

Australian lifestyle

Vegemite turns 100: how the spread changed the way Australia eats, from nostalgia to Noma

Born out of imitation in the 1920s, the pantry staple with a global reputation is also increasingly used in Australian professional kitchens

[Follow our Australia news live blog for latest updates](#)

[Get our morning and afternoon news emails](#), [free app](#) or [daily news podcast](#)



For many Vegemite is a comfort food and a reminder of home, says Matt Gray of Bega Group, which bought the brand from its foreign owners in 2017. Vegemite marks its 100-year anniversary on Wednesday. Photograph: Julian Smith/AAP

Tristan Lutze

Wed 25 Oct 2023 09:29 AEDT

Jamie Callister, the grandson of Vegemite creator Cyril Callister, is one of the millions of Australians who starts the day with a slice of buttery toast licked with a thin swipe of our beloved national spread.

“He was a brilliant scientist,” Callister says of his grandfather, who was recruited by Melbourne-based entrepreneur Fred Walker to develop a homegrown alternative to Marmite using spent brewer’s yeast from the nearby Carlton and United Breweries. “Today marks the 100-year anniversary of the first jar of his creation coming off the production line.”

And while Callister - who wrote a biography of his grandfather this year - and his family are justly proud of Cyril Callister’s legacy, the Vegemite grandchildren say they see the spread’s lasting success as much more than that. “This isn’t our story, it’s Australia’s story.”

For most Australians, a love of Vegemite was imparted at a young age. Elizabeth Hewson, a food writer and author of *Saturday Night Pasta*, remembers the way her grandfather would feed her Vegemite on toast in bed. “Lots of butter, a thoughtful spread and cut into squares,” she says. “I make it that way for my son now too.”

“My first memory of Vegemite was envy,” says recipe creator and bestselling cookbook author Nagi Maehashi of *RecipeTin Eats*, who counts

a slightly warmed Bakers Delight Cheesymite scroll among her favourite foods. “I was born to quite traditional Japanese parents. They would send me to school with these incredible bento boxes and I would just be looking at my friends with their Vegemite sandwiches. That’s all I wanted.”

Matt Gray, general manager of brand marketing and innovation at the Bega Group, which purchased the Vegemite brand from its foreign owners in 2017, says for many the spread is a comfort food and a reminder of home. “The Vegemite brand truly is a national treasure, woven into the fabric of Australia.”



📷 Vintage jars at the Vegemite factory in Melbourne. Photograph: Julian Smith/AAP

As for how he enjoys it, Gray admits his preferred application isn’t the beloved Vegemite, toast and butter combination, but rather a popular home cooking hack: “My favourite way to eat Vegemite is to add it to Bolognese. It’s Australia’s secret ingredient.”

In professional kitchens too, the red and yellow jar is increasingly close at hand. Attica in Melbourne long featured a steamed mini-take on the Cheesymite scroll as part of its Australian-themed degustation, while Canberra’s Corella Bar dispatches thick slices of sourdough with a pre-combined “buttermite” mix.



📷 Vegemite’s Blend 17 was released in 2017 on a limited run, promising a ‘richer, sweeter’ taste and costing twice as much. It was named after one of Cyril Callister’s early versions tested in 1923. Photograph: David Fanner/The Guardian

At Sunda in Melbourne, the signature coil of buttery roti is buddied with a thick mound of Vegemite-spiked curry. Former Sunda head chef Khanh Nguyen admits it was, however, a foreign influence that inspired him to use Vegemite in the dish.

“When I did an internship at Noma at their Sydney pop-up, they made their own version of Vegemite,” Nguyen says. “That gave me the inspiration to season

my curry with it.”

Though indelibly Australian, word is spread further afield by evangelists like Sam, a teacher overseas who responded to a call for Vege-memories on social media. As part of International Week at her school in Cairo, Sam distributes a little Vegemite (“spread onto white bread, of course”) among her students. “Kids talk about it for the rest of the year,” she says, “whether they’re lovers or haters.”

For other ex-pats like Tiah, who now lives in the US, a dab of Vegemite on toast is a powerful reminder of home. “Growing up, every day I got a

nanna-made Vegemite sandwich,” she says. “Now a breakfast spread is the closest thing I have to [remembering] the safe feeling of home.”



■ 4 US embassy staff mark Vegemite Day by tasting spread for the first time - video

Food writer Nazia Hafiz too keeps a supply close at hand to remind her of Australia. “I have it here with me in Berlin,” she says. “It’s nice to have something familiar when you’re far from home.”

As to how her German colleagues have taken to the spread, Hafiz says the reception hasn’t always been immediately positive. “It’s pretty hilarious to watch their faces screwing up, and their reactions of ‘nein danke!’”

Mixed international reviews aside, with over 20m jars sold domestically each year, it seems certain future generations of Australians will continue to acquire the taste.

Most viewed
