

## **“Practically indispensable”: the culinary uses of olive oil in (South) Australia in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.**

In 1910 *The [South Australian] Daily Herald* praised olive oil as “an excellent food”. “...in cooking”, it continued, “it is regarded by experts in the culinary art as practically indispensable”<sup>1</sup>. Yet, judging by contemporary recipe books and other evidence, olive oil seems to have been a notably dispensable ingredient in the food of South Australians until at least the 1960s. And this despite the availability of locally pressed ‘virgin’ olive oil and the presence of a well developed local industry that, it was claimed, could have grown to satisfy any demand for its product . This paper is an attempt to describe and analyse this reluctance of South Australians to incorporate olive oil more generally into their cooking and eating habits.

*The Daily Herald* correspondent, ‘Agricola’, was not the first to commend the use of olive oil in cooking. From the mid 1870s to the early 1920s — the period coincides with an explosive growth in olive and olive oil production — olive-related literature is sprinkled with references to olive oil as a food; before 1875 and after 1920, it seems to have been regarded merely as the marketable end-product of growing olive trees. As early as 1875 — five years after the Adelaide Gaol pressed the first commercially successful oil in South Australia — another anonymous correspondent to *The South Australian Register*, probably Samuel Davenport, noted with uncharacteristic dispassion that “in the countries where it is produced [olive oil] is used in place of butter, enters largely into the diet of the people, and is extremely wholesome and nutritious”<sup>2</sup>. By 1898 yet another anonymous correspondent to the *Journal of Agriculture and Industry* recognised that “on the continent of Europe olive oil is very largely used in cookery, but in Australia its value is not well recognised. It is much nicer, more nourishing, and more easily digestible than animal fats. Used in pastry it makes a much lighter crust than lard, dripping, or butter”<sup>3</sup> Again in 1910 Agricola reported that “in important olive countries... the oil and the fruit, green or ripe, are daily luxuries and nutritious food. The people fry their fish in the oil and make sweet desert cakes of

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<sup>1</sup> [The Daily Herald](#), October 1, 1910, p.10

<sup>2</sup> [The South Australian Register](#), June 17 1875, p.5

<sup>3</sup> [Journal of Agriculture and Industry](#), June 1898, p.856

pastry cooked in boiling oil and sugared. During the hot summer oil is their substitute for butter with bread.”<sup>4</sup> Finally, in 1917, the manager of the Government Orchard at Blackwood, C.H. Beaumont, exhorted South Australians to adopt olive oil in the kitchen just as they had adopted olive trees in their orchards.

Olive oil is a powerful food, and is a splendid substitute for animal fat, and has practically no waste. There is nothing better for the frying of foods. It is a fine preservative; we are all acquainted with its use in tinning fish, &c. ...in fact, olive oil and ripe olives are invaluable<sup>5</sup>

(South) Australians, then, knew the importance of olive oil in the cooking of Mediterranean Europe and had at least some idea of how it was used. Moreover, the acknowledged medical and dietary benefits of olive oil gave them good reasons to consume olive oil. However, this knowledge did not necessarily translate into local domestic practice as evinced in references to olive oil in cookbooks published in Australia.

Recipe books are not indisputably reliable sources for the culinary habits of the general public and, for the purposes of this paper, for the place of olive oil in its food culture. Nevertheless, more than banquet menus or literary descriptions of meals, cookbooks afford an insight into the culinary interests of at least that part of the population that was increasingly interested in food and its preparation, was possibly trained to cook in public classes or in schools, referred to cookbooks and should have been most inclined to adopt newly available foods or ingredients such as olive oil. If (South) Australians, like Southern Europeans, used olive oil in their food and cooking, I assume, this should have been reflected in their recipe books.

Searching for recipes that include olive oil in nineteenth and early twentieth century cookbooks has proven to be a particularly unrewarding task. Bette Austin’s *Bibliography of Australian Cookery Books published prior to 1941* lists 722 books related to cooking published in Australia from 1864 to 1941; approximately a third, about 250, could be described as general collections of recipes. To survey these, I have sampled the general

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<sup>4</sup> The Daily Herald, August 20, 1910.

<sup>5</sup> C.H.Beaumont, “The Olive and its Uses”, paper read to the Blackwood Agricultural Bureau, The Journal of Agriculture of South Australia, October 1917, p.277

cookbooks, concentrating initially on those published from about 1870 to about 1920 since this period witnessed a dramatic increase in the consumption of olive oil.

This survey comprised the following collections of recipes:

- Alfred J. Wilkinson, *The Australian Cook*, 1876
- L. Rawson, *Cookery Book and Household Hints*, 1878
- [Anon], *Australian Plain Cookery*, 1884
- Harriet Wicken, *The Kingswood Cookery Book*, 1885
- Margaret Pearson, *Cookery Recipes for the People*, 1888
- Cole's Australian Household Guide...comprising the new and enlarged edition of Mrs Beeton's Cookery Book*, 1891
- Margaret Pearson, *Australian Cookery*, 1892
- Mrs. L. Rawson, *The Antipodean Cookery Book and Kitchen Companion*, 1895
- Harriet Wicken, *Useful Recipes*, 1895
- Hannah Maclurcan, *Mrs. Maclurcan's Cookery Book*, 1898
- Harriet Wicken, *The Kingswood Cookery Book*, 1898
- Mrs. F. Routledge, *The Goulbourn Cookery Book*, 1899
- Mrs. F. Aronson, *XXth Century Cooking*, 1900
- Hannah Maclurcan, *The Twentieth Century Cookery Book*, 1901
- Alice Hills, *The Adelaide Cookery Note Book*, 1902\*
- K. McCall, *Four Hundred Tested Recipes*, 1903
- [Anon], *Garden and Field Cooking Recipes*, 1905\*
- A. M. Munro, *Practical Australian Cookery*, 1909
- G. S. White, *The New Idea Cook Book*, 1910
- Lady Victoria Buxton's Girls' Club, *The Kookaburra Cookery Book*, 1911\*
- Racey Schlank (ed), *The Liberal's Cookery Book*, 1912\*
- [Anon], *The Australiasian Cookery Book*, 1913
- Mrs Willie Moffatt, *The Berrambool Recipe Book*, 1915?
- Faulding's Journal, *War Cook Book*, 1917\*
- E. W. Bramble, *Patriotic Cookery Book*, 1918
- [Anon], *The Golden Cookery Book*, 1919

[Anon], *Your Store's Book of Cookery*, 1919\*

[Anon], *Aunt Susan's Toothsome Recipes*, 1920\*

[Chalmers Church Friendship Club], *South Australian Presbyterian Cookery Book*, 1924

This is not a random sample. Assuming that (South) Australian writers were more likely to be influenced by the well-promoted local olive industry, I included all available recipe books authored by South Australians or published in South Australia (marked above with an \*) for the period. Given this, the selection should be positively biased towards more and a broader range of recipes that included local products, including olive oil. These cookbooks include approximately 8000 recipes, many repeated or with minor variations, over all categories of food.

This survey reveals that olive or 'salad' oil were used almost exclusively for dressing salads and for frying fish. Apart from these uses, just two recipes specified olive oil: "a dessertspoonful of olive oil or butter" in a recipe for Savoury Pie<sup>6</sup> and in an exotic variation to Australia's preferred meat:

Baked Mutton Chops ...the chops may be allowed to lie in a marinade for 2 or 3 hours. Make the marinade by mixing 2 tablespoonfuls of olive oil, 2 tablespoonfuls of vinegar, 2 bay leaves, a few herbs, a blade of mace, a sliced onion and pepper<sup>7</sup>

Until domestic refrigeration became common, fresh fish was a relatively uncommon food. Tinned fish was the more usual substitute and fresh fish was likely to be fried and smothered in rich sauces to mask any 'off' flavour. As early as 1895 Mrs Lance Rawson advised that "fish should always be fried in olive oil in preference to dripping" and she included a recipe for Tartare Sauce that included "half a small bottle of good olive oil".<sup>8</sup> Similarly *The Kookaburra Cookery Book*, 1911, maintained that "good salad oil is a most excellent medium for frying fish in, and a squeeze of lemon into the oil is a great improvement."<sup>9</sup> By 1917, however, even the *War Cookery Book* published by Faulding's, an olive oil bottler and distributor, claimed that "many authorities consider that nothing is

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<sup>6</sup> "Garden and Field" *Cooking Recipes and Home Hints*, p.25

<sup>7</sup> *Your Store's Book of Cookery*, p.31

<sup>8</sup> Mrs Lance Rawson, *The Antipodean Cookery Book and Kitchen Companion*, p.16, 31

<sup>9</sup> *The Kookaburra Cookery Book*, p.14

better for frying than well-clarified beef dripping”<sup>10</sup> although this might have been more a response to the wartime shortage of olive oil for such extravagant civilian use. By the 1920s, the preference – although not actual use – for olive oil for frying fish had disappeared from the cookbooks. In 1923 Lily Fowler’s instructional *Cookbook* maintained that “oil is the best and most expensive, but clarified fat answers the purpose almost as well and is much cheaper.”<sup>11</sup> a ‘make-do’ response from the war years that persisted through the Depression and Second World War until at least the 1950s. A year later, the *South Australian Presbyterian Cookery Book* noted that, despite oil being best for frying fish, “lard and clarified dripping are most frequently used”<sup>12</sup>.

References to ‘olive oil’, ‘oil’ or ‘salad oil’ are more common in recipes for salads and salad dressings; in some cases, ‘Lucca’ or ‘Provence’ oil was prescribed.<sup>13</sup> although this might have related more to the quality (what is now known as ‘extra-virgin’) than to the origin of the olive oil. Until the health food fads from the 1920s, however, Australians were averse to salads in general, green salads in particular and exotic additions such as salad dressing. This was based partially on the dominance of boiled vegetables in the food culture, ignorance of the nutritional value of salads, irregular availability of quality ingredients and the prevailing belief that cold food, especially salads, was indigestible and caused flatulence! The addition of dressing with the often distinctive taste and oiliness of olive oil compounded this abhorrence of salads. Several collections therefore defended salads and salad dressing. For example, in 1905, “*Garden and Field*” *Cooking Recipes* insisted that

Salads are among the best and most relishing dishes one can have through the summer, and when taken with oil, very wholesome, provided, of course, that they agree with one’s digestion.

“An old proverb says”, it continued

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<sup>10</sup> *War Cookery Book*, p.8

<sup>11</sup> Lily F. Fowler, *Miss Fowler’s Cookbook*, p.37

<sup>12</sup> *South Australian Presbyterian Cookery Book*, p.7

<sup>13</sup> For examples, Mrs Willie Moffatt, *The Berrambool Recipe Book*, p.88; Mrs Lance Rawson, *The Antipodean Cookery Book*, p.62; *Your Own Store’s Book of Cookery*, p.73–82; Lily Fowler, *Miss Fowler’s Cookbook*, p.93, 107

four persons are needed to make a good salad — a spendthrift to throw in the oil, a miser to drop in the vinegar, a lawyer to administer the seasoning, and a madman to stir the whole together....<sup>14</sup>

Of the salad dressing recipes surveyed, approximately 50% include a version of olive oil: ‘olive oil’ (42%), ‘oil’ (29%) or ‘salad oil’ (29%).

‘Salad oil’ was, or at least purported to be, olive oil and throughout the period the terms were used interchangeably. Adulteration with other vegetable oils, especially cotton-seed and ‘colza’ [rape, canola] oils, was common in imported ‘salad oil’. How pervasive the practice was is impossible to determine. During the ‘Olive Oil Scandal’ of 1906 — in which the Prime Minister Government faced a no confidence motion because of the Premier’s unfortunate comments on the quality of olive oil — the local oil manufacturers attacked not only the Rt Hon Tom Price but also imported ‘salad oil’ because of adulteration with cottonseed oil<sup>15</sup>. Later, in 1910, the Metropolitan County Board conducted an enquiry into the quality of local olive oil; the Inspector of Food and Drugs, Mr L. J. Gatzemeyer found that only one of nine samples of locally bottled ‘olive oil’ was adulterated. However, Gatzemeyer found that all but two of 9 local manufacturers imported and, presumably, mixed imported olive oil of unknown quality with their own product.

The consensus of opinion is against the marketing of imported oil of whatever grade, as South Australian. But it almost the unanimous opinion of merchants and manufacturers that this practice is largely carried on, and is by them denounced as a fraud, At the same time it is insisted upon that as the demand for South Australian oil is far in excess of the supply the deficiency has to be made good somehow.<sup>16</sup>

Gatzemeyer recommended that the Government “fix a standard for ‘salad oil’”.

About the same time, one major olive oil distributor, Faulding’s, warned South Australians against adulterated and imported oils:

Faulding’s Virgin Olive Oil is highly nutritious and mildly laxative. For use with salads it has no compeer, having a bland and pleasant flavour; whilst its delicate aroma at once stamps it as superior to any imported brand....  
We desire to caution the Public against the inferior oils which are sold as Olive

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<sup>14</sup> “Garden and Field” *Cooking Recipes*, p.28

<sup>15</sup> James Martindale, “The Olive Oil Rumpus” in *Our South Australian Past*, Book 1, pp.90–97

<sup>16</sup> *The Adelaide Observer*, December 10, 1910

Oil. Many of them contain Cottonseed, Sesame, and China Oils, which are frequently rancid and should not be permitted to be vended.<sup>17</sup>

The genuine olive oil content of salad oil was suspect and, with inappropriate bottling and poor storage, the chances of rancidity were high; little wonder, then, that Victorian and Edwardian housewives, if they dressed their salads at all, drowned the ‘oil’ in vinegar<sup>18</sup> The one major advantage of ‘salad oil’ was that, by comparison with genuine olive oil, it could be bought from local grocery stores in conveniently small bottles that, incidentally, had mostly been imported from the United Kingdom. ‘Salad oil’ was the industrialised expression of olive oil<sup>19</sup>.

Whatever the quality of their olive oil, its taste would have been familiar to only few South Australians. To most it was an acquired taste. According to *The Renmark Pioneer* in 1895, “the taste for [olive oil] should be cultivated as it has been for olives, oysters and many other foods.”<sup>20</sup> And in 1910 ‘Agricola’ advised that “as few people care to take olive oil alone at first, a good plan is to pour it freely over tomatoes, lettuce, French beans and mixed salads”<sup>21</sup>. More often than not, consumption of oil was vindicated by its reputed dietary and health benefits; as a medicine it was not supposed to be appetizing.

Descriptions of the taste of South Australian olive oil emphasised its sweetness, or, from about the turn of the nineteenth century, its blandness, certainly not the astringency, olive fruitiness or peppery flavour now prized in extra virgin olive oil. In 1886 Samuel Davenport asserted that “no oil that has ever been sent into the market surpasses in quality, lucidity and creamy delicateness of the most delicious flavor the oil that is now produced on the Adelaide Plains”<sup>22</sup>, equating quality with creaminess and delicacy. Given the national aversion for things savoury, oils with subtle rather than full flavour were likely to have been more successful in the market — in fact more like the blends of olive and refined, tasteless oils sold as ‘salad oil’.

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<sup>17</sup> Faulding’s Virgin Olive Oil, leaflet, nd 1900?

<sup>18</sup> Grace Matthaiei, ‘Why did the Victorians Keep Off the Grass’, *The Epicurean*, February/March 1979.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Simons, *One continuous picnic, a history of eating in Australia*, 1982,

<sup>20</sup> *Renmark Pioneer*, June 1 1895

<sup>21</sup> *The Observer*, September 24, 1910

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Davenport, “The Olive in South Australia” in J.F. Conigrave, *South Australia: a Sketch of its History and Resources...*, 1886, p.101

The recipes surveyed reflect this distaste for olive oil, firstly by offering methods that disguised the taste of the oil and secondly by substituting alternatives for olive oil. In 1895 *The Antipodean Cookery Book* asked

How many people refuse salad dressing because of the salad oil which flavours it. This is not right; the oil should not be perceptible, though there it should be, so incorporated that there is no oily flavour at all.<sup>23</sup>

More usually, the authors suggested more palatable alternatives such as cream or condensed milk or even plain milk and butter. *The Kookaburra Cookery Book* advised that “most of the salads where oil is used may have substituted for it cream, if oil is repugnant; but a good olive oil such as South Australia produces is ideal.”<sup>24</sup> The most common substitute for olive or salad oil was butter and most cookbook authors specified butter especially for “simple”, “easy” or “Australian” salad dressings (generally some form of mayonnaise), rather than olive oil which was reserved for “French Salad”.

Harriet Wicken’s recipes appended to Philip E. Muskett’s *The Art of Living in Australia, together with three hundred Australian cookery recipes...by Mrs H. Wicken* (1893) are indicative of how olive oil was used in the kitchens of nineteenth century Australians. Muskett intended these to exemplify the type of foods, particularly salads, that he advocated for Australians. Of the 298 recipes, 55% contain some form of fat. Of these, butter dominated (64%), followed by lard/dripping/’frying fat’ (21%) and then oil/’salad oil’ (16%). Given Muskett’s advocacy, not surprisingly, salads and salad dressings are over-represented in the collection (15%); excluding salads, the dominance of butter in Mrs Wicken’s cooking is even more pronounced (74%) and the poor position of olive oil more evident (1.5%). For her salads and dressings, the opposite is true. ‘Oil’ — occasionally ‘salad oil’ but never ‘olive oil’ — is used in 70% of the salad recipes that contain some form of fat (75% of the total), butter in 24% and lard in 6%. And whenever oil was specified, so too was vinegar, usually in generous quantities.

Australian cookbook authors, then, were not enthusiastic about the quality, ‘virgin’ olive oil in which local producers took so much pride, even for salad dressings and frying fish. The

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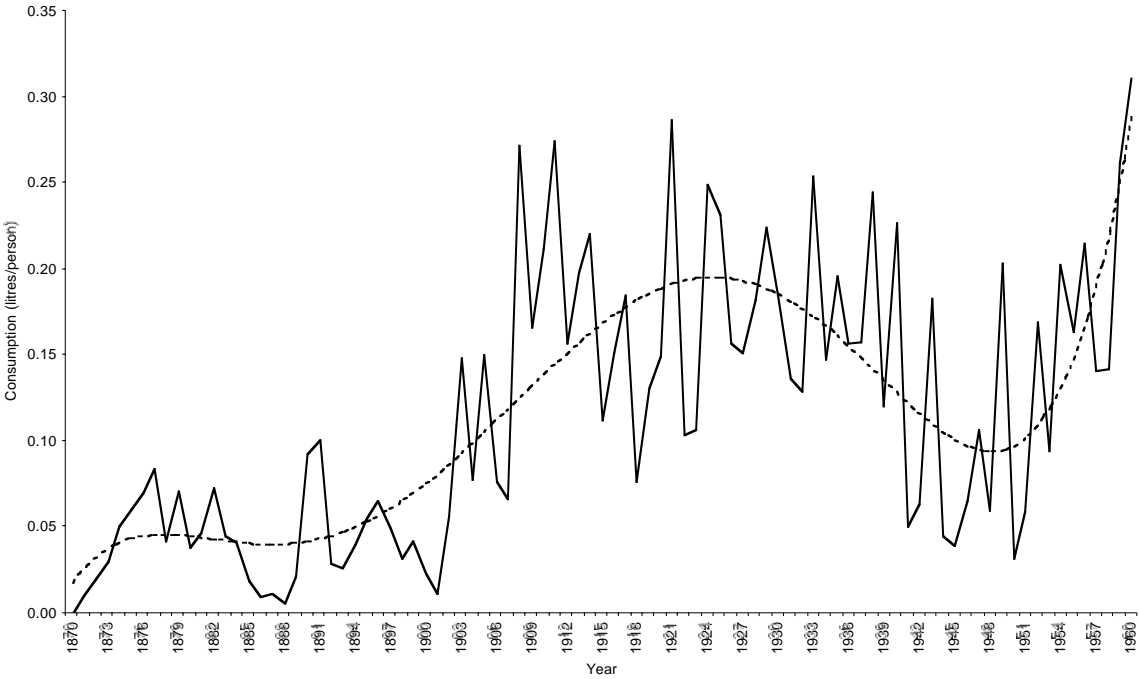
<sup>23</sup> Mrs Lance Rawson, *The Antipodean Cook Book*, 1895 p.47–48

<sup>24</sup> *The Kookaburra Cokkery Book*, 1911, p.61



limited references to olive oil in the cookbooks is supported by our best estimate of olive oil consumption in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

From 1870 to 1960 — the period for which *The Statistical Register* provides reasonably accurate statistics — the average consumption<sup>25</sup> of olive oil in South Australia was 0.12 litres per person per year — perhaps not coincidentally, this is almost exactly the size of a small bottle of Fauldings olive oil. The graph below [Graph 1] plots estimated per capita consumption of olive oil in South Australia from 1870 to 1960; the dashed line represents the trend and, given the short-term fluctuations, provides the clearest illustration of consumption over the period. In the late 1880s, South Australians consumed less than 0.01 litres per person per year; by 1960 this had risen to 0.31 litres (0.49 litres in 1963!); by comparison, according to the most recent estimates (1995), Australians consume approximately 1 litre per person per year.



<sup>25</sup> Per capita consumption was calculated by  

$$\frac{\text{Local production} + \text{Imported oil} - \text{Exported oil}}{\text{Population}}$$

Graph 1: Estimated per capita consumption of olive oil, South Australia, 1877 – 1960

[Source: *Statistical Register*, 1877 – 1960]

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Household consumption would have been higher than this, by a factor of between four and five. These figures, however, include oil used for all purposes, pharmaceutical, industrial, cosmetics — commonly estimated at between a third and a half of total production and imports — as well as culinary and other domestic uses. Therefore we can assume that, over the period, South Australian households used, on average, two or three small bottles of olive oil per year, about a third of a litre.

This reinforces the evidence from the recipe books. Such low rates of consumption would hardly have supported extravagant or widespread use of oil in cooking. Olive oil was a luxury, more likely to be dispensed by the tea-spoon from the medicine chest than drizzled generously in the average South Australian kitchen.

Contemporaries identified a number of factors for this low uptake in locally produced olive oil. Arthur Perkins, the Director of Agriculture and an advocate of olive culture provided the most considered analysis. In 1917 Perkins questioned whether “...the present rate of consumption of olive oil is likely to remain stationary? ...whilst as a race we are probably never likely to rival the Latin races as consumers of olive oil it [is] more than probable that with a great increase in production and a general lowering of local prices, local consumption will increase manifold. ...it is only local scarcity and prevailing high prices which keep it back from the multitude.”<sup>26</sup> According to Perkins, South Australians paid premium prices for local olive oil (compared to imported oil) because of its outstanding purity and quality; he predicted that local demand would support a five- or six-fold increase in production, progressively lower prices, and therefore encourage consumption —the classic “take-off” theory.

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<sup>26</sup> A.J. Perkins, ‘On the scope in South Australia for the extension of olive groves’, *Journal of Agriculture of S.A.*, January 1917, p.456

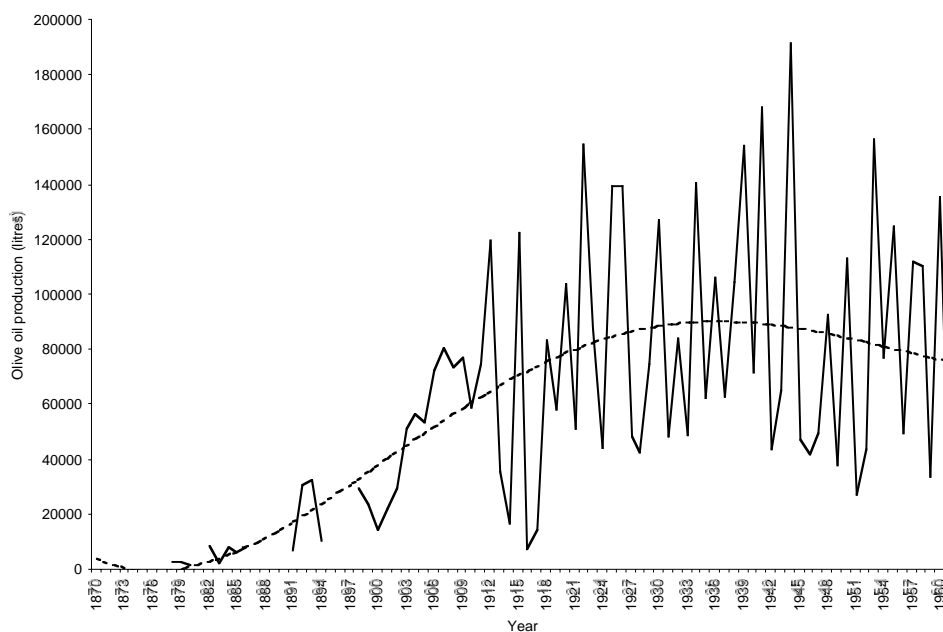
Scarcity certainly contributed to the low rate of consumption. Commentators consistently noted ‘unlimited demand’ for local olive oil; oil producers regularly sold all of their oil soon after it had been pressed, often before the month recommended for ‘racking’. For example, in 1910 the agricultural correspondent of the Adelaide *Observer* wrote that “no difficulty is experienced in disposing of all the South Australian [olive] oil and if it were available a much larger quantity would be easily absorbed<sup>27</sup>.”

The apparent contradiction between these low rates of consumption, as reflected in the limited use of olive oil in the cookbooks, and the scarcity caused by ‘unlimited demand’ is explained by the relatively low volumes of oil produced at the end of the nineteenth century. Such small quantities could almost satisfy the demand for quality olive oil for salad dressings and frying fish, particularly when supplemented by imported ‘salad oil’. The point here is that those involved in the olive industry, such as Perkins, believed that increased production would not only satisfy current demand but encourage greater consumption and this would be reflected in a more general use of olive oil in South Australian’s food.

Production of olive oil in South Australia did, in fact, increase from 1870 until about 1920. The graph below [Graph 2] plots estimated oil production over this period; again the dotted line is the trend. Oil production peaked at approximately 8,500 litres per year in the mid-1920s; the annual variation was significant, as much as 120%, suggesting that local supply was unreliable, a factor that was used to justify importation of European oil.

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<sup>27</sup> ‘Agricola’, ‘Olive Growing, a valuable industry’, *Observer*, September 24 1910



Graph 2: Olive oil production, South Australia, 1870 – 1960

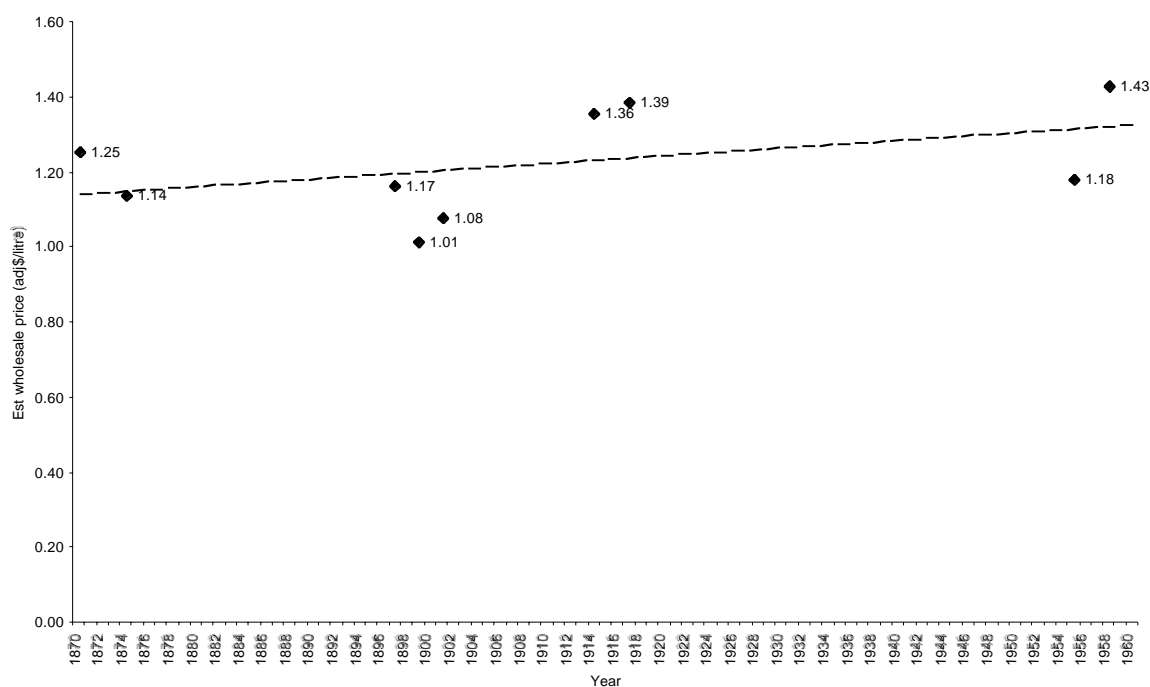
[Source: *Statistical Register*, 1877 – 1960]

While production of local olive oil increased, it continued to attract high prices, prohibitively so for most of the population. Contemporaries often referred to the ‘good’ or ‘substantial’ prices paid for virgin oil although this might well have been intended to encourage prospective olive producers. In 1910 Beaumont predicted that “when the price charged is reduced to something within reason, there is no doubt [olive oil] will come into general use.”<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately there is no reliable data on the retail price of olive oil. So far I have been able to find just one reference to the retail price: a newspaper advertisement for bottles of Faulding’s olive oil at 2/6 in the 1920s, more than \$50 a litre at current prices.

There are, however, occasional references to the wholesale price of locally produced olive oil. For 1870 to 1960, this is graphed below [Graph 3]; again the dotted line is the trend. According to this, the price increased from about \$1.15 in 1870 to \$1.32 in 1960 in adjusted dollars per litre (based on the value of the dollar in 1968). This represents a modest 15%

<sup>28</sup> C.H.Beaumont, “The Olive and its Uses”, paper read to the Blackwood Agricultural Bureau, *The Journal of Agriculture of South Australia*, October 1917, p.277

increase in real terms over 90 years; the variability was also about 15%, remarkably stable given the inconsistency of production.



Graph 3: Indexed wholesale price of olive oil, South Australia, 1870 — 1960

Despite increased production, then, the wholesale price of olive oil did not fall in real terms, as predicted by Perkins, Beaumont and others, and it is likely that the retail price remained as stable and relatively high. Olive oil manufacturers, bottlers and distributors had a direct interest in maintaining high prices and, therefore, high profit margins.

Perkins' and Beaumont's predictions that increased production would lower prices and encourage consumption were evidently unfounded. More general use of olive oil in the cooking of South Australians did not result from the dramatic growth in production from 1890s to the 1920s. The explanation for this is, therefore, more complex than the simple demand-supply model suggested by Perkins. A major factor, already mentioned, is the unfamiliar at best, at worst 'repugnant' flavour of olive oil for nineteenth century South Australians. There was also a sense that olive oil was a 'foreign' taste, acceptable for 'French' salad dressing but little else.

However, judging by the collections of recipes, the most important factor in the reluctance of South Australians to use olive oil, however, was the ready availability of alternatives that were familiar, culturally acceptable, cheaper and, above all, palatable. In the culinary stakes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, olive oil ran a very poor last against two competitive culinary fats: lard/dripping and butter. With the relative abundance of fatty meat in domestic cooking, rendered animal fats such as lard and dripping were the gratuitous by-products of most kitchens; the recipes include lard in all categories of food and in the majority of recipes. Similarly butter was more easily obtained, especially after butter factories replaced farms as the major urban source in the 1920s; and with the introduction of ice-chests, butter could be better stored. Average consumption of butter from 1890 to 1960 was 7.99kg per person per year<sup>29</sup>; this is equivalent to about 7.5 litres of oil per person per year or almost 65 times the consumption of olive oil over the same period. Unlike olive oil, the consumption of butter started from a high level and continued to increase until influenced adversely by margarine in the late 1940s. Against lard in everyday cooking and working class kitchens and butter for special recipes, olive oil could not compete as the preferred culinary fat in South Australian “food culture”.

Far from being ‘indispensible’ olive oil was and remained the exception rather than the rule in the kitchens of the vast majority of South Australians. It was considered to be too difficult to obtain, too expensive, a luxury reserved for the restaurants of the decadent, ‘foreign’ and, finally, barely palatable. The only foods in which contemporary cookbook authors allowed it much prominence — for frying fish and salad dressing — were only occasional in most South Australian households until well into the twentieth century. On the other hand, lard and butter were ubiquitous. Little wonder, then, that, until Elizabeth David taught us otherwise, even the most progressive cooks dispensed with olive oil in their kitchens.

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<sup>29</sup> Statistical Register, 1890–1960