

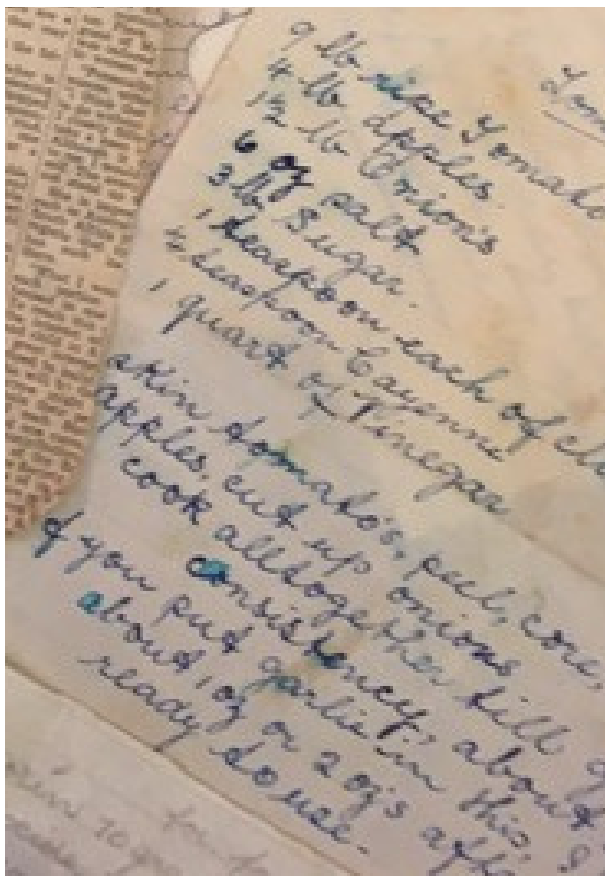
May I help you with your housekeeping?

Susan Faine, December 2020



I have a folder of recipes torn out of Australian women's magazines and newspapers from the '30s and '40s. Some are whole pages, others are single clippings. It's a mixed bag really: recipes, handy hints, all sorts of tips for managing a household in lean times.

It's September 1930, and the Australian housewife is readying her kitchen for the summer routines of bottling and jam and jelly-making. Comprehensive general advice guides the choice of fruit: 'reject squashy and overripe specimens; these may be used at once in puddings and sweets', about the cooking ('do not skim constantly, but wait until the jam or jelly is nearly done, then remove the scum'), the bottling and storing ('cover preserves when they are cold – first with a round of wax paper that exactly covers the jar and fits evenly round the edges, and then with a parchment or gummed label; or if you do not happen to have either, a good substitute is kitchen paper dipped in milk..')



The dos and don'ts are followed by recipes – raspberry jam, strawberry and red-currant jam, black-currant jam, loganberry jelly – and ads for the Fowlers Vacola fruit bottling outfit.

Housewives are reminded of many good uses for the water they've cooked vegetables in, now flavoursome and nutritious. Mrs Cutcliffe of West Hobart has won 7/6- for sharing with her 'sister-housewives' her favourite recipe - Steamed Pudding without Eggs – and a recipe entitled 'Subterranean Chicken' turns out to be a rabbit hotpot. And 'for those who want to serve a "Christmassy" meal but lack the means to buy festive fare', The Herald proposes the early colonial mutton recipe 'Australian Goose', and the economical and easy-to-digest sago plum pudding.(1)

In November 1939 The Herald announced a new weekly column, 'Guide for Good Wives', to help even 'excellent housewives whose house runs on oiled wheels' to run their homes more efficiently. (2) In this rubrique, 'Pastry without Butter', 24 June 1943, gives both savoury and sweet pastry recipes that replace butter with clarified suet, mutton dripping, or lard. 'I can make such excellent butterless pasty and eggless cakes now I have to use my wits', writes columnist Sarah Dunne. (3)

Of course, what Sarah Dunne means is that she now has to be a budget-conscious housewife. I pause to reflect on lockdown in Victoria, and how households have managed this year of shifting financial and social circumstances; the panic-buying and stockpiling, the return to resourcefulness and greater self-sufficiency in response to the day to day restrictions of lockdown.

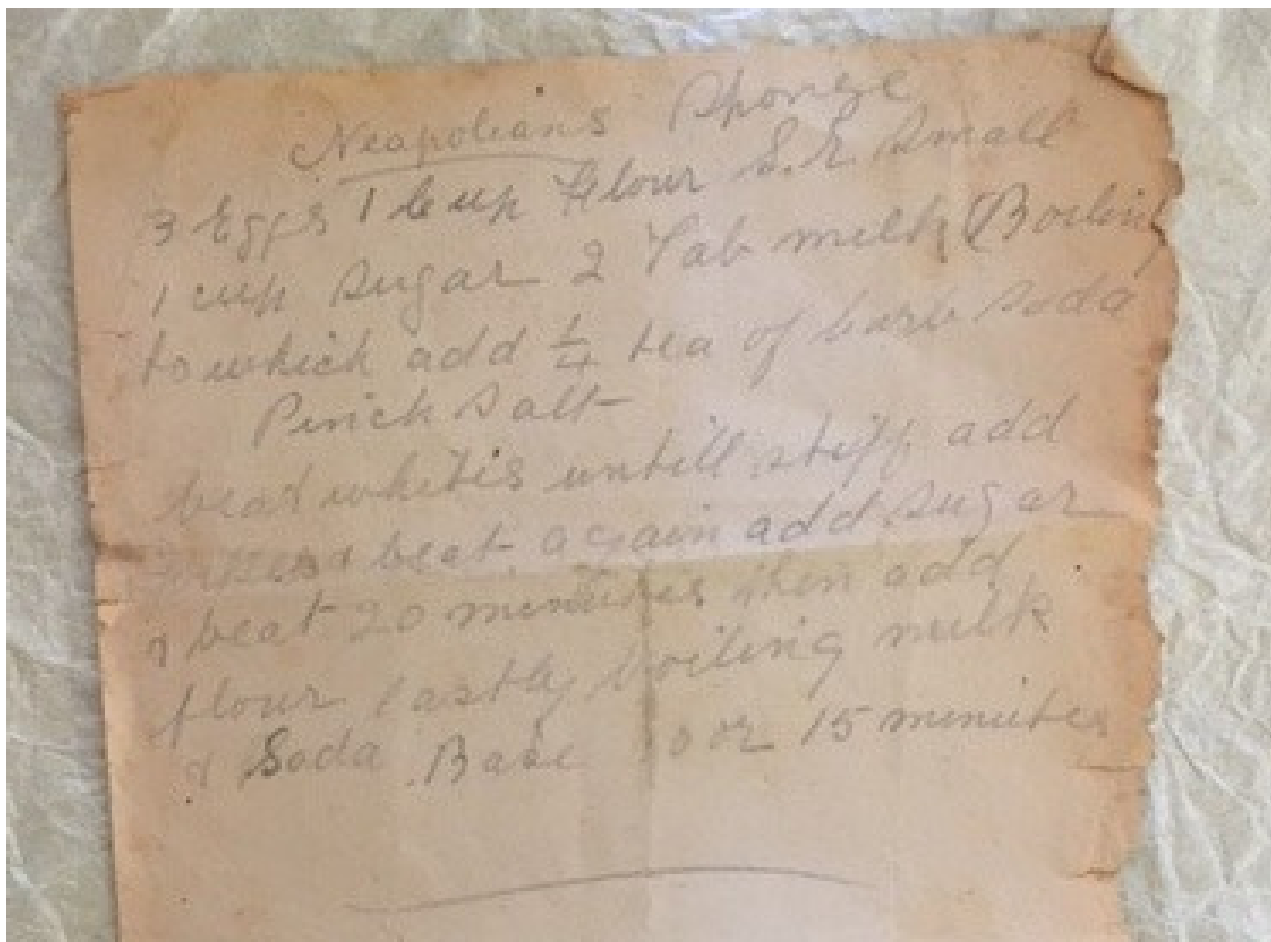
In the folder there are handwritten pages too, written on all kinds of paper in pencil or biro, and even a few older ones in ink; ingredients plus method or just a list of abbreviated ingredients. Some have a woman's name at the top, the 'owner' of the recipe. The paper is brittle and yellowed and stained, some are creased where they were folded, and the writing is smudged, probably from wet hands or bench: no coated pages with art-directed photos here, no acrylic stands for propping or protecting recipe books.

Among them I find tomato chutney with apples in it, 'a good family fruit cake', Rita's cornflake cookies, one egg chocolate cake, mustard steak, mock raspberry jam and ginger beer, the latter providing careful instructions that remind me of the ubiquitous 'Iso-sourdough' starter. 'Feed plant for 7 days with ½ teaspoon of ginger, & ½ teaspoon of sugar. on 8th day put in vessal (sic) adding ½ teaspoon of ginger 3 cups of sugar ... leave for 24 hours strain & bottle the longer it lies the better the brew. Then keep half of sediment & start as before. I have fed the plant today so you do it for another 6 days.'

Since this is the festive season, and the easing of restrictions means people will break bread together, you might like to consider this tip on beating egg whites in 'Pin Money for Housewives': '...try putting them on a flat plate and beating with a table knife. The results are far more satisfactory, and it is very much quicker', writes J.G.B. of Moonee Ponds.

Do let us know how it goes!

And just in case you're curious about the provenance of this collection - a handwritten advice (for a treatment) 'for fowl's pox', stamped D. F. P. Galagher, Chemist, E. Preston, and the letterhead of the Preston Sub-Centre of St John Ambulance Brigade with a handwritten marmalade recipe on the other side, point to a memorable garage sale in Coburg, a long time ago.



Sources:

Title: May I help you with your housekeeping? is borrowed from Sarah Dunne, Guide for Good Wives column, The Herald, 1940s

- (1) Christmas Dinner, (1933, December 19). *The Herald* (Melbourne, Vic. 1861 - 1954), p. 17.
- (2) What Would You Do--? (1939, November 27). *The Herald* (Melbourne, Vic.: 1861 - 1954), p. 13.
- (3) Pastry Without Butter (1943, June 24). *The Herald* (Melbourne, Vic. 1861 - 1954), p. 8.



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My work has been in community, with people and their stories, objects and places, enabling the story owner to speak of their life as they lived it.