

Pavlova



Whence the pavlova? There has long been disagreement between Aussies and Kiwis about the origin of the sweet meringue cake, called the pav after the Russian danseuse, Anna Pavlova, who visited the Antipodes in 1926 and again in 1929. In 1931 she died of pleurisy, aged 49, in Amsterdam.

Recently, the National Library of Australia, in its Trove archive, has been scanning and digitising Australian newspapers from 1803 to 1955 (after which copyright is retained by the newspaper companies). In an inspired move, the NLA allows the converted output, often garbled thanks to dodgy printing, to be corrected by anyone online. It occurred to me to seek the earliest reference to the pavlova cake in their newspaper archive. Although this research is unlikely to resolve the controversy, it might shed light on the evolution of the meringue cake into the pavlova.

Can we agree that a pavlova is an open meringue cake, in which the meringue in the centre is not brittle (by the use of cornflour), and which is decorated with cream and fruit? We could further ask when the passionfruit had become associated with such meringue cakes, and when the name "pavlova" first appeared for these desserts.

There are several early recipes for meringue cakes that are recognisable antecedents of today's pav. The earliest I found was a recipe for "Lemon Meringue Pudding" of 29 July 1893 in the Rockhampton *Capricornian*, and there were a handful of recipes for cakes topped with meringue before 1934.

The *Australian Women's Weekly* of Saturday, 25 August 1934, page 33, published an feature entitled, "Meringue Dishes," by Margaret Shepherd, which includes seven recipes, but nary a mention of the word, "pavlova," which suggests that the name was not in wide use for meringue dishes in mid-1934 Australia.

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Among the seven recipes is one that is significant. It is for an open "Meringue Cake," and introduces passionfruit to the meringue, as well as cornflour (and coffee essence!), but not vinegar (although the feature notes that "About three drops of lemon juice or vinegar whitens the [egg white] mixture, and improves the flavour"):

Six tablespoons castor sugar, 2 egg whites, 1 tablespoon cornflour, coffee essence. Mix castor sugar and cornflour together. Add to the stiffly beaten egg whites gradually, beating all the time, add one teaspoon coffee essence. Beat well. Put into a shallow, well-buttered cake tin, cook 60 minutes in a slow oven. Lift on to a plate and cover just before serving with whipped cream and passionfruit mixed together, or whipped cream flavored with rum.

Three years later the first reference to a "Pavlova Cake Sweet" (were there savoury pavlovas?) appears, in the *Australian Women Weekly* of Saturday, 19 July 1937, page 39S. This recipe is an open cake, and includes both cornflour and vinegar, a modern pavlova:

Whites of 4 eggs, 8 oz. castor sugar, 1 dessertspoon cornflour, 2 teaspoons vinegar, strawberries, or fruit in season, whipped cream, pistachio nuts or chopped walnuts. Stiffly beat whites of eggs. Add sugar gradually and beat well, or until stiff and frothy. Fold sifted cornflour in lightly and add the vinegar. Place mixture into an 8 in. sandwich tin which has been well greased and lightly dredged with cornflour. Bake in slow oven for 1¼ hours. Decorate with whipped cream, strawberries and nuts. Serve as cold summer sweet.

A year later the first "Pavlova cake" recipe with passionfruit (but without cornflour) appears, in the *Perth West Australian* of 11 November 1938. So perhaps the *passionfruit pavlova* comes from Perth after all.