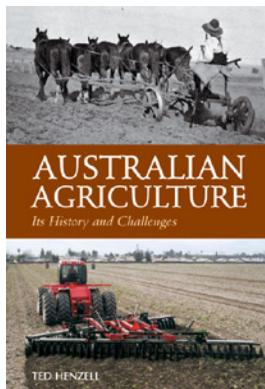


# The history of food hints at its future

Jennifer Marohasy reviews  
*Australian Agriculture: Its  
History and Challenges*

by Ted Henzell  
(CSIRO Publishing, 2007,  
308 pages)



**A**griculture began in Australia with the arrival of the first European settlers in 1788. In the early years, wheat was grown in coastal New South Wales, with the flour produced rationed along with a fixed quantity of beef, sugar and tea. Many early settlers considered fruit and vegetables a health hazard—indeed, a Dr Johnson suggested that cucumber should be well sliced, dressed with pepper and vinegar and then properly thrown out, as it was good for nothing.

Over the last two hundred years much has changed—including not only where and how our food is grown but what we like to eat. This history is detailed, commodity by commodity, in a new book by Ted Henzell with the deceptively bland title *Australian Agriculture: Its History and Challenges*.

Henzell's book contains much of interest for food buffs on the history of different products and their methods of production. It is surprising to learn that it was Chinese migrants who grew most of the vegetables for Sydney at the turn of the twentieth century and that they practised one of the most sustainable organic farming systems in the world—the use of nightsoil (human manure). This perhaps explains why recipe books back then recommended that carrots be boiled for two hours!

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There are also stories for those interested in wine, including material on some of the colourful characters who pioneered wine-making in our hot climate before the advent of mechanical refrigeration. Interestingly, the Forster brothers in Melbourne were using refrigeration to make their lager beer 50 years before South Australian wine producers realised how important refrigeration was for the production of light white wines. Furthermore, fortified wines are remarkably tolerant of hot oxidant conditions during fermentation, which perhaps explains why they accounted for about 85 per cent of Australian wine sales during the 1930s and 1940s.

Henzell puts the modern animal liberation campaign in some context, when he describes just how many cattle died on the early sailing ships on their way to Botany Bay. Nearly all the early introductions were financed by the government, as live importation was such a costly and risky business. Only 227 beasts survived of the 364 boarded in the first 10 years of settlement.

In the chapter on sheep and wool, Henzell explains that with the industrial revolution underpinning the development of the wool industry, there was an excess of mutton. So, in the 1840s, when there was a sharp fall in demand for stocking new stations, about a million head of sheep a year were boiled down for tallow.

While some have suggested that the recent failed wheat crop is a sign of inappropriate intensive European agricultural techniques and climate change, *Australian Agriculture* documents the tremendous increases in wheat yields over the last 100 years—particularly the last 20 years—as a result of innovations such as high-yielding varieties, rotation with canola and improved management with nutrition and diseases.

Henzell also documents the extent to which yield per hectare has increased dramatically in cotton, driven by a significant investment in research and development and the adoption of new genetically modified varieties. In contrast, productivity in the sugar industry has suffered from the banning of organochlorine pesticides and growing the crop as a monoculture. Not only does Henzell illustrate how Australia's fruit and vegetable industries have used quarantine policy to limit competition from imports, but he also shows the extent to which those policies have hampered opportunities to develop export markets.

The most powerful message to draw from Henzell's book is not only that each commodity has a unique history, but that each commodity will only survive as an Australian industry into the twenty-first century if it manages to stay internationally competitive—in particular, through the development and implementation of new and innovative technologies, from the planting of the crop through to the sale of the final product. And considering how recent an addition many 'staple' foods such as tomatoes are to Australian kitchens, we may be eating very different foods in many different ways by the end of this century.

**IPA**