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**American and Australian post-war culinary culture: Betty Crocker and Betty King — her Australian lookalike**

**ABSTRACT**

*In the early 1950s, home economist Betty King was invented by registered Australian company, World Foods Pty. Ltd. Modelled on America's Betty Crocker, a 'live trademark' designed to put a human face on large food corporations and attract and teach women to use new appliances and packet mixes (Schapiro 2004: 178), Betty King marketed new processed American foods to Australian housewives. Whilst recognising the impact of post war migration from Europe on its food culture and the creation of its national cuisine, Australian collective memory prefers to ignore the impact of America in this period. This paper uses a culinary example to examine how Australian companies adopted sophisticated American marketing methods to promote new American manufactured foods to Australian housewives. It argues that in this way American convenience foods, recipes and cooking techniques, made their way into our cuisine.*

**KEYWORDS**

Betty King  
Betty Crocker  
Australian  
American  
culinary culture

**INTRODUCTION**

The collective narrative about Australia's culinary heritage and culture acknowledges and values the contribution of post war migrants from Europe but largely overlooks American influences. The late John Button delivers a perfect example of the force of this collective belief and its contradictions. He wrote in 2007:

Between 1942 and 1945, when Australia's population was seven million, one million US service personnel came to Australia. They were made welcome, and strange things happened. American sporting results and recipes were

published in the newspapers; ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ was played at the start of theatre and concert performances; Australians were introduced to the hot dog; Americans, reluctantly, to the dim sim (Button: 2007).

But in concluding, he wrote that apart from fast foods, like hot dogs, Americans had little impact on Australian cuisine. The real change came after the war when migrants from Europe and Asia came to Australia bringing new restaurants and cafes and tastes to Australia (Button). Women’s magazines, as Donna Brien argues in her study of culinary icon Margaret Fulton, with their predominantly female audience and reliance on advertising revenue, are a treasure trove of information about consumer taste, status fashion and leisure (Brien 2010) and it is through the advertisements and recipe sections from the post war period printed in them that we have immediate access to both the range of new food products and the methods used to sell them to Australian women.

This paper uses a culinary example to examine how, in the post war period, Australian companies adopted sophisticated American marketing methods to promote new American manufactured foods to Australian housewives. In the early 1950s, home economist Betty King was invented by registered Australian company, World Foods Pty Ltd. Using America’s Betty Crocker marketing model, Betty King featured in advertisements in magazines and newspapers and marketed new processed American foods to Australian housewives, who, with their control of the household budget, were a powerful group.

Betty King, modelled on American Betty Crocker, was created to sell a range of packaged processed ‘boxed’ foods to Australian housewives by offering to help them learn to cook with these modern foods, all ‘guaranteed to save time ... and making cooking easier’. Advertisements claimed Betty King helped countless women in millions of kitchens (Advertisement 1954a: 68) and by 1954, she was promoted as Australia’s best-known cooking specialist even though she (like Betty Crocker) did not exist.

## **SETTING THE SCENE FOR BETTY KING**

Betty King did not arrive unannounced. America’s influence on Australia was felt during World War II. American servicemen stationed in and passing through Australia, were made welcome in Australian homes: for many Australians this was

their first encounter with luxury goods (Khamis 2007: 40). After the war, between twelve and fifteen thousand Australian women married American servicemen and moved to America and their accounts of American modernity reached Australian housewives through letters, magazine articles and newspaper reports:

This extraordinarily huge ‘traffic’ of young women, all transplanting their lives from one side of the globe to the other by ship, was a worldwide phenomenon. It caught the attention of the press and was the subject of many newspaper reports and cartoons (Arrowsmith 2008).

Australian war brides sent glowing reports of life in the USA to friends and family in Australia. In the post war period they, along with the women’s pages in newspapers, provided glowing stories of American modernity, homes, dream kitchens, foods and recipes.

The 1953 Pillsbury Bake-off and its prize-winning recipes were described in article in popular women’s magazine *Women’s Day* and *Home*. The winning recipes were all typically America recipes – Starlight Double Delight Cake, Chocolate Marble Bars, Plantation Peach Shortcake and Apple Orchard Pie. (Brown 1953: 17) and in 1963, after General Mills bought a fifty percent stake in White Wings, we had our own version of this event in the Dairy White Wings Bake-off.

In 1954 Mrs Doherty, an Australian home appliance expert, wrote in *The Housewife*, ‘the American housewife is happier than the Australian’. Describing the *aids* American housewives had at their disposal – a deep fryer, a controlled heat frying pan, an electric mixer and an electric coffee maker – she wrote ‘The preparation of meals is very quick and considered more fun than a chore’ (Doherty 1954:13).

## **MARKETING TO WOMEN**

The post war housewife has been cast as victim of a patriarchal society that saw her role as one reduced to the service of the family; alienated in their suburban homes; and/or as servants with little effective power outside of the home (Friedan: 1965). Recent research has questioned these limiting narratives that see women trapped in an unhappy domestic role (Thomson 2011).

In marketing terms, the housewife was a powerful, not pitiable, figure (Reekie 1991, Thomson 2011). Major retailers and advertisers estimated that women

constituted somewhere between seventy-five and ninety percent of all their customers (Reekie 1991: 17). A 1960 survey of the *Housewife's Day* conducted in Melbourne (market research itself was a new marketing tool introduced by American advertising companies) by United Service Publicity Pty Ltd claimed that its survey of 1400 Melbourne housewives had 'advertising, marketing, economic and sociological implications'. 'The housewife is an extremely important figure to marketers of a great many products'. Interpretation of the document 'should help formulate marketing and advertising strategy' (USP 1960: 1).

Market researchers knew, from observed and personal experience, that it was women who shopped and decided on household purchases. Retailers were clear that women always had the final say in household purchases and exerted influence even over masculine commodities – for example men chose the brand of paint and women chose the colour (19). Gail Reekie argues, based on her review of trade literature, that marketers were very aware in this post war period that they needed to 'know and understand the responses, buying behaviour and motives of their customers' (17).

Women's magazines also recognised the influence of women on their revenue from advertising. *The Australian Women's Weekly* identified that women controlled ninety per cent of a household's spending power (Griffen-Foley 1999:33). The housewife was the purchasing manager for the household and every home – not just wealthy ones – was the target for new consumerism (19).

The sophisticated American marketing techniques (Reekie 1991, Khamis 2007) were borrowed all over the world, including in Australia. The United Services report identified that *the* one thing women of all social and economic classes could not avoid was preparing food:

When the week is analysed ... it becomes apparent that the most time consuming household duty is associated with meals, where for every day of the week an average of 4 ½ hours is spent in preparation, consumption and washing up. In other words a ¼ of a housewife's waking day is concerned with meals. It is worth noting that virtually no housewife escapes from doing something about meals each and every day (5).

Nowhere in this report is it mentioned that women's thoughts on cooking meals were sought or analysed but other market research identified three clearly defined groups

of Australian housewives: those who achieved personal satisfaction from preparing food, those who enjoyed satisfying others and those who wanted to get out of the kitchen as fast as possible (Reekie 21). Having identified these groups Betty King could sell her products to all three groups using her culinary expertise as a home economist and her guarantee of new products and new cooking ideas all tested in her test kitchen.

### **BETTY CROCKER AND BETTY KING**

Magazines scanned from the period show advertisements for a range of products all endorsed by a small head and shoulder drawing of a woman, usually a home economist or a professional with some expertise or authority. These women all looked alike; around the same age, attractive, smart and had with a catchy yet ordinary name: Sue Murray, Dorothy Summers, Anne Dixon and Betty King.

This idea originated in America. Laura Schapiro notes that American marketing companies used a head and shoulders image to put a personal face to many of its emerging brands. She says:

Ideally this woman was aged between 32 and 40, attractive but not competitively so, mature but youthful looking, competent yet warm, understanding but not sentimental, interested in the consumer but not involved with her (178).

This branding technique was, according to Schapiro, never more successfully used than with the Betty Crocker branding:

Live trademarks were designed to put a human face on food corporations bidding for the attention of female shoppers... these kind female faces were there to forge a crucial link between old habits and modern foods.... Among those personalities the one who made the biggest name for herself was Betty Crocker, to this day the most successful culinary authority ever invented (Schapiro: 178-180).

Created in 1921 to act as a credible source for advice on the many cooking enquiries received from housewives about their cooking, by the 1940s and '50s, most American housewives knew her name, her voice, and recognised her picture on packages and advertisements.

World Brands PTY LTD, an Australian propriety company that imported and distributed processed foods, mainly from America, registered in 1949 and deregistered in 1991, copied this model. Its Australian creation, Betty King ‘leading home economist’ first appeared in Australian women’s magazines in 1950 promoting Mello Chocolate Dessert. She personalised this new chocolate pudding in a packet by providing recipes on each pack and hints on serving decorating each of the three flavours.

In 1951 Mello changed its name to Mellah. Betty King introduced Australians to a new Melt’n’Mix method of cake making using Copha, a coconut fat made only in Australia, along with Mello instant pudding mixes. Her range of products increased to include Continental Brand packet soups, Liptons tea (Advertisement 1953: 64) Puffin Multi-Mix baking mix (Advertisement 1961: 52), Deb Instant Mashed Potatoes and in Perth Western Australia, Nurse’s Cornflour tests in the Betty King Model kitchen proved it – every sponge was taller fluffier and had a better flavour (Advertisement 1954b: 24).

Betty King was presented to Australian women in much the same way that Betty Crocker was presented to American women.

### SIMILARITIES

Both Betty Crocker and Betty King were depicted as real women. Their images were created and changed over the decades to stay current and reflect women’s fashion.



Figure 1: Images of Betty Crocker [http://chnm.gmu.edu/sidelights/who-was-betty-crocker /](http://chnm.gmu.edu/sidelights/who-was-betty-crocker/)





1955

1960

Figure 2: Images of Betty King

Both Betty Crocker and Betty King were depicted as professional women. The front cover of *Betty Crocker's Picture Cookbook: Revised and Enlarged*, shows a professional kitchen with lines of ovens and work spaces and women in uniforms cooking, making it clear that Betty Crocker worked from a professional not a home kitchen. Every Betty Crocker recipe was developed in the General Mills test kitchen, and Betty Crocker understood that every woman tackled a recipe differently so before a recipe was published it was further tested by a select group of women in home kitchens. In its foreword *Betty Crocker's Picture Cookbook* describes the testing process for all Betty Crocker recipes:

All have been tested and retested in representative homes throughout the country. Only those that passed this home testing with a top score for excellent results and eating enjoyment appear here (Crocker c1955: Introduction).

Betty King also advertised her 'staff of experts' and 'her professional kitchen' where she developed new recipes, simplified time wasting techniques, and accumulated knowledge that would benefit the housewife and her family. Her role was there to help women create quick interesting, easy, tasty meals for their families and to support their creative endeavours and their busy lives:

Betty King, Home Economist, of World Brands Pty Ltd is one of the leading ladies of Australian cookery. Her name is closely identified with all that is newest and best in modern cookery techniques (King c1955: Cover).

Betty King is pictured in her cook book of 'up to the minute' recipes using copha, dressed in a white uniform, stirring a mix in the bowl of her Sunbeam mixmaster. She

is addressing a group of women all looking on attentively as she demonstrates Melt'n'Mix recipe using Copha (shortening). She is influenced by Betty Crocker and uses the American term 'frosting' (along with the more Australian term 'icing' in her cookbook) and she suggests women use the American method of applying frosting to a cake, slathering it on instead of smoothing it, and swirling it boldly. 'It looks richer and bolder if you do', she offers (King: 14). A thumbnail size picture of her appears at the start of the introductory page and her firm signature at the end.

World Brands worked hard to convince women of Betty King's existence placing her in a collection of recipes for 'Varied Meat Dishes' published in *AWW* (Advertisement 1963: 46 and 48-49) amongst 'real' home economists, Betty Dunleavy who worked at Clifford Young and Co (Uncle Toby's) and went on to run the Leila Howard Test Kitchen for the *AWW*; and Marion Raymond of the Nestle Company. Photographs of Betty Dunleavy and Marion Raymond accompany their recipes, but Betty King is illustrated next to her contribution.

She had a monthly column of new recipes and cooking ideas using Continental soups and Mellah Instant Pudding in *The Australian Women's Weekly*. Readers could cut out the recipes, attach them to a sheet of paper, and file them in the new Betty King folder available for 5/- (Advertisement 1963b: 81).

## **WHERE BETTY KING FAILS**

Like all imitations though, the copy is never as good as the real thing. Betty Crocker was not all fiction. Her brand flourished under the guardianship of Marjorie Child Husted, a home economist who believed that home making was a dignified career for women, 'No matter how many housekeeping duties modern conveniences take out of the home the chief function of the homemaker still remains: to give the love and security—the training for character and attitudes that make for successful living' (from a speech at American Association of University Women 1951 and quoted in Schapiro: 186). She felt that women needed a champion, 'someone to remind them that they had value' (186).

In a 1952 speech to advertising executives and quoted by Schapiro, Husted said:

But as I came to know more about women's lives we added service more deeply needed—service built on increased understanding of the fundamental

needs of women. And then we received much greater response (Schapiro 185).

Australian Betty King, from the outset, was a prop created to provide recipes and advice on a range of ways the new packaged foods could be used. She showed women how they could plan a meal around Continental soup, how economical and time saving these packets were and how reliable the recipes were after having 'spent months tasting and testing these soups' (Advertisement 1955: 68). Betty Crocker's culinary knowledge was based on her 'trove of information about homemaker's habits in the kitchen' (Schapiro: 182) gained from her work prior to General Mills running the Gold Medal Cooking Schools. Her observations went into the test kitchen at General Mills and were incorporated into Betty Crocker recipes. Failure was impossible cake after cake after cake...

Betty King invited women to connect with her by writing in for recipes for special occasions and for information and hints or if something went wrong. Proof of her credibility was offered to her readers by the 'constant stream of letters that pour in from every city and country district' (back cover). That women wrote to her, and that her test kitchen was a farce, is shown by a correction printed in *AWW* a week after the original recipe for ice cream made with Mellah pudding mix appeared in an advertisement. The original recipe published on 11 February 1953 gave incorrect measurements for the milk component. The correction was printed the following week, 'because of the wide general interest in the recipe' (Advertisement 1953b: 58). The mistake was significant. The original recipe called for a full cup of condensed milk, milk powder mixed with water, cream or reduced cream whereas the corrected recipe only called for ½ cup of milk or substitute.

## **CONCLUSION**

Betty King did not fail in delivering her product and her message to housewives. Along with a range of foods introduced in the post war period through migration are American foods, marketed to women using American marketing methods, purchased and used frequently in Australian homes. Clearly Betty King was a tool used to market these products to Australian women.

Today, the Betty Crocker brand is represented by a simple spoon with the words, 'Betty Crocker' written across it, and Betty King has disappeared, as has the company she represented and some of the brands she promoted.

Betty King and Betty Crocker, rather than helping women to cook, made food preparation so easy that women's culinary skills were no longer needed in the kitchen ... 'just add milk, no mixing needed ... just heat and serve'. In the 1960 *Housewife's Day* survey, it was found that women in Melbourne spent an average of 4.5 hours each day around food preparation. Then, time spent at food preparation was seen as something that needed fixing. Whereas those hours now would be seen by many as leisure. Arguably, that could be the reason for collectively removing quick and easy instant foods and America from our food narratives.

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Jillian (Jill) Adams (B Arts (Hons), Dip Ed, MA) started a career in town planning, before she set off to Paris to pursue her dream of becoming a Cordon Bleu cook. She is a qualified teacher, a graduate of Cordon Bleu École de Cuisine in Paris and is currently president of the Oral History Association of Australia. Her book, *Barista: A guide to espresso coffee* (2008) is used widely in espresso coffee training in Australia and overseas, while her *A Good Brew: H. A. Bennett & Sons and tea and coffee trading in Australia*, tells the story of social and cultural change in Australia through the stories of people involved in our tea and coffee industries, and will be published in 2013.

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