

**Speech at the 50th Anniversary Dinner of the
Canberra Wine and Food Club**

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by Professor Don Aitkin AO

It is a great honour to be asked to speak to you tonight, and a rather undeserved one. Although I have been an office-bearer of this Club in the past, that was getting on for forty years ago. And although I have lived in Canberra four times, and most recently since 1980, I have not visited the Club very much in the past fifteen years. The reason has been that for much of that time I was forced to eat and drink as a part of my role as a Vice-Chancellor. A vice-chancellor needs three essential qualities: a mind quite unclouded by delusions of intellect, an ear sensitive to the subtle distinction between truth and flattery, and an iron stomach. If I can claim at least to possess the last, I have also to admit that eating and drinking for a living rather takes the pleasure out of it.

My task is to set the first fifty years of the Club in the context of the development of our city and our nation. I joined the Club in 1966, and became a Committee member a year later, rising to the exalted position of Foodmaster after a testing time of responsibility for grounds, which were very similar then to those we see now, though greener. Canberra's population was then around 100,000. When the Club was formed in 1953 Canberra was less than half that size. It is now nudging 350,000, if we include Queanbeyan and the 5-acre holdings to the north, east and west of the city. The Club is somewhat special now, but we were even more special then. In 1969 the food writer Anne Marshall visited the Club, having included us in a small survey of what she called 'leading gourmet groups' (there were seven of them), and requested us to supply and test a menu for a book she was compiling. She referred to us in her book (*The Australia and New Zealand Complete Book of Cookery*), which the Club still holds in its Library, as 'the only Wine and Food Club to have its own licensed premises, for members only'. It may remain true, but if it is not, then we should still hold claim to the title of being the oldest Club with its own premises. I remember Anne Marshall well, because I had the responsibility of developing the menu and because I was rather taken by her. Alas, she was much more taken with Rick Bottomley, who was probably then the Cellarmaster. As so often in this Club, the wine must have seemed more important than the food. It made a rather heavy meal, that menu we provided; so were the others offered by similar clubs and societies. Tastes have changed somewhat.

Wine, for those who lived on the south side of Canberra and weren't members of this Club or the Wine Society, came from Harris's grocery in Manuka, which I remember as being roughly where Abels is today. I learned a good deal from the man who ran the grog side of that store, and of course much more when I joined this estimable body. There is a good saying, much used among those who once had a sporting career of some kind, that 'the older we get the better we were'. Something like that must be true of wine connoisseurs. I can remember Edgar Riek, Merv Paterson, Rick Bottomley, Jensen Wong See, Hans Meli, Wilf

Frey, Gordon Bootes and Herb Skinner, to name only a few from that time, pronouncing on the origin, virtues and characteristics of given wines with total confidence though, amazingly, without total agreement.

The truth is that we didn't have a lot of stimulus from outside. There was, in 1969, no Canberra cool climate wine industry. There were no wine columns in the papers and no wine tours. Beer was the overwhelming preference as an alcoholic beverage. There were few restaurants of any quality. Indeed, the Club was responsible for pronouncing on that quality, at the request of Canberra Consumers, in 1967 and again in 1970. I cannot find the 1967 report in my papers, though I was a member of both the Club and the consumers' body at the time. But I do have a priceless copy of the September 1970 report, and I can remember writing a good deal of it. It begins with a swingeing account of poor menus, poor food and poor service. On the other hand, we did advise that for the best restaurants one should be prepared to spend between \$6 and \$9 for a meal of three courses, wine included! Those members with hair my colour will remember the good ones: Bacchus Tavern, the Charcoal Restaurant, the Hotel Canberra, the Lobby. Many of the restaurants were in hotels or motels. The testers were club members and wives (nobody had 'partners' then or, if they did, they were decently discreet about such a lapse). When eight of us went to the Hotel Canberra (Aitkins, Bottomleys, Freys and Skinners, if I remember correctly), we agreed in advance to choose separate entrees and mains, and did so, without fazing the staff. But for dessert most of us had the crepes Suzette, which were superb, and served by the majestic maitre d' (whose name I have now forgotten).

I went to live in Sydney in the 1970s, and became fond of dining out. When I returned to Canberra in 1980, things had changed a great deal. Good Food Guides were now standard, and Leo Schofield was the guru. In the mid 1980s he extended his survey to Canberra and other regional centres, and because I knew him and now lived here I became the local Leo. No one knew that I was there on a spying mission, and there were others who commented as well as the designated tester. The restaurant names from that period will cause a nod or two: Chats, Hill Station, Nobbs, the Charcoal Restaurant (still packing them in), EJs, Peaches, Chez Moustache, Fringe Benefits. From my Sydney experience, I thought that the best here was only a tad less inspiring than the best in Sydney.

These days, however, Sydney is sometimes regarded (by Robert Carrier for one) as the dining-out capital of the world, and Canberra is treated with some disdain. The current issue of *Gourmet Traveller* does mention one or two local restaurants with a certain appreciation but plainly thinks the generality is mediocre. I don't think so, but I would have to admit that my critical antennae have not been sharpened by enough visits to Sydney restaurants that see \$30 for entrees and \$50 for mains as straightforwardly acceptable. There has been a great change in pricing, reflecting the growing gap in our society between the very well paid and the rest.

What is most important, especially in understanding the changing place of this Club in the world of wine and food, has been the huge growth in expertise in our

society. There are simply hundreds of excellent chefs in Australia — I am tempted to say thousands — and the standard of service in restaurants is immeasurably better. The prime cause is training, for which the TAFE colleges of Australia deserve huge credit. Much the same is true in winemaking. The number of wineries in Australia is rising toward 2000, and it is standard practice for winemakers to have received training at Roseworthy or Charles Sturt. The quality, variety and ingenuity of Australian wines have compelled attention in Europe and North America, and we all benefit from that success.

What prompted this revolution? Nearly a quarter of a century of continuous prosperity, from 1950 to 1973, certainly helped. So did widespread and sustained immigration, not limited to Europe. So did the great shift of Australians into education. So did the attraction of married women into the workforce, which gave families more disposable income and also pushed them into eating out and into buying prepared and semi-prepared foods. So did the changes in shopping hours, and the breakdown of conventional working hours, of the sanctity of the Sabbath, and of the traditional notion of the holiday. So did the urge to experiment, to find a new way of doing things, to depart from what was seen as stuffy and complacent and safe. Eating and drinking became a kind of 'high art'. Put all that together, and you attract people who want to grow new kinds of fruits and vegetables, make new kinds of cheese, develop particular kinds of animals for the table, make excellent and distinctive pates, honeys, verjuice, dukkah. You encourage people who want to combine French and Asian elements in their cuisine, or bring Thai or Vietnamese cooking up to a world class. We can and do eat very well in Australia, and pay remarkably little in international terms.

The revolution has extended to architecture, because it has affected the design of living in a fundamental way. Apartments are being built in Sydney, as they exist in Paris, where the kitchen is hardly there: a sink, a microwave, the smallest of cooktops and a dishwasher drawer: the assumption is that the occupants will not have guests in to dinner, but meet them somewhere, and that much of the time they will eat out, for breakfast, lunch (of course) and dinner. Restaurants themselves have become opportunities for designers, and in fact there has been a great improvement in design. Australia was once a country without much pretension to style; that is no longer the case.

The scale of the revolution has been profound. Anne Marshall's 1970 book looked forward, but its great weight was in the past: what our parents' generation thought of as fine dining. Elizabeth David's great books were products of the 1960s, Jane Grigson's of the 1970s. Both authors were hugely influential, and to this day my autographed hardback copy of *French Provincial Cooking* is likely to be consulted if I'm thinking of what to cook. Today, the cooking section of any good bookshop can occupy a substantial wall, but the emphasis now is on speed, low calories, colour and novelty, and ethnic endeavour. Very many good cookbooks are written and produced in Australia. To echo an earlier point, the design and quality of production of some of these books are of world class.

So what purpose does a wine and food club serve in a country where so much that is important in food and wine has changed — not merely changed, but improved out of sight? In the 1950s and 1960s we in the Club were, in some respects, *avant-garde*, a sign of things to come. But, as the Cellarmaster keeps pointing out, it is no longer necessary to belong to the Club to get access to good wine. Nor is it the only place to eat in town. There are around 400 restaurants in Canberra, and fifty or so of them are very good indeed. My answer is almost conventional. We have a common interest in good food and good wine, and in a fellowship that flows from that interest. The five years of my closest association with the Club were very important to me in developing friendships, my understanding of wine and my expertise as a cook. I am sure that there are hundreds of members, present and past, who would want to say something comparable. The aspiration in the kitchen in 2003 is a long way from the aspiration of 1967, and that is perhaps as it should be: the best wine and food club would surely be one excited more by the challenge of the future than by the glories of the past.

I finish, Mr President, on a slightly different note. I have said very little about fun, about humour, about by-play. A lot of that goes on when people are together preparing a meal, and it is one of the most enjoyable aspects of belonging to the Club. I cannot summon up a story from the past that exemplifies exactly what I mean, so I will have to illustrate by analogy. A long time ago the address at just such a dinner here was given by the Hon C. R. (Bert) Kelly, the Liberal member for the wine-growing electorate of Wakefield in South Australia and a former Minister in the Gorton Government. I was responsible for getting him to agree to speak, and I explained to him what the audience was like (a much rowdier mob than this distinguished gathering) and what he might like to talk about. So Bert spoke, and spoke very well. But his speech was almost entirely about the funny things that he had seen in his political career, and not at all about wine or food. At length he realised that he should stop, and he turned to the President to say, “Mr President, I know that you and your members will have been waiting for me to say something about wine, because I am the member for Wakefield. Well, Mr President, I try not to avoid doing that, because you see, my electorate is full of farmers, and they whine about this and they whine about that. I’m just sick of all the whine.” And he bowed and sat down.

And so, Mr President, do I. Thank you for inviting me to speak on such a special occasion.