Fame, Fortune and Agency: Housewives and the Dairy White Wings Bake-Off

ABSTRACT
A full page advertisement in Woman’s Day promoting its publication of the best recipes from the first International Butter White Wings Bake-Off shows in the foreground, placed on a window ledge, a savoury pie, a packet of White Wings flour and an opened block of butter. Open shutters show in the background what looks like Italy’s Amalfi coast (photograph 1963: courtesy White Wings). The first Dairy White Wings Bake-Off, modelled on the Pillsbury Bake-Off in America, gave Australian women fame and recognition, travel and financial reward in exchange for their baking skills. American historian Laura Schapiro describes the Pillsbury Bake-Off as an opportunity for housewives to shine: ‘Here for once was a labor of love that went public and earned its reward in the tangible coin of the realm’ (2004: 39). In its early years the Dairy White Wings Bake-Off claimed to be a significant event for any housewife and ‘tangible proof of the great and growing interest in good food and cooking in Australia’ (Anon 1963: 15) but as the competition grew it became less about baking and more an opportunity to market and promote Australia overseas. This article looks at ten years of the Butter White Wings Bake-Off and in particular the 1967 competition, when, with Galloping Gourmet Graham Kerr as chairman, the competition left baking behind to search for an Australia national cuisine and in so doing offered women a conflicted and confusing version of their role.

KEYWORDS
Pillsbury Bake-Off
White Wings Bake-Off
housewives cooking
Graham Kerr
INTRODUCTION

Even before World War II, Australian women received recognition and financial reward by sharing recipes, cooking and housekeeping tips in magazines and in the women’s pages of daily newspapers. Columnists such as ‘Vesta’ and ‘Vesta Junior’ in The Argus, a Melbourne newspaper, and Ann Maxwell in Woman, a popular magazine that preceded Women’s Day, relied on women’s contributions to fill their pages and maintain lively discussion about cooking and home decorating. In her weekly cooking pages, Ann Maxwell would announce that she intended to publish recipes using, say, apples in a forthcoming issue, and ask her readers to send in their apple recipes. Every published recipe received a small fee of two shillings and sixpence and the best recipe received ten shillings and sixpence. Offering even higher financial rewards were the many cooking competitions that had the dual aim of promoting new food products and finding new recipes. In 1945, a cooking competition for the superior phosphate-raising agent Aerophos attracted many entrants with its prize pool of £1000 (Advertisement 1945: 40).

DAIRY WHITE WINGS BAKE-OFF

Based on America’s Pillsbury Bake-Off competition, which was conceived by Pillsbury Flour
Milling Company in 1949, the Australian Dairy White Wings Bake-Off was, according to its organizers, a significant event for any housewife and ‘tangible proof of the great and growing interest in good food and cooking in Australia’ (Anon 1963: 15). This competition developed into a lavish annual event where cooking became the focus of strategic marketing at local, national and international levels. This article looks at the evolution of the Butter White Wings Bake-Off as a way of investigating food culture and society over the life of the competition.

The Butter White Wings Bake-Off owed its origins to the Pillsbury Bake-Off, which American culinary historian Laura Schapiro describes as ‘arguably one of the most successful promotions in the history of the modern food business’ (Schapiro 2004: 34). This competition was created by the Leo Burnett advertising company and launched by Pillsbury, an American flour company, in 1949. It celebrated and promoted home cooking at a time when women were increasingly using packaged cake mixes, frozen cookie dough and other ‘no work’ cooking based on convenience products. The Bake-Off elevated Pillsbury’s Best Family Flour, ‘the humblest of grocery items, with little to distinguish one bag from the next’, into an esteemed product and, as a measure of the success of this campaign, attracted seven hundred thousand new customers to the product in its inaugural year (Schapiro 2004: 35).

Thousands of American women sent recipes into the organizers and a team of home economists examined each recipe. One hundred home cooks were invited to travel, all expenses paid, to the Waldorf Astoria hotel in New York, and compete in the Bake-Off (34). The competition was a way of selling flour but it also gave women a chance to publically display and receive recognition for their culinary skills:

For the first time ordinary home cooks were invited into a glamorous public forum to display their work, surrounded by reporters and photographers, cheered on by Eleanor Roosevelt, the Duchess of Windsor, Margaret Truman, Art Linkletter and Arthur Godfrey. … Here for once was a labor of love that went public and earned its reward in the tangible coin of the realm (39).

For the American housewives who entered the Pillsbury Bake-Off there were rewards even for those who did not win. America’s Pillsbury winner, Mrs Thurston’s comments after not winning (but making it to the finals) resonate for all housewives. She was disappointed not to be taking home the cheque for her Chocolate Regal Cake but she counted her prizes: ‘My first plane ride, my first range, my first mixer, my first experience winning … [and] the precious feeling of suddenly having fortune smile on me—really and truly so’ (quoted. in Schapiro 2004: 40).
Schapiro adds:

Women like Mrs Thurston knew very well what a labor of love was, for they worked under those auspices every day; but the Bake-Off was delightfully different. Here for once was a labor of love that went public and earned its reward in the tangible coin of the realm (40).

Australian journalist Reese Brown wrote an article in *Woman’s Day* about the 1952 competition from New York, describing it in considerable detail and publishing prize winning recipes.

![Figure 2: Competitor from the 1963 Dairy White Wings Bake-Off (courtesy of White Wings).](image)

Within ten years of this article, Australia had its own version of the competition, run by The Australian Dairy Produce Board and White Wings Limited. The sponsors carried on the same tradition that had been established over fifteen years by the Pillsbury Bake-Off, which they described as ‘a very simple idea … to bring Australian women the recipes from Australia’s best home cooks to make it possible for more Australian women to demonstrate that “Nothin’ says lovin’ than [sic] somethin’ from the oven”’ (Anon 1963: 15). But this simple idea was not the real purpose of the competition.

White Wings, which manufactured cake flour, sponge, instant pudding, sponge pudding fruit cobbler, ice block mixes, White Wings jelly and refrigerated ready-to-bake scones, was formed in 1913 and taken over by Gillespie Holdings Pty Ltd in 1952. The company entered into the Pillsbury partnership in 1961 When White Wings became owned equally by Gillespie Holdings Pty. Ltd. of Sydney and the Pillsbury Company of America (Anon 1965: 18). This was a unique business model at the time as the partnership was equal in financial participation and control. The production volume achieved by White Wings made it a large consumer of dairy produce and it would become an export earner for Australia in
future years (Anon 1965: 18). Linking these two companies in a baking competition made good sense.

FIRST YEARS: 1963-1965

In its first years, this was a competition for non-professional women home cooks. Professional chefs, bakers and home economists were not allowed to enter. Entry was simple; all an entrant had to do was to submit a recipe in the appropriate category. They did not have to cook for the judges; the baking was done for them and the finished dish submitted to a panel of judges. The competition encouraged the use of Australian products, flour, butter and cheese (Anon 1965: 9).

Bob and Dolly Dyer of Australian television fame were the hosts for the final of the first Bake-Off in 1963. Nineteen women and one boy, successful at state level, won a trip to Sydney’s Chevron hotel to bake their recipes in front of the panel of judges. The ballroom was converted into a massive kitchen to accommodate the competition. Mrs. Fay Howard, a South Australian housewife and formerly a TV designer who was interested in dressmaking, interior design and home entertaining, won the major prize of £2,500 in cash, a trip to the USA to attend the Pillsbury Bake-Off, flying Qantas, a Metters cooking range, a Kriesler stereogram, a Sunbeam toaster, mixmaster, electric clock, kettle and frypan and along with the other finalists, a four day stay at the ‘magnificent Chevron Hotel’ in Sydney (Fulton 1963: 16).
Women’s Day produced a booklet containing a selection of the recipes: Mrs. Keeney (NSW) had entered a recipe for Spanish Lemon Cake and Mrs. Justins (WA) had entered several recipes, but the one that took the eye of the judges was her Opera House Cake. Margaret Fulton, food editor of Woman’s Day, wrote:

The Butter-White Wings Bake-Off produced an amazing number of new recipe ideas. Many recipes were old recipes with a new twist, which intrigued us into giving them a trial bake. Other recipes were quite new to us. (1963: 15)

The competition continued along these lines for the next few years with television variety show compere Bobby Limb hosting the 1964 competition held in Melbourne at the Southern Cross Hotel on 7 September. Mrs. Bradbury from NSW competed with her variation of an apple tea cake, saying, ‘It’s really just an ordinary tea cake but I use evaporated milk instead of ordinary milk and I top the cake with walnuts and brown sugar’ (Irvine 1964: 13).

THE GALLOPING GOURMETS AND THE SEARCH FOR A GREAT AUSTRALIAN DISH: 1967

In 1967, chef and food writer Graham Kerr and wine writer Len Evans published The Galloping Gourmets (Kerr 1967). The two writers travelled to the recognized centres of fine cuisine to examine dishes and their presentation and to gather menus and contacts who could
help with Kerr’s dream to create a ‘great national cuisine’ for Australia (1967: 7). This book and Kerr’s quest for an Australian dish was closely aligned with the Butter White Wings competition. Kerr took on the role as the competition’s new chairman and a new section for a recipe for the Great Australian Dish was added with an equal prize weight. To win this section, the entrant had to make a main course dish ‘with a unique Australian flavour’ and using distinctive Australian ingredients (Anon 1967: 67). There was also the possibility of a television show about international cooking. This move saw home baking, which had previously dominated Australian cookbooks, taking second place to main course cookery and the emphasis shifted to a nationalistic aim of promoting Australia and Australian produce and cuisine both locally and internationally.

The competition was staged at Roselands Shopping Centre in Sydney where nonstop cooking of ninety recipes over five days took place. The Australian Main Course, Section 1, now dominated the event. Three finalists were selected from each state and their recipes were subsequently judged by visiting celebrity chefs recruited during Graham Kerr’s travels for his book from hotels he visited in the USA, including Hawaii, Britain, Denmark, Switzerland, France, Italy, Austria and Hong Kong. International chefs Lucien Chassignat of France, Antonio Prantera of Italy and Napua Stevens of Hawaii assessed the finalists’ dishes. The home baking section, once the main event, took a backwards step and, as Section 2, was judged by a panel of female Australian home economists.

The Bake-Off ended with a spectacular presentation dinner on 31 October at the Wentworth Hotel in Sydney where the winner of ‘the great Australian dish’, Mrs. Preston of Queensland, won the grand prize of $1000, a Metters range and a Metters washer dryer (with a combined value of $600) and a kangaroo fur coat with her recipe for Black Eyed Beef and Husk Salad. International food expert Mr John Goodman Jones praised ‘the Australian housewives’ ability’ and ingenuity in creating outstanding dishes. He said that ‘several dishes they tested would hold their own on the menus of any of the world’s top hotels and restaurants’ (Anon 1967: 42). He was so impressed by one dish that he announced that he would use it for an informal lunch he was hosting for a group of advertising executives (Anon 1967: 42).

Looking back at the event now, Mrs. Preston took out the main prize and her skill was duly recognized, but other aspects of the event seem at odds with her achievement and also with the changing role of women in the 1960s. For the first time in the life of the event, a recognized male food professional, Graham Kerr, was at its helm and the home economists,
who had judged the competition since its start, were in a secondary position to the group of international chefs who judged the Australian Dish section. Baking, a symbol of ‘lovin’’ (Anon 1963: 15) through the art of home cooking, was quietly demoted and the art of entertaining was elevated.

For the week leading up to the main event, Roselands Shopping Centre enticed women into the Centre with a Bonanza Bargain Week featuring an international food-themed fashion parade in which a glamorous model portrayed a woman winning the heart of her man – in this case a handsome Indian prince – by making a curry mix. Her Indian prince ‘promised her a casket of jewels’ (47). The shopping centre hosted a day-long Bake-In aimed at food industry professionals at the same time. A Miss Bake-Off section was also added to the event. Miss Bake-Off was a girl with a flair for entertaining and cooking, but she also had to be pretty. To be part of the competition entrants had to send in a photograph, entertaining ideas and a dinner menu.

In the same spirit as its origins and initial intent in 1963, ‘nothing says lovin’ like something from the oven’ (Anon 1963: 15), this was a successful marketing and public relations event. By 1967 and with Kerr at its helm, the Bake-Off had picked up many high profile sponsors along the way and was now a marketing event for Qantas, Sydney’s Wentworth Hotel, Roselands Shopping Centre and a range of other sponsors who all received national and international publicity through the event. However, by the late 1960s, the Dairy Butter Bake-Off had become a confused event in terms of women’s changing roles in the home and kitchen, mixing cooking and baking skills with fashion, beauty and promotion of women’s hosting skills in the home.

The nationalistic aims of the competition should not be overlooked. The Great Australian Dish, the main section for the event in this year, reflected the competition’s chairman, Graham Kerr’s desire to acknowledge local ingredients and give Australian cuisine international status: ‘Since it was announced nearly four months ago, it has become a challenge to Australians – old and new, of all ages, and of both sexes – to establish Australia’s own individual cuisine on the menus of the world’s leading restaurants’ (Anon 1967: 42).

By 1968, the competition was bigger and better with even more new categories introduced, an increased prize pool and visiting judges from Ireland and Italy. A record number of entries were received and five major categories were announced ‘to allow the widest range of entrants in all age groups’ (Advertisement 1968: 12). That year the working
woman was acknowledged and a Busy Lady section was added to allow for the use of packet mixes, refrigerated dough products or White Wings convenience products and butter. Miss Bake-Off was now the Bake-Off Princess, and the title was won by Mrs. Helen Maria Junker. Perhaps the biggest surprise for this year was the winning recipe. The Grand Champion, Mrs. A. McQuitty from Tasmania, won $4000 cash plus a section prize of $750 and a $300 Metters range for her recipe for Peach Kuchen using a packet of White Wings Butter Cake mix and a can of sliced peaches (Anon 1968: 88).

By 1969, the organizers announced that the Bake-Off reflected a world-wide upsurge in the interest in cooking. It now catered for men who liked to cook. Mr, Ron Francis, the general manager of White-Wings, announced, ‘[C]ooking is emerging as a status symbol and is becoming interesting to the man of the house as well as the wife’ (Anon 1969: 83). A men’s-only section was added to the Main Course section list.

By this time, the Bake-Off was also addressing new export opportunities for Australia. The Dairy Board was increasingly prominent in South-East Asia and actively promoting milk consumption there. It had partnered with local businesses in Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines and was producing condensed and evaporated milk from powdered milk exported from Australia. The Dairy Board also sponsored a weekly cooking program in Hong Kong. In 1969, all recipes had to include butter. In a subtle but effective marketing move, judges for the main section were head chefs from the Intercontinental Hotel group located through the Pacific and Asia, a strategic cross-promotional choice.

Inspired by the Pillsbury Bake-Off’s tradition of incorporating the 100 best recipes each year into a book, the organizers that year were encouraged to produce a book of winning recipes. *Best of the Bake-Off Recipes* was compiled with recipes ‘from the finalists and prize winners of over one hundred thousand recipes submitted to all the Butter-White Wings Bake-Offs’ (Wilson 1969: foreword). Although the entrants’ names are not listed with their recipes, the book provides enduring recognition of their skills. In his foreword, Wilson states,

> Although they have been tested by judges of international reputation from Australia, from France, Ireland, Italy and other countries throughout the world, they are not the sophisticated creations of an Escoffier. They owe their origins to the most discerning judges – housewives from all over the country. … This collection is tangible proof of the growing interest in good food and good cooking in Australia and throughout the world. (1969).

In 1970, the Bake-off had only three main sections – the Flour and Butter, Busy Lady and Main Course sections – but it is full of mixed messages, as was that decade as far as women’s
issues were concerned. The main judge was Mr. Clement Freud, a restaurateur, journalist and television personality who was at one time catering advisor to Field Marshall Montgomery and was also a grandson of Sigmund Freud and the executive director of Playboy Clubs International. The competition was to be held at Burwood Westfield Shopping Centre in Sydney (20-23 October) and was compered by Melbourne television celebrity Geraldine Dillon. This year, for the first time, the contestants were removed from the final of competition: the eight finalists would be flown to Sydney to watch their recipes being cooked by a team of professional cooks and home economists and to make television guest appearances with Clement Freud (Anon 1970a: 49). For the first time in the history of the Bake-Off, women did not bake their own recipes for the judges.

The winner was Mrs. F. T. Ryan from Hamilton in Victoria. She told how she had scribbled her recipe on a piece of paper whilst she was waiting for her daughter to come home from school. Her recipe was for a family favourite dessert reserved for special family occasions, ‘Mocca Ratan Barua’, named after her Indian cook who taught her how to spin sugar when she lived in Calcutta. She also stated that her husband, a senior hydrographer with the State Water Supply Commission, laughed at her when he came home and she told him she had entered (Anon 1970b: 106).

CONCLUSION
In its early years, the Butter-White Wings Bake-Off promoted women’s baking skills along with flour and butter, two key ingredients for successful baking. As the success of the competition grew, it attracted sponsorship beyond the confines of the home and the kitchen and its scope changed to embrace the marketing ambitions of these high profile organizations. At the same time, both men and women’s roles in the home were undergoing change. In many ways, the Butter White Wings Bake-Off reflects the confusion and misperceptions that accompanied this period of change and the adjustment of gender roles around the kitchen, cooking and entertaining. It is difficult to draw conclusions from this event because in many ways it provides a running commentary of the development of Australian cuisine over its lifetime. From a gendered point of view, there was much with which to take issue over this event. It is clear that even the organizers were at odds about how women were represented and it appears that the art of home baking was removed from women, first by simplifying it and finally by handing it to professionals. But what is of interest is how cooking – women’s work – was at the epicentre of such an enduring and important marketing event.
REFERENCES

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