

11 Facts From Down Under About Vegemite



Vegemite has a long history of controversy. Made from the yeast extract left over from breweries, the spread's salty, bitter flavor has been dividing Australians for decades. Whether you're a hater, a devotee, or a Vegemite virgin, these savory facts will give you newfound appreciation for Australia's unofficial foodstuff.

1. IT WAS A WARTIME SUBSTITUTE FOR MARMITE.

The yeast spread that would eventually inspire an Australian staple originated in Europe. In the late 19th century, German scientist Justus Von Liebig invented [Marmite](#) when he discovered that yeast left over from the beer-making process could be made into an edible snack when concentrated and bottled. The Marmite Food Company was [founded in Staffordshire, England in 1902](#), and soon after the product was shipped around the world. Australians took an especially strong liking to the British import. When supplies were [halted by German U-boats](#) attacking merchant ships in World War I, the nation found themselves desperate for a substitute to satisfy their Marmite craving. Australian entrepreneur Fred Walker commissioned a chemist named [Cyril Callister](#) to devise an alternative in 1922. After months of perfecting the recipe in the lab, the dark, yeasty paste later known as Vegemite was born.

2. ITS NAME WAS PICKED OUT OF A HAT ...

To drum up publicity around their new product, The Fred Walker Company launched a nationwide competition to name it ahead of its debut. Hundreds of submissions were collected, and [Walker's daughter](#) pulled the winning entry [out of a hat](#). The coiners of the name "Vegemite" were awarded a £50 prize.

3. ... THEN BRIEFLY CHANGED TO A TERRIBLE PUN.

The spread didn't keep its new moniker for very long. By the time Vegemite hit shelves in June 1923, the war had ended, and Australian's beloved Marmite was available once again. Consumers were hesitant to give an unfamiliar competitor a shot, so Vegemite sales floundered. In an effort to monopolize on Marmite's success, The Fred Walker Company changed the name to a cringeworthy pun in 1928. The newly rebranded "[Parwill](#)" was meant to play off Marmite's name. The updated slogan went: "If Marmite, Parwill!" Unsurprisingly, the new strategy didn't do much to help their image, and the name was eventually switched back.

4. IT GAINED MOMENTUM AS A HEALTH PRODUCT.

By the late 1930s, the brand had finally started to receive some recognition. It was [officially endorsed](#) by the British Medical Association in 1939 and advertisements for it began appearing in the *British Medical Journal*. The product's high concentration of B vitamins and other nutrients helped Vegemite become a staple in soldiers' ration packs during World War II. Posters hung up during wartime bore the [slogan](#): "Vegemite: Keeping fighting men fighting fit." Vegemite's nutritional benefits were also valued by consumers at home; doctors and even baby care experts were recommending the spread as part of a balanced diet (though many current doctors don't recommend giving babies Vegemite).

5. THE STARS OF THE CLASSIC JINGLE REUNITED 50 YEARS LATER.

Vegemite had established itself as a staple of Australian pantries by the 1950s. Its status as a national treasure was further solidified in 1954, when the brand [released an ad campaign](#) that would be remembered for decades. The infectious jingle, titled "Happy Little Vegemites," was a huge success, and the original radio spot led to a television campaign that lasted through the late 1960s.

A few years ago, the company launched an initiative to reunite the original child stars in honor of the ad's 50th anniversary. They tracked down the seven surviving cast members, and in 2007 they sat down for the interview. Trisha Cavanagh (the baton-twirling girl in the video above) told the [Herald Sun](#), "It may be just a commercial, but it will never die ... I think it will be around long after we're gone." The castmates also shared their favorite ways to eat Vegemite, which included "cheese and Vegemite," "crab Vegemite," and "tomato and Vegemite toast."

6. THE FORMULA IS KEPT SECRET.

Like [many iconic food brands](#), Vegemite keeps their exact recipe a fiercely-guarded secret. (According to its website, the ingredients of vegemite haven't changed since Callister's [originally created the spread](#) in the 1920s.) However, some ingredients are less of a secret than others: We know that [seasonings](#) like salt and celery and onion extracts are added to the yeast base to make it more palatable.

7. IT'S AMERICAN-OWNED.

Despite the concoction's Australian roots, the company that owns Vegemite is all-American. Fred Walker collaborated with James L. Kraft to establish [Kraft Walker Cheese Co.](#) around the same time Vegemite was invented. Using the success of his processed cheese business to give Vegemite a boost, Kraft and Walker launched a [new promotion](#) giving away a free jar of the stuff with every purchase from their brand. In 1935, Vegemite was officially sold to Kraft Foods—now [Mondelez](#)—and is still owned by them today.

8. IT WAS THE FIRST ELECTRONICALLY-SCANNED ITEM IN AUSTRALIA.

In 1984, a 66 cent jar of Vegemite became the [first product](#) scanned at checkout in Australia at a Woolworths. The historic item is now on display at the chain's head office in New South Wales.

9. IT'S BANNED FROM SOME AUSTRALIAN JAILS.

In recent decades, Vegemite has been a target of harsh scrutiny for its potentially illicit applications. It was [banned from prisons](#) in the Australian state of Victoria in 2007 to prevent inmates from extracting the yeast to make booze. Officials have also tried [restricting sales](#) of the spread in remote communities where alcoholism is especially prevalent. The concerns are likely blown out of proportion, considering any yeast in Vegemite is dead by the time it reaches the jar and therefore isn't great for making moonshine. At best, the Vegemite might serve as a nutrient for naturally occurring yeast and speed up the fermentation process, but even then most scientists are unconvinced.

10. THERE HAVE BEEN SOME UNUSUAL VARIATIONS.





Vegemite via [Wikimedia Commons](#) // Public Domain

Vegemite's relationship with Kraft has led to a few peculiar products over the years. In the 1990s, they combined the spread with their classic cheese slices to make [Vegemite Singles](#). The mash-up was short-lived, but they revisited the idea in [2009](#) when they combined cheese and Vegemite to create a jarred spread. [Vegemite Cheesybite](#) is one offshoot that can still be found on shelves today.

Vegemite's collaboration with Cadbury was less of a success. In their review of the Vegemite-infused Cadbury Caramello Block released last year, [The Guardian](#) described the aftertaste, saying, "It doesn't resemble the beautiful, tangy, salty gloriousness of Vegemite spread on hot-buttered toast, instead it tastes like licking a plate where Vegemite was smeared, many months ago, then left in the sink to fester."

11. IT'S BEEN USED TO CONDUCT ELECTRICITY.

If you never got around to acquiring a taste for Vegemite, there are other uses for the product that don't involve eating it. [Last year](#), an Australian chemist used Vegemite to complete a circuit and turn on an LED light. Vegemite's high concentration of ions and water make it a surprisingly good conductor (this is the same reason you can power a clock with a [potato](#)). The experiment was part of a larger project looking to make edible medical sensors that gather data inside the body and dissolve when their job is completed. So next time you rag on Vegemite, remember there's a chance it could one day help save your life.