

Aboriginal Cooking Techniques by Warwick Wright

Traditional :

1. Roasting on hot coals:

The basic technique for cooking flesh, including most meats, fish and small turtles. A further slow roasting, involving covering with coals and ashes may have then been employed to thoroughly cook the meat or to soften an otherwise tough meat. After cooking, the meat would be quickly consumed. For game, such as a kangaroo, the fur would first be singed off in the flames. As the carcass started to swell, it would be removed from the flames, gutted and the remains of the fur scraped off with a sharp implement. By this time the fire would be a bed of hot coals on which the carcass would be further cooked. It is unlikely that cooking would be complete by this method, the meat would be rare but probably relished by all, particularly the men of the group. Smaller game would be more thoroughly cooked by this method. Shellfish would be cooked briefly on the coals at the side of a fire so that, as soon as the contents started to froth, they were removed from the heat. This method avoided the shellfish being overcooked and tough.

2. Baking in the ashes

Dampers and various types of bread were baked in the ashes. Care was taken to only use the correct type of wood from which the ashes were obtained. Some woods imparted an unpleasant taste or even caused irritation or discomfort to the users. Most wattles seemed to have been successfully used for baking in the ashes, yielding a fine ash that did not cause irritation. Witchetty grubs only required to be briefly rolled in the hot ashes to cook them. Often damper or goanna would be placed on the hot ground beneath the ashes and covered with more ash to cook. A scooped out hollow was often made in which to cook yams and other small vegetables by then covering them with a further layer of ash and coals.

3. Steaming in a ground oven

Ancient ground ovens still exist, particularly in the Wiradjuri area, along the Darling, Murrumbidgee and Lachlan Rivers. At Lake Urana in western NSW I have seen such ovens and only recognised them after having them explained to me. The ovens were prepared by digging out a pit about 90 cm long and 60 cm deep, taking care to collect any clay from the digging. The clay, usually fashioned into smooth lumps, would be placed aside until the pit had been filled with selected firewood and then placed on top. As the wood burned, the clay would dry quickly and become very hot. These clay lumps, nearly red hot, would be removed from the pit using sticks for tongs, the pit swept out and quickly lined with green leaves or grass on which small game such as possums would be lain, covered by more green grass and weighed down by the clay lumps. All this was covered with earth from the original excavation to prevent loss of steam. This method of cooking produced excellent results. In areas such as Arnhem Land, wrapping in moist paperbark from the Melaleuca trees is still a popular method of cooking vegetables and meat in a ground oven. Iron particles in ground ovens became aligned according to the magnetic field of the earth at the time the ovens were last used – from this the age of the ovens could be calculated, a bonus for archaeologists.

Recent :

1. Boiling

Adapting quickly to new technology, the Aborigines learned to boil foods in galvanised cans, drums, billy cans, aluminium pots and even more sophisticated cast iron pots, whenever such items were available. This probably led to the demise of the use of the ground oven and a change in nutrition.

2. Barbecueing

The use of a piece of wire or a wire fork to hold pieces of meat or dough over red coals also seems to have been quickly adopted in some areas.