookbook* [1].

At this time, in the late 1960s, Fulton also established the Chicken and Chablis Club in Sydney. This was a women's gourmet club, in which she performed the role of 'food mistress', selecting the menu and providing information about the club's meals for its female members. This group joined a number of other women's gourmet clubs in other Australian cities, including the Chicken and Chablis Club in Adelaide and the Brides of Bacchus Club in Melbourne, organisations that suggested the then quite revolutionary idea that women could participate in formal gourmet activities (Evans 1966). The clubs' activities included lectures on the ingredients and cooking methods, and related information about the wine served at its regular luncheons. This activity picks up on another activist thread in Fulton's writing, as her cookbook and magazine writing has, since the 1950s, not only affirmed the importance of creativity for personal fulfilment, but in encouraging the use of time-saving products, was early in recognising women's changing roles and our increasing desire to work outside the home. Fulton's writing has, indeed, assisted in making women's domestic work visible for at least the women involved. She has also actively encouraged other women to take up meaningful work (even if it meant less time in the kitchen), both by positing that other career paths were possible (including her own in journalism and advertising) and by her involvement in mentoring schemes. She encouraged her own daughter's career in food preparation and writing, with the result that Suzanne Gibbs is now a popular Australian magazine food writer and editor. Gibbs has been the food director for *Australian Good Food*, the local version of a popular British BBC magazine of the same name, since its launch in August 2008.

In the later 1960s, Fulton also began writing for one of the first post-war Australian magazines dedicated to food and wine, marking a significant moment in the development of the *Australian Gourmet Magazine*. Established in 1966, the *Australian Gourmet Magazine* was struggling to find a sustainable format and stable of writers. Fulton brought a food information-driven inflection to the magazine, which until then had focused on elitist and male-identified concerns such as setting up a wine cellar, choosing cigars and fine restaurant (which was then French) dining. In her columns, Fulton instead promoted the possibility of the act of home cooking as gourmet, as well as what Australian fine dining outside the home might be; that is, as not necessarily French. Susan Sheridan has similarly discussed how the most popular Australian women's magazine from this period, *The Australian Women's Weekly*, similarly brought the domestic kitchen into focus as a site of 'ethnic' food preparation in the post-war period, but notes this took place in the home kitchen sometime after it was popularised in the pages of magazines and on the tables of fine restaurants (Sheridan 2000, p. 322).

Fulton's influence was so pervasive over the next decade of the 1970s that, by 1982, some three years after she had left *Woman's Day* for the food editorship of rival

magazine *New Idea*, Fulton was judged to have had ‘more impact on the Australian kitchen than any thing or person since the refrigerator’ (Ward 1982, p. 16). Although this discussion has focused on her work in the 1960s, throughout the entirety of her almost sixty year long career in food writing, Fulton’s message has remained remarkably clear—buy fresh seasonal produce, support local producers and food businesses, reduce waste, be open to the cultures of others, drink responsibly, and respect the work-life choices we all make. This message has certainly resonated with readers. *The Margaret Fulton Cookbook*, having largely been kept in print since 1968 to meet reader demand, has achieved lifetime sales of over 1.5 million copies and has contributed to the some four million copies of Fulton’s twenty-four cookbooks that were estimated as having been purchased nationally and internationally by 2007 (Gibbs et al. 2007). A new edition of *The Margaret Fulton Cookbook* (rewritten with Suzanne Gibbs) was released in 2004 to excellent reviews and ongoing sales success.

Conclusion: Beyond the ‘just academic’

In the conclusion of his analysis of the social dynamics of food security, Johan Pottier writes of the importance of food studies:

studying food issues, whether within households or in the offices of policy-makers, must not be “just academic”. The aim of such research must be to understand and to transform (1999, pp. 196-97).

In the preceding, I suggest that food writer Margaret Fulton has long made Australians think about what and why we eat, and how this affects our world. Fulton has a long history of contributing to important discussions about and around food, as well as the positive transformations of public culinary and other habits. In a range of areas, from sustainable and ethical agriculture to the work-life balance and gender equality, using the diction and popular forms of the day, such Australian food writers have been not only media commentators on contemporary concerns but also, at times, forward-thinking activists and campaigners for change.

Endnote

[1] Cookbooks published in 1968 catalogued by the National Library of Australia include: Abbas, Azhar Ilias 1968, *Recipes of the Orient*, Rigby, Adelaide; Ady, Doris M 1968, *Curries from the Sultan's kitchen: curries from India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon*, Reed, Sydney & Wellington; Allen, Norma 1968, *The Courier cookbook, good cooking from the cookery pages of the Courier*, The Courier, Canberra; Anon 1968, *Australian cheese and wine: 20 dinner & luncheon ideas*, Lansdowne, Melbourne; Anon 1968, *Australian cheese and wine: recipe cards – 20 party ideas*, Lansdowne, Melbourne; Anon 1968, *Australian cheese and wine: recipe cards – 20 cakes and dessert ideas*, Lansdowne, Melbourne; Australian Women’s Weekly 1968, *Canned foods and short cuts for easy Winter meals: from our Leila Howard test kitchen*, Australian Women’s Weekly, Sydney; Australian Women’s Weekly 1968, *The Australian Women’s*

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Acknowledgements

The research reported in this paper was begun at the Research School of Humanities at the Australian National University, under a Humanities Research Centre Research Fellowship, and completed with a grant funded through the Faculty of Arts, Business, Informatics & Education, CQUniversity, Australia. This paper was much improved by the astute and generous comments of delegates at the Food for Thought Congress (presented by the Australian Studies Centre, Universitat de Barcelona and the Centre for Peace and Social Justice, Southern Cross University), held at the Universitat de Barcelona, Spain, 1-5 February 2010, and those of the peer reviewers.

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