

We've been loving and adoring Vegemite for 100 years

By [Kimberley Price](#)

Posted Wed 25 Oct 2023 at 5:00am, updated Wed 25 Oct 2023 at 5:18am



Vegemite is celebrating its 100th anniversary.

Vegemite, the spread that makes Australians Australian, is celebrating its 100th anniversary.

No matter if you're a Happy Little Vegemite, or love to test the salty sweetness on your foreign friends, the condiment has a place in all our pantries (or fridge if you're one of those) and in our hearts.

For Jamie Callister, Vegemite is in his DNA.

When his father tasked him with restoring the history of his grandfather, Cyril P. Callister, Jamie had no idea the story he would find.

'Everyone knows the product, but no one knows the story'

After Britain's Marmite became unavailable during and after the World War I, businessman and entrepreneur Fred Walker decided Australia needed their own.

Key points:

- Vegemite celebrates its 100th anniversary on October 25
- The spread was invented by Cyril P Callister
- Dr Callister used the leftover brewer's yeast from Carlton United Brewery to create the spread

Food technologist and chemist Dr Callister was brought into the Vegemite factory in 1923 to a rather hostile environment.

"People were basically thinking, 'what can a university smarty pants do that we can't do?'," Jamie said.

"Over the course of the year, through trial and error, he came up with what we know as Vegemite."

The spread is essentially the by-product of beer and was developed through using leftover brewer's yeast from the Carlton United Brewery.

After a nationwide competition to name the product, Mr Walker's daughter pulled the winning name out of a hat.

But it wasn't a fairytale ride for the spread, which now produces 20 million jars every year. There was a lot of anticipation when Vegemite rolled off the production line in 1923, but it fell short on consumers.



Inventor of Vegemite, Dr Cyril P. Callister. (Supplied: Federation University)



andson of the creator of Vegemite, Jamie Callister, with his book about his grandfather's story. (ABC Ballarat: Lexie uniewic)

"Instantly and spectacularly, it was a complete dud," Jamie said.

"But it's just a testament to my grandfather's personality that he wouldn't take no for an answer.

"They (Callister and Walker) had incredible perseverance and integrity and were an incredible partnership.

"You've got the entrepreneur who's ready to have a red-hot Aussie go in Fred Walker and the brains behind it, my grandfather, who was actually a brilliant scientist."

As Dr Callister began experimenting with cheese throughout the 1920s and 30s, he encouraged Mr Walker to go to Chicago and secure the license of processed cheese from James Kraft.

"This gave Vegemite and new lease on life," Jamie said.

"The cheese is an absolute runaway success. Fred had a stroke of genius and said, 'if we can't sell Vegemite, let's give away a small jar with every block of cheese' and the people just loved it."

In a time of austerity, people began having their Vegemite with processed cheese, and a match made in heaven was born.

As the American marketing craze made its way to Australian shores, wild adverts painting Vegemite as a wonder food continued to boost the product's popularity until television crept into households and an iconic jingle was made.

A Happy Little Vegemite forever

Trish Cavanagh was seven years old when she was one of eight selected from the Helen de Paul dance school in 1959 to appear in a television advert for Vegemite.

"We went out to the Pagewood Studios in Sydney, and it was the second week of the school holidays," Ms Cavanagh said.

"There were three ads made that week – the marching one which everyone loves, there was a circus scene, and one they can't find which was made on a playground."

Mrs Cavanagh was the lucky child chosen to dance on top of the Vegemite jar and sit at the kitchen table.

After filming wrapped, her family went and bought a television so they would be able to see the ad in their own home.

"I had no idea how that decision would change my life forever and give me such wonderful opportunities to celebrate many milestones with Vegemite over the years," she said.



There's been many iterations of Vegemite over its 100 years, including a collaboration with Cadbury. (Twitter: Cadbury Australia)



A Vegemite advert from 1923. VEGEMITE, the VEGEMITE device and the VEGEMITE trade dress are trade marks of the Bega Group and used under licence. (Bega Cheese Limited)

"It is such an honour to be part of Vegemite's history.

"I just love my Vegemite, even today."

Now, 64 years after dancing, marching and singing "We're happy little Vegemites" Mrs Cavanagh says the memories are still close to her heart, and she loves reminiscing about the experience.



In 1959, at the age of seven, Trish Cavanagh was a "Happy Little Vegemite" kid. (Supplied: Bega Group.)



Mrs Cavanagh says happiness and Vegemite go hand-in-hand. (Bega Cheese Limited)

"Everywhere I go, someone always introduces me as 'This is Trish, she's the Vegemite girl on top of the jar'," she said.

"There's always a happy story that goes along with that."

"Vegemite has always created happy memories for me. So, to me, happiness and Vegemite go together."

A lifetime of work

For over half of Vegemite's history, Robert Carman has been a part of the team.



Robert Carman has been working at the Vegemite factory for almost 52 years. *(ABC News: Kimberley Price)*

He first stepped into the Port Melbourne Vegemite factory in 1972 after accepting a four-year apprenticeship as a fitter and turner.

"In those days I was selected for this business, and I took that as first offer and been here since," Mr Carman said.

"We had a main workshop where we had over 60 tradesmen and we used to make all the machinery for all the country locations. It was an exciting time."

After completing his apprenticeship, Mr Carman became the workshop foreman before moving into the operations part of the plant as a reliability engineer.

He then took further opportunities as the services foreman and today he is the facility manager.

"It's a great place to work, with great people. Everyone always says it's one big family," he said.

"Iconic is the word for it and 100 years they've been on the market, that's something to talk about."

Mr Carman is also one of the few Vegemite personnel selected for the tasting panel tasked with checking every batch of Vegemite before it hits supermarket shelves.

"You'll get five or six jars over a couple of shifts, and there's a number of questions you've got to go through to make sure they meet all those requirements," he said.

"If they don't, then that product goes on hold."

Mr Carman says consistency is key, and with such a refined taste in Vegemite he encourages people to spread it on lightly.

"I love it," he said.

"It could be Vegemite and tomato or Vegemite and avocado, any way is good.

"The flavour never changes."