

‘New Zealand is Butterland’

INTERPRETING THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF A DAILY SPREAD*



IN *PARADISE REFORGED*, James Belich performs alchemy and transmutes a fat to a protein: butter becomes part of ‘the great New Zealand protein industry’.¹ This essay restores butter to a fat and engages with the history of this central commodity. While anthropologists and sociologists embrace food and eating as fruitful fields of scholarly enquiry, New Zealand historians have had little to say, hence Tony Simpson’s *A Distant Feast: The Origins of New Zealand’s Cuisine*, a self-confessed ‘attempt to kick-start the process of exploring the origins of New Zealand’s food culture’.² In accounting for the traditional ‘butter loyalty’ of New Zealanders, indicated by our high levels of consumption compared to most other butter-eating nations, I will explore some of the dynamic, highly contextual and often contradictory meanings attached to this commodity from the early years of European settlement through to the mid-twentieth century. Butter production, distribution and consumption patterns provide insights into the workings of interfamilial, social, economic and political relationships throughout New Zealand’s history.

Culinary preferences, and, indeed, particular foodstuffs, often service definitions of national and cultural identity. Jean-Christophe Agnew is wary of attempts to interpret critical moments in the history of nationalism ‘as structurally and symbolically conditioned by consumer goods’. He believes that ‘there is an important historical and theoretical distinction to be drawn between the politicization of commodities and the commodification of politics’.³ These are important concerns, yet most of us eat on a daily basis throughout our lives. For this reason Sidney Mintz argues that tastes and habits in other spheres of consumption ‘do not approach food in significance’.⁴ Carole Counihan echoes Mintz, declaring that food and the act of eating are ‘infinitely meaningful’.⁵ What we choose to eat, how we eat it, and how we feel about these things reveal the ways in which humans ‘mediate their relationships with nature and with one another across cultures and throughout history’.⁶

Mintz emphasizes that the specific nature of consumables cannot fully explain why certain substances are attractive to humans. The ways people use substances gives meaning; context or the social situation is fundamental in assessing the significance of food commodities.⁷ In *Sweetness and Power*, he constructs sugar’s history as one of changing relationships among people, societies and substances, and proposes that the changing consumption of sugar in Britain ‘could serve as an index of a kind for the transformation to modernity’.⁸ In its processed crystalline form, sugar (sucrose) was ‘practically unknown in northern Europe before perhaps 1000 A.D., and only barely known for another century or two’.⁹ Sugar only began to feature as a central dietary

component from 1650 with the growth of West Indian plantation colonies and the trade in African slave labour. The British democratized its consumption by widening its accessibility and affordability. Mintz pays attention to the ways in which they learned to use sugar and integrate it into their diet. As sugar usage changed — from medicine, spice, decorative substance and preservative to a central source of daily calories — meanings for the substance also changed; sugar shifted from being a luxury product, used only by the wealthy, to a dietary necessity for all British consumers.

Butter's history is somewhat different, for humans have always required some form of fat in their daily diet (although butter is not the universally preferred form), and butter was present in Britain from the pre-Roman Iron Age. Its production is much simpler than sugar's and is easily mastered in a domestic setting. Highly perishable, butter (from the Greek *boutyron*, 'cow cheese') is churned from cream, a process of vigorous agitation at the correct temperature (between 12°C and 18°C), causing minute fat globules to unite in a continuous mass. Water is forced out as buttermilk and the butter is further worked with the addition of salt to improve texture and flavour and prevent the onset of rancidity. It was often heavily salted and stored in brine for extended periods. Clarified butter — ghee — is produced by evaporating all moisture, thus further extending butter's shelf-life. The 'strokings', the final, richest milk drawn from a cow, produce the highest-quality butter. Strong cultured butter was churned from cream left to ripen for up to a week, whereas butter churned from fresh pasteurized cream produced a mild 'sweet cream' variety.¹⁰

As the ultimate and original fat, the 'fat of the land', butter belonged to the categories of 'finest', 'pure' and 'natural' and, according to Margaret Visser, 'always seemed magical because of the mystery of its solidification out of milk'. Farmers suspected sorcery when cows produced no milk, or cream failed to churn into butter.¹¹ Butter was also prized for its golden colour, and the excellent flavour it imparted to food was said to be 'matched by no other oil or fat'.¹²

Butter was originally eaten as a culinary 'fringe substance', along with spices, meat and vegetables, to increase the palatability of core complex carbohydrates such as bread and potatoes.¹³ It imparted a smooth texture, carried flavour and, as a concentrated source of calories, increased the satisfying quality of food. Plentiful in medieval summer months, butter was mainly eaten in this way by the poor. Physicians regarded it as best for growing children and elderly men, but 'very unwholesome betwixt those two ages'. It was often rubbed into the skin to relieve growing pains and joint stiffness.¹⁴ More wealthy citizens were suspicious of butter throughout the Middle Ages, believing it formed a fatty layer at the top of the stomach; for this reason it was thought appropriate to consume it only in the morning 'if it be newe made'.¹⁵ Cookbooks for the nobility indicate butter was used as an aperitif with fruit, an enricher in cakes and pastries, a cooking medium, a baste for meat and as a preservative, melted to form a seal over pie fillings. These uses called for only small amounts of butter. It was only from Tudor times, with the gradual emergence of a middle class 'which did not despise butter as a food of the poor', that the wealthy began to eat butter more frequently and in greater quantities.¹⁶

C. Anne Wilson labels the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries 'the golden age of butter in English cookery'.¹⁷ 'Butter was everywhere', melted over most boiled foods, as a main ingredient in puddings and cakes, melted as a sauce at table and herbed or spiced to spread on bread. It was not uncommon to roast a pound of butter, coated in breadcrumbs, sugar and salt, to eat by the slice. It seems likely that the increased consumption of butter paralleled that of sugar, for the widespread availability of sugar launched new types of sweet dishes, and butter, if not a central ingredient in these, was usually served as a sauce to accompany them. The poor still used butter on bread and it continued to be regarded as a basic food in hospital and workhouse diets.¹⁸ With rapid industrialization and urban expansion from the eighteenth century working-class access to dairy products was limited. The widespread availability of cheap sugar displaced the more expensive and perishable butter, with jam often used as an alternative spread on bread.¹⁹

The culinary preferences and traditions that developed in early New Zealand were predominantly British, given the dominance of immigrants from the British working and lower-middle classes. The typical British urban working-class diet of the mid-nineteenth century consisted of potatoes, bread, jam, occasionally bacon and tea with sugar and milk. Those from rural areas enjoyed more diversity, with butter, cheese and meat featuring more frequently, while the middle class consumed large amounts of meat and dairy products and a variety of vegetables and fruit.²⁰ Disregarding unfamiliar indigenous food traditions, these patterns were re-invented on arrival in New Zealand: 'The newcomers took the abundance they found was now possible, and married it to the traditions they had brought with them. This produced a food culture based on their aspiration to rise in the world, and on what they knew of the food habits of those whose status they were pursuing. Within a very short time they had invented a culture based on a wide choice of meats, fruits and vegetables and characterised by plenty and hospitality.'²¹ The social fluidity of colonial life, with the related shortage of domestic servants, served to emphasize the universal value of simple, plain food in abundance over elaborate, time-consuming food preparation. Providing guests and strangers with vast quantities of food and incorporating food into all social gatherings underpinned colonial hospitality. Unknown in British culinary traditions, this form of 'social cooking' was unique to colonial societies.²²

Butter-making and butter-eating traditions immigrated with the British to New Zealand. While most probably did not eat it daily at 'Home', butter was still regarded as a basic and necessary foodstuff, and scarcity enhanced its desirability. Butter was included with salted meat, ship biscuit, rice, flour, oatmeal, dried peas and potatoes, raisins, sugar, coffee and tea in ship rations, but it would have been heavily salted for the journey to New Zealand. In recording his first actions on arriving in Lyttelton in 1853, Henry Sewell noted: 'Got some fresh butter and a loaf of bread and set off . . . to regale ourselves with these almost forgotten luxuries'.²³ Access to fresh primary produce became one measure of a new settlement's successful progress. The availability and quality of basic foodstuffs was frequently commented on in letters and diaries. 'This is the country for living', one labouring man declared in 1875, 'beef, mutton, butter, eggs and everything else that is good'.²⁴

During the first decades of planned settlement, dairying was an important element of settler self-sufficiency and the home economy, rather than a commercial enterprise. Many households had a family cow. With the dairy usually an extension of the kitchen, butter-making was the preserve of women.²⁵ The realities of colonial domesticity and food provisioning saw many women thrust into production tasks of which they had little knowledge or experience. Sharing butter-making wisdom was necessary. 'A lady told me the other day she could not make butter', Jessie Campbell remarked in the 1840s, 'the cream she kept for it always became so sour! She could hardly be persuaded my butter was made from sour cream.'²⁶ Churning could be a 'wearisome business', taking upwards of two hours if the cream was not fresh or at the optimum temperature. More unusual butter-making methods included burying cream wrapped in linen for 24 hours in the garden to separate into butter and buttermilk.²⁷ Jane Maria Richmond, however, found butter-making 'very pleasant work'.²⁸ As a perishable foodstuff, techniques to preserve batches or restore tainted butter were an extension of butter-making knowledge. Methods employed included adding extra salt, placing it in brine, wrapping it in linen or muslin soaked in borax, or greaseproof paper and wet newspaper, and storing it in ice boxes, safes and cool cupboards.

Butter was also symbolic of 'civilization' and its moral principles of 'improvement', 'progress' and racial strength. Many social commentators reflected on ways to enhance the lived realities of the indigenous population, hoping to prevent their predicted extermination in the face of introduced diseases with closer European settlement. The Inspector of Native Schools, James Pope, believed butter consumption would assist Māori 'to become as healthy as the Pakeha'.²⁹ As he noted in his manual for school children: 'It is to be hoped that the time will come when Maoris [sic] will keep cows and use butter and milk, just as Europeans do. In any case, butter is very good for them, and they should eat it whenever they can get it.'³⁰ When tutoring Māori women in domestic rituals, Lady Mary Ann Martin translated her butter-making recipe into Māori, 'Mo Te Hanga Pata'.³¹ As early as 1859 the *Maori Messenger* stressed the careful attention Māori women should pay to their personal cleanliness if they were to make good-quality butter.³²

Small farmers who increased their domestic herd bartered excess butter at the local store for essential goods. Shopkeepers then sold it to other settlers and began looking for markets outside towns as farm production exceeded local consumption. Inadequate preservation methods precluded any major expansion; only the development of refrigerated shipping from 1882 secured the economic viability of the export dairy industry. As Britain ceased to be agriculturally self-sufficient, the potential benefits of a new large market for perishable foodstuffs were realized and created 'a whole new reason for New Zealand to exist'.³³ An 1883 dairy inspector's report concluded: 'We have only to make the prime article in butter and cheese, then no power on earth can stay the flow of gold in this direction. The untold enduring wealth of New Zealand lies upon the surface and the cow is the first factor in the way of securing it.'³⁴

Making the 'prime article' demanded a shift from farm to factory production so as to ensure a consistent, high-quality and uniform product, especially as

British consumers often complained about the 'fishy' flavour of blended farm butter.³⁵ Controlling and improving hygiene was of central concern here too: 'The golden rule . . . is to be "clean" — clean in the fullest and minutest sense of the word.'³⁶ Individual entrepreneurs initially established factories, but farmers soon combined resources and took local control of the dairy industry through the co-operative system. With New Zealand's reputation as a high-quality, efficient primary producer at stake, legislation, supervision and advisory services assisted this shift to factory production. A Danish butter expert, Carl W. Sorensen, was appointed as an assistant dairy instructor in 1891. He emphasized the high standards Denmark followed to gain dominance in the British butter market; to compete effectively the 'Fortunate Isles' could not simply rely on the natural advantages of fertile soil and temperate climate.³⁷

The Department of Agriculture was established in 1892, with the Dairy Division a separate branch from 1896. The Dairy Industry Acts of 1892 and 1894 assigned the Department control over farm and factory inspections, factory registration, cool stores and produce grading. Demonstration farms and winter dairy schools to educate farmers about factory operations were also set up.³⁸ Correct techniques for working butter after churning were critical, with *Brett's Colonists' Guide* pointing out that over-working or bad working would spoil even the best butter. The 'sliding plastering movement' was rejected in favour of the 'direct pressure' approach.³⁹ As farmers were paid on the basis of the butterfat content of their milk, a preference for the high-quality-producing Jersey breed developed. This encouraged research into selective breeding to further enhance productivity, for 'every cow must be a good one'.⁴⁰

Factory production and industry expansion redefined dairying as a male occupation as family labour facilitated these developments. Milking and separating remained predominantly women's work, and there were employment opportunities in factories for women in the final production stages of wrapping and packaging. Concerns were soon expressed over the toll such work took, with headlines denouncing the 'sweated labour of so many women and children' on small dairy farms.⁴¹

The promise of 'untold enduring wealth' forced the elimination of not only poor hygienic practices and inefficient production methods, but also the threat posed by margarine. A French food technologist, Hippolyte Mege-Mouriez, invented margarine as a cheap butter substitute for the military and working classes in 1869. Initially manufactured from the oil separated from beef fat (oleo), hydrogenation — a process developed in the first decade of the twentieth century — hardened oils to form solids at room temperature. This led to the production of vegetable-oil based 'hard' margarines.⁴²

The Margarine Act 1895, re-enacted in 1908, regulated its production and sale in New Zealand. The Act prohibited colouring margarine so as to imitate butter (therefore leaving it an unappetising grey), mixing margarine with butter or milk and selling margarine as butter. Margarine was to be labelled clearly as such and manufacturers required an annual licence. New Zealand was not alone in passing restrictive legislation. While Europe obviously encouraged its manufacture, Canada matched New Zealand in severity, while more drawn-out legal battles were fought in the United States.⁴³ One member of the New

Zealand Parliament, John McGregor, drew on overseas debates to oppose the Act, quoting an American senator that legislating against margarine — ‘one of the most brilliant discoveries of the age’ — should be regarded as ‘a libel on civilisation’, depriving people of a ‘wholesome and economic article of food’.⁴⁴ A poem entitled ‘A Rank Deceiver’ suggested margarine was not all it first promised to be:

When to thee my mind returns,
 Oh Oleo, Oleo,
 Regretfully my bosom burns,
 Oleo Margarine,
 Thy comely look had won me quite,
 In thee I sought my heart’s delight;
 Now my fond hope is killed outright,
 Oh Oleo Margarine

Thou it is I am full sure,
 Oh Oleo, Oleo,
 Who art keeping me so poor,
 Oleo Margarine:
 When for thee I have to pay
 All my hard-earned cash away,
 Within my soul I feel dismay,
 Oh, Oleo Margarine.

In thy fair form deception hides,
 Oh Oleo, Oleo,
 In thy false heart no truth abides,
 Oleo Margarine;
 Now that I know thee as thou art,
 I’ll tear thy image from my heart,
 And bid thee from my sight depart,
 Oh Oleo Margarine.⁴⁵

As imitation butter, margarine threatened the dairy industry’s monopoly over the production of essential foodstuffs. The Margarine Act did not prohibit margarine manufacture, but clearly erased all possible associations of the new product with butter.

Butter was sold in New Zealand and abroad under hundreds of brand-names, but the two main ones were ‘Fernleaf’, adopted as the national butter brand in 1925, and ‘Anchor’, chosen as the brand of a factory established in 1886 by Henry Reynolds. Accounts differ as to the reasons behind his choice. Some emphasize its appeal as a symbol of reliability and safe arrival and its practical shape for stamping onto butter blocks.⁴⁶ Eric Warr suggests Reynolds may have had an anchor tattoo on his arm.⁴⁷ Anchor butter soon won prizes at shows and exhibitions and after a series of factory mergers became the brand of the largest dairy co-operative, the New Zealand Cooperative Dairy Company, established

in 1919. Its director, William Goodfellow, founded Empire Dairies in London in 1929, which acquired the sole selling right of the Anchor brand on the British market. Pre-packed butter pats were introduced into Britain in 1924; before then butter was exported in bulk blocks in boxes from which grocers would cut and wrap a lump for the consumer. Butter boxes were a 'special feature' of the New Zealand trade and were 'well-known and popular'.⁴⁸

The rise of the 'Dairy of the Homeland' and the colonial dependence this implied were captured in six promotional films produced for the 'Fernleaf' brand by the Dairy Export Control Board in the 1920s and in one entitled *The Milky Way* by the Government Publicity Office in 1927. The latter traced the butter-making process from farm to factory to port, with evocative imagery of lush green pastures and an ideal climate working in harmony with the factory system of strictest hygiene, expert labour and modern, efficient methods of production and packaging. This served as a tribute to New Zealand skill and British good taste: 'Discerning British housewives recognise New Zealand's butter as one of the finest in the world.'⁴⁹ In this way the safe arrival of high-quality export butter served as an index of New Zealand's rapid progress, with one film stating that 'butter for Britain wrought the change' from 'former wilderness' to 'to-day's development', paying special attention to the transformation of Māori from warriors to co-workers making 'a daily round gathering cream cans!'⁵⁰ As Philippa Mein Smith concludes: 'Civilization of the wilderness and of the indigenous people . . . were the outcome of producing food for British needs'.⁵¹

Through the Primary Products Marketing Department, government promotion of dairy products in the 1930s included personal canvas of retail and wholesale grocers, in-store demonstrations, window and counter display material, posters on buses and delivery vans, editorial publicity, exhibitions and fairs and advertising in trade and women's magazines and newspapers.⁵² 'Fresh green pasturelands and warm summer sunshine' produced butter of superior quality, and New Zealand butter's 'health building properties' were also extolled. As a further endorsement, shop displays declared the produce was 'carried in British ships — manned by British seamen'.⁵³

Tony Simpson argues that the growth of the dairy industry 'reinforced and confirmed the developing nature of the New Zealand diet as it existed until well after the Second World War'. But as Beatriz Borda notes: 'It has often been contended that food preferences depend on what is accessible in the environment and what is possible in the technological and economic circumstances, but . . . the way we eat depends as much on what the culture permits and on what the culture insists is appropriate'.⁵⁴ Belich pushes trading links to the forefront of an overarching 'recolonial' shift from the late nineteenth century, which 'tightened New Zealand's links with its metropolis . . . [and] made modern New Zealand an ideological and economic (though not necessarily a cultural and social) semi-colony of Britain'.⁵⁵ Recolonization promoted New Zealand as a 'Better Britain', a superior immigrant destination 'because it provided ruralism, freedom from urban and industrial pollution, and the virtues of an idealised England. So, possibly, did its food.'⁵⁶ The images promoting New Zealand butter support this, for the dairy industry had to make its products

appear as familiar and attractive as possible to British consumers and challenge Danish, Australian and Irish market dominance.

In accounting for why New Zealanders ate so much butter, the meanings attached to this commodity in the context of imperial trade cannot be overlooked. In its colonial setting butter was not only a basic food staple, prized for its flavour and valued as a rich source of energy, it was also a trading commodity from which handsome profit could be made. New Zealand butter and cheese became gastronomic blocks of gold and domestic consumption was accorded high status. Butter received its most emphatic endorsement as a national icon in a 1960s Dairy Board marketing slogan: 'New Zealand *is* Butterland'.⁵⁷ As indicated in Table 1, the contribution of butter to total New Zealand export earnings steadily increased during the early twentieth century, peaking at just over 30% in 1935.

Table 1: Percentage contribution of butter and dairy products to total New Zealand export earnings⁵⁸

	Butter	Dairy products (total)
1895	2.0	2.4
1900	6.3	8.3
1905	10.4	12.0
1910	8.9	14.9
1915	9.1	18.3
1920	6.6	22.0
1925	18.7	30.1
1930	26.7	42.0
1935	30.2	40.7
1940	25.4	37.4
1945	24.0	37.1
1950	19.6	29.5
1955	19.7	26.4
1960	16.6	24.6
1965	16.1	24.4
1970	10.1	17.3

I am wary, however, of overstating the significance of recolonization for local butter consumption patterns. While Mein Smith states that 'how others see us continues to affect how we see ourselves', it is not clear that New Zealand consumers simply regarded lavish butter-eating as a way of becoming 'Better Britons'.⁵⁹ These marketing campaigns were solely for British audiences. Butter sold itself on the domestic market; it did not need to be promoted here as there was no competition from other butter producers or margarine. Moreover, an abundance of primary produce and its vibrant promotion overseas did not ensure high consumption levels; New Zealanders were not great cheese eaters or milk drinkers during the first decades of the twentieth century, issues which, as we will see, became areas of concern for nutritionists.

I contend that butter possessed a more fundamental attractiveness to humans, enhanced by its versatility as a food commodity. This existed before

the development of modern marketing campaigns. In critiquing the 'emulation' thesis in much historical analysis of consumption patterns, Colin Campbell stresses the importance of taking individuals' primary daily concerns as the focus of attention in understanding their conduct and to avoid confusing consequence with intention. He also points out that some goods are simply desired for their own sake and the satisfactions they bring.⁶⁰ It is helpful to keep these points in mind when assessing the legendary proclivity of many Pakeha for butter.

The cultural worth attached to cooking and baking, and by extension its contribution to internalized definitions of a 'good' woman, contributed to our high levels of butter consumption. Food provisioning has always been a highly gendered activity, with women assuming most of the responsibilities for preparing and serving food across cultures and throughout history. While class served to further differentiate the domestic labour force in Britain, the pioneer realities of life in New Zealand obliged most women to assume responsibility for their own family's food requirements. As New Zealand society became increasingly urbanized, the late nineteenth century witnessed the rise of the Cult of Motherhood and Domesticity. This ideology institutionalized the notion of gendered separate spheres and the scientific management of the home.

The private domestic sphere was an arena in which women as wives, mothers, homemakers and moral guardians were expected to excel and, moreover, would be taught to excel. 'In a country so richly blessed with an abundance of good things', declared Alice Milne of the women's division of Federated Farmers, 'it is of primary importance to the health and happiness of the home that every housewife should learn the art of good cookery'.⁶¹ Compulsory cooking education in primary and secondary schools and a home science degree at the University of Otago were important steps in this direction. These initiatives created new professional opportunities for women as home science instructors, teachers and nutritionists.

The kitchen was upheld as an autonomous feminine space, where women could exert considerable power in making dietary choices for the family. Women traditionally exercised this domestic power in the interests of others. Food selection and preparation were performed according to unwritten cultural rules that reinforced women's subordinate role as servers and carers, and upheld male economic dominance as breadwinners and male food preferences, perhaps best expressed in the phrase 'food fit for a man'.⁶² This privileged familiar and conservative eating, for 'if the housewife ventures into culinary territory that is unknown to her mate, there may be domestic disharmony'.⁶³ Gendered 'entitlements' to food, in terms of quantity and kinds of food, also informed preparation and consumption patterns: 'Our high priestess [of the kitchen] need not be a university graduate to observe that her adolescent son requires more than his father, and that her own waistline expands if she keeps pace with the appetite of her husband, or if she is too fond of sweets, cakes and butter'.⁶⁴ The belief that good cooking contributed to the 'happiness of the home' indicates food provisioning demanded an emotional investment on the part of women; meal times were central to the maintenance and reproduction of family relationships, underpinned by the association between food and love.

Joan Jacobs Brumberg's historical analysis of anorexia nervosa is testimony to the cultural power of food refusal in this context.⁶⁵

Baking was an important dimension of colonial hospitality, made possible by the wide availability of butter, eggs and milk. 'Keeping the tins full' quickly came to symbolize domestic competency, indicating women had spent their 'leisure' time in an appropriately gendered way. Fairs and social gatherings facilitated public demonstration and recognition of the culinary skills required to produce such creations as light cream sponges and pavlovas. The preparation of everyday plain fare did not enjoy the same prestige. Morning and afternoon teas provided a more subtle social space for the interplay of competitiveness and display, the ultimate compliment being to walk away with an empty plate.⁶⁶ As Somerset noted in his study of a Canterbury farming community during the 1930s: 'In Littledene, baking is an art . . . the farmer breeds a pedigree cow or pig; his wife gets her modicum of expression from her cooking'.⁶⁷ The number of baking recipes in the ubiquitous *Edmonds Cookery Book* increased from 34 in 1908 to 137 in 1955, while cookbooks published in the first half of the twentieth century devoted substantial sections to cake, biscuit and pudding recipes.⁶⁸

Women's responsibility for family feeding and the related emphasis on instruction enjoyed enhanced cultural power under the influence of nutritional science. As Muriel Bell, appointed nutritionist to the Department of Health in 1940, declared in the introduction to *New Zealand 'Truth's' Cookery Book*: the 'proper selection of food' determines the 'progress of mankind', and 'the task assigned to the housewife is no menial occupation. She sits on the box-seat — it is for her to shape the future.'⁶⁹ The 'proper selection of food' demanded sound knowledge of both dietary principles and the practice of economical and efficient food provisioning. Cookbooks began to include nutritional information in the recognition that 'this is skilled work and [the housewife] must have knowledge for the job . . . a good recipe book will help . . . but recipes are not enough'.⁷⁰

In his work on the history of the American diet, Harvey Levenstein characterizes the breakdown of foods into fats, carbohydrates and protein and their respective caloric values in the second half of the nineteenth century as the 'new' nutrition; the discovery of vitamins between 1912 and 1930 as a 'newer' nutrition; and the recognition of the contribution of diet to increasing rates of obesity and diseases of affluence in the developed world as a 'negative' nutrition.⁷¹ In New Zealand, butter held a prominent place within each of these nutritional epochs. The 'newer nutrition' reinforced butter's central role in the New Zealand diet, now recognized not only for its calorific value, but also as a useful source of vitamins A and D. In this respect New Zealanders were advantaged, for the butter produced from cows fed on grass year-round contained a high vitamin content. The Department of Health endorsed this positive image, advising that 'butter is superior to and cannot be wholly replaced by other fats which form part of the dietary . . . the average consumption of butter should be approximately one pound per week for each individual as a fairly liberal estimate'.⁷²

When the major diseases of nutritional deficiency were identified, only

goitre was of serious concern in New Zealand and iodized salt was introduced as the remedy. The focus shifted during the 1940s, with nutritionists advising people to limit rather than increase their intake of particular foods. This was also known as 'hidden hunger', where poor food choice displaced more nutritious foods.⁷³ Partiality for baking and its intrinsic role in social rituals were singled out, with New Zealand's high butter intake indicative of the 'sin of so many in between cakes and biscuits', the result of 'lopsided hospitality': 'Our progress in the knowledge of food has had a bad partnership in the social customs with which our food habits are inextricably bound; food is served at all social functions, and in New Zealand, on all occasions when guests arrive, with the result that our pride in artistic presentation of food on these occasions has led to elaborate preparation of food with little if any relation to our needs or to their food values.'⁷⁴

As a collective entity, New Zealand dairy produce symbolized to the world all that was good about the 'Better Britain', yet this indiscriminate praise was slowly redefined in nutritional circles as scientists isolated the specific properties of each food. There was concern among nutritionists and dieticians that a popular misconception of butter as a suitable milk substitute endangered the health of children. Milk contained essential calcium and protein; in providing only fat and vitamins 'cream and butter come a very bad last in supplying the variety of substances for growth'.⁷⁵ In *Good Nutrition: Principles and Menus*, Elizabeth Gregory and Elizabeth Wilson maintained that New Zealand's reputation as the world's highest consumers of dairy products derived principally from butter consumption statistics. Their growth rate experiments on rats fed different combinations of dairy products confirmed 'that we were not getting the best value for the money we were spending on milk and dairy products'.⁷⁶

New Zealand adopted the standards of the 1935 League of Nations Technical Commission's Recommendations for Optimum Nutrition, which classified milk as an essential protective food and butter as a supplementary energy food. Modifications were deemed necessary, for while the report 'appears to give us leave to omit the butter', such a change 'would certainly not meet with the approval of New Zealanders', who were estimated to consume one and a half times the League's recommended two ounces of butter daily.⁷⁷

In constructing an image of milk as 'an imperial icon of health and racial strength', Mein Smith locates this commodity within a narrative of New Zealand's pre-eminence in maternal and child welfare, and an economic dependency on the British market through the trade in dairy produce.⁷⁸ Nutritionists and health professionals promoted milk as 'our best single food', initially for infants, then as a 'body builder' for growing children through the introduction of the milk in schools scheme in 1937. New Zealanders had to be encouraged to drink milk in a way that was not required for butter, and while milk was redefined as a dietary staple, professionals dislodged butter from this status.

Civilian rationing in New Zealand, introduced in 1942 to redirect maximum food supplies to the United Kingdom, was seen as 'coming to our aid by compelling us to reduce our sugar, meat and butter intake, but we must see to it that we make the desirable adjustments'.⁷⁹ Butter remained restricted until

1950 and shortages did reduce consumption. ‘Economic recipes’ appeared for cakes without butter, eggs or milk, and ideas for extending and replacing butter were shared in cookbooks, newspapers and magazines. The Women’s Food Value League suggested preparing a ‘butter spread that looks convincing’ from milk, egg, gelatine and cornflour.⁸⁰ Other hints included stirring butter into cold custard or mixing it with beef dripping and lemon juice, while a butter substitute of minced cod fat boiled with milk and left to set was also recommended: ‘I have used this for cakes, biscuits and puddings and guarantee one couldn’t tell the difference.’⁸¹ Hansells also developed an ‘Imitation Butter Food Flavouring’, most likely intended to improve these butter substitutes. Table 2 indicates that after rationing ended, consumption quickly returned to pre-war levels, and New Zealanders continued to consume more butter than other dairy-eating countries.

Table 2: Butter and margarine consumption in selected years per head of population⁸²

		Australia	Canada	Denmark	Holland	NZ	Sweden	UK	USA
Butter (kg)	1938	14.8	14.5	8.3	5.6	19.4	10.9	10.9	7.5
	1950	13.7	10.0	4.8	2.7	16.9	13.6	7.7	4.8
	1955	13.2	9.2	8.6	3.0	19.6	10.5	6.6	4.1
	1960	11.4	11.4	10.8	4.7	19.7	11.0	8.2	3.5
	1965	9.9	8.4	10.0	4.3	19.5	8.7	8.8	2.9
	1970	9.2	7.1	9.1	3.0	17.9	5.8	8.5	2.4
Marg (kg)	1950	3.0	3.1	14.1	17.0	–	11.2	7.6	2.8
	1955	3.5	4.0	19.0	19.2	–	13.7	8.1	3.7
	1960	4.3	4.2	19.1	19.9	–	13.6	6.9	4.3
	1965	4.8	4.0	18.3	19.6	–	16.1	5.5	4.5
	1970	5.2	4.3	17.6	17.7	–	17.6	5.4	5.0

While nutritionists began to voice concerns over New Zealand food traditions, the inherent cultural ideas about food supported the dietary status quo. Dietary staples of any particular food tradition — the ‘cultural superfoods’ — are generally highly resistant to change. In providing stability and continuity, it is precisely these elements that define the tradition.⁸³ Baking and sharing that baking with others were so intrinsic to the identity of women as competent and skilful homemakers, and to the initiation and maintenance of social relationships, that any attempts during this era to redefine these practices were simply ineffectual. As a Scottish immigrant remarked in the 1960s: ‘New Zealand is a practical country. I find the housewives to be most economical. I must admit when I first came here I was amazed at the morning and afternoon teas . . . at home you would be lucky to get a biscuit. It seems to be the New Zealanders’ way of being friendly.’⁸⁴ In 1969 the *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly* issued a 20-page pullout of ‘the best possible recipes . . . which New Zealand women have known and loved for years’ in recognition that keeping the tins full was ‘a first line of defence against uninvited visitors . . . it can mean days or even weeks of peace of mind’. Moreover, it ‘is more like cooking

for fun . . . it's rarely taken for granted and wins most of the compliments and appreciation'.⁸⁵

Subsidy removals in 1967 on butter, flour and bread, three 'basic elements in the average New Zealander's diet', stirred widespread consumer protest, with meetings of Housewives' Associations held in various centres. The *Otago Daily Times* reported that some households used one pound of butter daily and some women believed things would become a 'bit grim', while others felt it would reduce food wastage, having 'frequently' seen rubbish bins outside homes with bread covered in butter.⁸⁶ A rush on butter, but not flour, was reported in Dunedin before the 40% price increase took effect.⁸⁷ Economy methods to extend butter or replace it with dripping resurfaced in food columns.

By the mid-twentieth century butter was firmly entrenched as a dietary staple used daily in most New Zealand homes, and as an export commodity central to the economic well-being of the nation. Butter was symbolic of a country come of age, its citizens living comfortably off the fat of an industry lauded for its unsurpassed efficiency and productivity. While domestic consumption rates have proved noteworthy, the butter-eaters of the Homeland played a central role in providing the essential market on which to build a viable export dairy industry. Self-conscious marketing campaigns building up butter as symbolic of the good life in Better Britain were designed to capture that market, but were not needed in New Zealand.

Consumption levels in New Zealand soon surpassed those in Britain. In many ways, New Zealand democratized butter as Britain democratized sugar. It was cheap, plentiful and able to be used extensively in, or as a complement to, the everyday foods preferred in this country. The versatility of this commodity and, most centrally, the domestic food provisioning of the wives and mothers of 'Butterland' underpinned New Zealand's claim to fame as a nation of great butter-eaters as well as butter producers. With advances in nutritional science, less positive messages regarding dietary fats were articulated, but at mid-century they did not possess sufficient cultural authority to tarnish butter's established reputation.

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NOTES

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