

MARMITE MATTERS: MARMAGEDDON AND COPING WITH DISASTER IN NEW ZEALAND

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Abstract

Among its other devastating impacts, the February 2011 earthquake in the New Zealand city of Christchurch damaged and closed the only factory producing the local variant of Marmite (a dark, salty yeast-extract spread and noble by-product of beer brewing). Stocks of this staple of the New Zealand diet dwindled and then ran out, bringing on the aftershock of 'Marmageddon'. Alongside Vegemite, Marmite is of central culinary and cultural importance to New Zealanders; it is a part of the country's popular cultural fabric ('kiwiana'), a literal consumption of national identity, and a product that is 'world famous in New Zealand' but barely sold anywhere else. This paper discusses the importance of Marmite (as well as Vegemite) in the New Zealand diet and maps the development and conclusion of the Marmageddon crisis. Marmageddon was a big deal; it lasted over a year and was discussed in high politics and in the national media as well as on an everyday level. Marmite-loyal New Zealanders had to make some difficult choices between hoarding supplies, rationing out doses, doing without, or substituting their preferred spread with Vegemite, which is made in Australia.

1 Food and national identity

The acquisition, preparation, and consumption of food by humans is more than just a matter of biological survival; it also involves decisions determined by the use of technological capabilities, nutritional and economic circumstances, and the cultural and symbolic value which people and communities put into food. In addition to providing nutrition, food helps tell us who we are. It is "through such pathways food takes shape as a decisive element of human identity and as one of the most effective means of expressing and communicating that identity" (Montanari, 2006, pp.xi-xii). As a key marker of identity then, food is

extremely affective; its taste on our individual tongues often incites strong emotions, while the communal, commensal experience of such sensations binds people together, not only through space but time as well, as individuals collectively remember past experiences with certain meals and imagine their ancestors having similar experiences. (Di Giovine & Brulotte, 2016, p.1)

Admittedly, the power of belief in endowing a particular food with exalted national properties is a "coercive collective act" (Barthes, 1973, p.59), which limits individual agency in deciding what food should be considered the "national" one in favour of some kind of collective imagining enforced through the media and other

channels of socialization. And there are significant communities within any national population that would hardly ever eat, or who would flat out reject, the food that is supposed to embody the national diet. After all, national populations change and are subject to foreign influences, so diets change along with them. Nonetheless, food does play a central role in constructing and defining collective identities (T. Wilson, 2006, pp.14, 15, 22). The importance of food is particularly acute for members of a community living beyond its borders; this is evident in the plethora of restaurants, pubs, and online and bricks-and-mortar food shops catering to specific immigrant populations, providing them with their desired form of nutrition as well as a sentient connection to the homeland (Lugosi, 2013, p.41).

If “[w]hen we talk about what we eat, we talk about what we are” (Vester, 2015, p.2), then threats posed to what is widely considered to be a “national food” – such as a problem with the supply of ingredients or manufacturing capacity leading to a significant change in recipe, or the food’s absence in supermarkets, pantries, and kitchens – can result in widespread feelings of concern and even a sense of national catastrophe. This paper will discuss (1) the importance of Marmite, which is a yeast extract used primarily as a food spread, as a national food in New Zealand and (2) the public discourse that resulted from its temporary halt in production as a result of the February 2011 Christchurch earthquake, which put Marmite’s sole site of manufacture out of operation from November of that year until March 2013, when normal Marmite supply resumed.

2 Marmite matters

Marmite is a food spread with a salty and savoury taste made from surplus brewing yeast, also known as “top fermentation” or “beer scum” (McAlpine, 2013). Its most common application is in sandwiches or on toast and crackers, usually with butter. It is also used as an ingredient in recipes and even as a drink, although the latter activity is not common practice. In New Zealand, Marmite is made by the Sanitarium Health and Wellbeing Company at one location in Christchurch. Originally a British product which was sold in New Zealand under licence, from the 1930s Marmite began to be experimentally manufactured with locally-sourced ingredients and with an altered recipe, which saw the addition of caramel and sugar as well as a “secret blend of herbs and spices” (“Frequently Asked Questions”, 2019) to produce by the 1940s a discernibly different product in taste, texture, and colour from its British parent (“Dig Deep”, 2019). In fact, New Zealand’s Marmite very closely resembles Vegemite, a food spread also made from yeast extract, which has been made in Australia since the early 1920s. Both spreads are very popular in New Zealand. Already a popular spread by the start of the Second World War, Marmite was distributed to New Zealand soldiers serving overseas during that conflict, just as Vegemite was to their Australian counterparts, and it was promoted as a part of the war effort and a healthy choice for soldiers and civilians alike (“Dig Deep”, 2019; Richardson, 2003, pp.61-62). For good reason, Marmite continues to be a central part of New Zealand soldiers’ ration packs today (Norman, 2006, p.8). While having a high salt content, both Vegemite and Marmite have desirable nutritional properties, being particularly rich in B vitamins, and researchers have confirmed that regular consumption of Vegemite or Marmite can have a positive effect on those who suffer from excessive anxiety and stress (Mikkelsen, Hallam, Stojanovska, & Apostolopoulos, 2018, pp.474-475).

For many reasons, scientists and other scholars have been so fascinated by Marmite and Vegemite that they have included mention of these spreads in works ranging from those of a philosophical nature to hard science. Certainly, tasting either spread for the first time is a conscious experience; it is felt through the senses and

can be something so intense as to exclude external factors. This is perhaps why Marmite and Vegemite have appeared in scholarly discourses on phenomenology, transformative experience, and decision theory. Presumably referring to the British original, Michael Tye writes that

[i]f you don't know what it is like to experience Marmite, you do not know the phenomenal character of the experience of Marmite. And if you do know the phenomenal character of that experience, you know what it is like to taste Marmite. (2009, p.9)

In discussing transformative experience and decision theory, Richard Pettigrew asks, "I have never eaten Vegemite – should I try it?" immediately before another equally important (indeed, life-changing) consideration: "I currently have no children – should I apply to adopt a child?" (2015, p.766). David Lewis comments that

I cannot present to myself in thought a range of alternative possibilities about what it might be like to taste Vegemite. That is because I cannot imagine either what it is like to taste Vegemite, or any alternative way that it might be like but in fact isn't. (1999, p.281)

The above considerations all suggest that eating Marmite or Vegemite is an experience which is unique and can be quite phenomenal, in both senses of the word, and therefore these spreads more easily find a place in such literature than, say, honey or jam would. Writing in an entirely different field, Phil Smith, Grahame Collier, and Hazel Storey proclaim that Vegemite could serve as inspiration for an Australian network of sustainability educators, because, as the "iconic Australian spread used on toast and in cooking, [it] gives a flavour of the challenges and opportunities faced in establishing a national professional development initiative" (2011, p.176). They also trumpeted the spread's nationwide ubiquity, uniqueness, and its "diversity" as properties to be applied in the design, delivery, and evaluation of sustainability education (*ibid.*, pp.178-179).

Moving beyond theoretical ruminations, which admittedly look pretty fragile, scientific writings have given Marmite and Vegemite unexpected technological applications. In addition to confirming that both spreads can conduct electricity, Charles Hamilton, Gursel Alici, and Marc in het Panhuis found that Vegemite and Marmite can be used "to produce 3D structures, such as attractive food designs and edible circuitry, onto bread substrates" (2018, pp.87-88). Vegemite and Marmite have also been successfully used as a key ingredient promoting fermentation in the manufacture of (very cheap) home-brewed beer (Kerr & Schultz, 2017), which, given Marmite's origins as a noble by-product of the beer-making process, allows it to come full circle.

It is true that Marmite and Vegemite are not to everyone's taste. While children in New Zealand and Australia may experience their first doses of them as a salty addition to pureed vegetables in their very first year of life (Richardson, 2003, p.62), those who first try these spreads as adults, such as immigrants and visitors to either country, find it a generally unpalatable experience (Johnston & Longhurst, 2013, p.34; Lupton, 1998, p.26; Rozin & Siegal, 2003, p.63). Unsurprisingly, neither spread has been an enduring hit beyond Antipodean shores. Vegemite did become something of an exotic fad for Americans in the wake of a wave of Australian popular culture imports into the United States in the early 1980s (Men At Work, Crocodile Dundee, and the like), but it never caught on as a permanent fixture in their diet (Contois, 2016, pp.350-354). Mike Morin opined that "the thing about this salty-tasting yeast product is either you love it or hate it," more specifically saying that "if you're from Australia, you love it. If

you're from the U.S., you hate it" (2014). In commenting on the return of the ownership of the Vegemite brand to an Australian company from an American one, Clint Rainey claimed that only the Australians would "ever 'get' Vegemite, a salty spread made from yeast extract that has the consistency of Castrol GTX", also acknowledging that (British) Marmite was "equally vile" (Rainey, 2017). Another American observer described the same British spread as "a foul-smelling, evil-looking yeast extract, which the manufacturer's own research shows that if an infant does not eat it by age three, the adult is unlikely to ever consume it" (Marling, 2006, p.91). Given the smaller international reach of New Zealand Marmite – which primarily appears to be sold abroad to communities of expatriate New Zealanders, most notably those living in Australia – there seems to be very little (if any) specific mention of that spread in places such as North America. However, it is nigh impossible that such judgements as the above would be any different if they concerned New Zealand Marmite. To the uninitiated, all of these spreads are equally vile.

Unsurprisingly, Marmite and Vegemite are quite incompatible with local tastes in Central Europe. Living in Slovakia, the present author has repeatedly offered New Zealand and British Marmite as well as Vegemite to his students and colleagues at several higher education institutions to polite but universally negative reactions. The same outcome with British Marmite has also been recorded by Jan Suk in his work with Czech students and members of the public who were invited to taste that "(in)famous English speciality" (2017, p.60) as a part of an art installation focusing on monstrosity. Offered as food to unsuspecting guests, Suk reports that Marmite contributed to a sensuous experience of being in a "monstrous den" with "people with screwed-up faces rapidly leaving" (*ibid.*, p.61).

2.2 New Zealand's black gold

New Zealand is an advanced and multicultural country, with the majority of the population identifying themselves as European New Zealanders (also known as 'pakeha'), which is commonly understood to mean being of British/Irish settler descent. A sense of ethnic homogeneity – which is based upon a shared history stretching back to the country's colonization by settlers of predominantly British origin in the mid-nineteenth century – and enduring cultural links to Great Britain are particular defining markers of the European New Zealand identity. Indeed, it is not inaccurate to say that European New Zealand folk culture is still "significantly British – different, but still British" (Kuiper, 2007, p.180). While national myths as salient reinforcers of the European New Zealand identity commonly have their origins in Great Britain, they have been adapted to local conditions over time, arguably becoming improvements on the original. Good examples of this process can be found in nationally significant foods such as New Zealand Marmite.

Tangible signifiers of European New Zealand identity are commonly referred to as 'kiwiana', which, in addition to clothing, children's toys, and various knick-knacks, includes beverages and foodstuffs such as meat pies, fish & chips, roast lamb and potatoes, hokey-pokey ice cream (vanilla-flavoured with hard honeycomb toffee chunks), Anzac biscuits (a hard biscuit made of rolled oats and golden syrup), pavlova (a meringue dessert), Weetbix (a whole-grain high-fibre breakfast cereal), Marmite, Lemon & Paeroa soft drink, Watties tomato sauce, and New Zealand beer. Matthew Bannister points out that, like European New Zealand identity itself, "all these signifiers come from somewhere else" and that they "are mass manufactured, commercial products. Kiwiana is basically 'trash' – fast food, cheap clothing, plastic souvenirs, symbolic of a New World, naïve but vigorous working class, rather than the Old World bourgeois coloniser culture" (2012, p.35). Regardless of their lack of aesthetic

(and some would say culinary) value, the food of kiwiana, of which Marmite is an integral part, is an entirely appropriate expression of European New Zealand identity as being undifferentiated and somewhat anti-intellectual (Ryan, 2002, p.958). Furthermore, its popular and sometimes passionate embrace by 'Kiwis' helps serve as proof that European New Zealanders do actually have a culture of their own (Phillips, 2015; J. Wilson, 2016).

Both Marmite and Vegemite are sold in Australia and New Zealand. However, native-born Australians have an overwhelming preference for Vegemite, which is clearly their favourite and "national" spread. As Paul Rozin and Michael Siegal state, "Vegemite may be the best predictor of national identity of any food in the world. That is, if you eat Vegemite, you are almost certainly Australian" (2003, p.63). Deborah Lupton states that Vegemite "has become a symbol of Australian citizenship. Stories are told of how expatriate Australians insist that regular 'care packages' of Vegemite be sent to them so that they are not deprived of their favourite spread" (Lupton, 1998, p.26). One such 'care package' was even delivered to terror suspect, Guantanamo Bay detainee, and Australian David Hicks in his darkest hours; indeed, it appears that Vegemite really is the elementary national spread for Australians, wherever they may be (Skrbis, 2007, p.184). Given its elevated cultural status, and despite the similarity of New Zealand Marmite, there really is nothing that could legitimately replace Vegemite in the Australian market (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010, p.509). Acknowledging Vegemite's importance to Australians, and perhaps going a step few competitors would dare take, the Cadbury confectionary company released a limited-edition Vegemite-flavoured version of its popular Dairy Milk chocolate blocks in May 2015 to give that product "an Australian twist" (Mitchell, 2015). Selling out within three weeks, this innovation pushed the boundaries of Vegemite experimentation a little further (Hickman, 2017).

Challenging Rozin and Siegal's claim that Vegemite is nowhere near as popular in New Zealand as it is in Australia (2003, p.63), anecdotal and observational evidence suggests that many New Zealanders eat Vegemite in preference to Marmite or alternate between both spreads, being 'bi-mites'; the present author is a bi-mite himself. A visit to any New Zealand supermarket or pantry would prove to any sceptic that Vegemite is a popular spread there as well. Indeed, loyalties in New Zealand between Marmite and Vegemite appear to be quite evenly split, with Marmite probably edging out Vegemite overall ("Marmite or Vegemite?" 2017). For New Zealanders, preference for one spread or the other is simply a matter of taste – Marmite is a little less salty and somewhat sweeter than Vegemite – rather than a matter of the spread's national origin. Simply put, Vegemite is as central to the New Zealand diet as Marmite is. Alongside other important national foods – such as Anzac biscuits and pavlova (both of which have been the subject of long-running disputes between Australians and New Zealanders over their provenance) – Vegemite serves as clear evidence of a broader common culture shared with Australia in terms of food as well as media, popular culture, sport, and the movement of people. Australia is not really seen as a 'foreign' country by New Zealanders, and so Vegemite is not considered to be a foreign product.

3 Marmageddon

In late 2010 and 2011, a series of earthquakes hit Christchurch, a city in the South Island of some 350,000 people and the sole location of manufacture for New Zealand Marmite. The most damaging of these was a magnitude 6.3 earthquake of shallow depth on 22 February 2011 which caused 185 deaths and damage to buildings and infrastructure to an extent unseen in that city's history. Sanitarium's Marmite-making

factory was damaged in the earthquake and was eventually forced to close down, halting all production in November 2011. This was not the first disruption to the supply of Marmite – there had been a shortage following a fire at the factory in 1966 – but this was certainly the longest (“Dig Deep”).

An impending Marmite shortage was announced by Sanitarium in March 2012 as it became clear that existing supplies in retail outlets would run out before the resumption of production. As supermarket shelves emptied nationwide, Sanitarium issued its first rationing advice, which included eating Marmite on toasted bread (as it spreads more thinly) and having Marmiteless days (Manhire, 2012). The company also launched the “Don’t Freak” advertising campaign in print, television, and online media, reminding Marmite loyalists of the importance of the spread to their everyday rituals (lest they switch to Vegemite) and presenting the spread as a true expression of New Zealandness (Macleod, 2012). The national importance of the shortage was understated by the involvement in the campaign of Sir Graham Henry, a former coach of the All Blacks rugby team and a hugely respected figure, who gave something like a televised presidential address to the nation (ibid.). Despite the lack of a product to sell, Sanitarium’s campaign ensured brand awareness remained very high as people were constantly reminded of the shortage and of Marmite’s importance. In order to continue protecting its ownership of the Marmite trademark in New Zealand, Sanitarium used legal channels to prevent one importer from selling British Marmite in New Zealand under the same name (Plunkett, 2012). This was despite the differences between British and New Zealand Marmite being very noticeable and the fact that the British spread would pose no real threat to the Marmite market in New Zealand. British Marmite is sold in New Zealand and Australia as *Our Mate* and is really only consumed by British immigrants.

Initially expected to last a few months, the Marmite shortage, promptly dubbed ‘Marmageddon’, ended up lasting over one year. One reason the shortage lasted so long was the realization that Marmite could not be made anywhere else other than in Christchurch, because the desired taste was due to the specific nature of the locally-sourced ingredients. Desperate for a makeshift solution, Sanitarium had tried to make Marmite to New Zealand specifications through an alternative supplier based in South Africa, but the taste and smell of that experiment was deemed too different to be palatable for the New Zealand market (Robinson, 2013).

Marmageddon affected people to various degrees. While the shortage presented a problem for Marmite loyalists, bi-mites switched to Vegemite, and there were plenty of people who did not like either spread. Aware of the almost evenly divided preferences for Marmite and Vegemite, Prime Minister John Key tried to remain non-partisan when discussing Marmageddon; he acknowledged the depletion of his own Marmite supply and the fact that he would “have to go thin” in his usage, but he also admitted that he was a bi-mite himself and could happily eat Vegemite should his Marmite supply run out (“Outcry in New Zealand”, 2012). One place that never actually ran out of Marmite during Marmageddon was New Zealand’s Scott Base research facility in Antarctica; the scientists there had so much Marmite on hand that they were willing to swap their supplies of the “black gold” for highly desired fresh fruit and vegetables (Wright, 2012).

During Marmageddon, a primary site of Marmite-related activity was on Trade Me, which is New Zealand’s largest Internet-based auction website. During the shortage, ordinary-sized jars of Marmite were offered at highly inflated prices, with some of these jars even being sold in various states of consumption. There was sometimes a mercenary aspect to this activity, which one mother seeking Marmite for her autistic child – who required it daily – likened to “farmers that take advantage of a drought and sell on bales of hay at exorbitant prices” (Jones, 2012). However, people in true need of Marmite, such as this mother, were helped by the

public once media attention was brought to their plight. Like the present paper, many online auctions proved to be attempts at humour: there were offers of Marmite which was already spread on toast; Marmite spread on cereal biscuits; and even Marmite artwork, including a print of a woman who was covered in this (now precious) spread and, well, nothing else (“Bucket of Marmite”, 2012). One notable and humorous sale of Marmite through Trade Me was that of a fire-damaged and half-empty jar which had survived an arson attack on a student flat in the town of Palmerston North, and which netted two hundred dollars for its (now homeless) sellers (Galuszka, 2012). There were also many auctions of Marmite jars and pails, and Marmite-related artwork, to raise money for charities; this displayed the generous nature of the New Zealand public in the spirit of pulling together for a good cause (Crayton-Brown, 2012; Parsons, 2012). Perhaps the most notable of these was a 500-gram jar of Marmite, worth a little over seven dollars before the shortage, which raised over one thousand dollars in an online auction for a hospice in the town of Nelson (“Marmite Strikes Gold”, 2013). While people were deprived of their beloved Marmite for some time, the above is all proof that Marmageddon also caused good things to happen.

4 Conclusion

Marmite returned to supermarket shelves on 20 March 2013 to great demand, although some consumers could swear that it somehow tasted “different” in spite of Sanitarium’s assurances it was one and the same product (King, 2013). Perhaps Marmite loyalists’ taste buds had changed in its absence from their diet, and they were a little overwhelmed by being re-acquainted with their old favourite. In any event, given Marmite’s successful return and the resumption of its position as a core component of the New Zealand diet, and marginal favourite in the yeast-spread market, it appears that everything just went back to normal. The “Don’t Freak” marketing campaign and regular media attention on the crisis had helped maintain brand and public awareness by playing on concepts of togetherness and New Zealandness. However, Marmageddon also proved that New Zealanders can actually survive without Marmite. There is, after all, always Vegemite. Unlike Australia, New Zealand is not a ‘one-spread’ country; perhaps in a Vegemite shortage Australians would experience a greater sense of nutritional and national privation than New Zealanders did during Marmageddon.

Most importantly, Marmageddon brought out some positive features within the New Zealand population, such as generosity, inventiveness, and good humour, which all form a part of how New Zealanders like to see themselves. Marmageddon and its conclusion also showed that Marmite still matters in New Zealand. It is a celebration of kiwiana, which involves taking things of foreign origin – such as fish & chips and meat pies from Britain, but also kiwifruit from China – and improving them, making them ‘kiwi’, and giving many New Zealanders a basis for a culture they can call their own.

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