

Podcast 68 – Australia's Vegemite

Learn English while learning about daily life in Australia,
with Rob McCormack

Podcast Number 68 – Australia's Vegemite

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Hi,

There are some things which people think of as typically Australian. Our National Museum of Australia in Canberra has created a special exhibition of the things which are thought to be symbols of our country and our way of life. Their list includes Kangaroos and the Sydney Harbour Bridge, which I have talked about in earlier podcasts. See http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/symbols_of_australia/home

In this podcast I would like to talk about another of those symbols – Vegemite. Vegemite is a food and some people would say it is not a very good symbol for a country. But the fact is, most Australians would say this particular food is typically Australian. Some people can't stand the taste of it, but for me, it's unique taste and appearance somehow says something about Australians. It's a part of our culture that we often value the things which are perhaps ordinary and also a little quirky. Vegemite is just like that. It doesn't look great and it doesn't cost much. But it's ours.



Vegemite is a paste which is usually spread onto bread, toast or crackers. It is dark brown in colour and has a very, very strong taste. It is so strong that it must always be used in quite small amounts. It is made from yeast extract and has some other spices added to it. When I was a child, someone told me that vegemite was made by boiling up a dead cow in a gigantic pot for days until there was only just a dark paste left – that paste was Vegemite. Of course it was a joke and I knew at the time that it wasn't true, but it also seemed to make sense to me in a strange sort of way. The taste of Vegemite is so strong that it tastes like all the salty flavours from a complete cow concentrated into one dark paste. Wow, that would be a powerful taste. Well that's sort of what Vegemite is like. It certainly is a unique taste.

There are other similar products on the market which come from other countries. For example, the British have a product called Marmite which is very similar to Vegemite. In fact, Vegemite was developed in Australia in 1922 by Cyril McCallister in Melbourne, when Marmite imports from Britain

were in short supply after the First World War. He was asked by his employer to develop a spread from the waste yeast coming from beer brewers. He came up with Vegemite. It really became popular during the Second World War, when it was included in Australian soldiers' army rations. By the late 1940s, Vegemite had become a very common Australian food.

Vegemite is actually high in B Vitamins, including thiamine, riboflavin, niacin and folic acid – all of which are good for bodily health. I guess a lot of mothers, including mine, thought it was a good idea to give their children something rich in vitamins. Of course, it does have a high salt content, around 8%, so I think too much Vegemite would not be a good thing.

One of the best ways to eat Vegemite is on toast. But here's the trick. Don't spread it too thickly. It's not like jam or honey. If you put it on too thickly, it will be the first and the last time you eat Vegemite. Make your toast in the normal way in a toaster, then spread a layer of butter or margarine. Now apply a thin layer of Vegemite, enough so that you can still easily see quite a lot of the butter underneath. That's the way to enjoy the delights of Vegemite.



Vegemite on Toast

Another favourite is Vegemite sandwiches. You make the sandwich in the usual way with bread and a thin layer of butter or margarine. Lastly add a thin spreading of Vegemite. A popular addition is to add a slice of cheese. This is one of my personal favourites. The cheese and the Vegemite seem to taste great together. Of course there are many other Vegemite recipes which you can find. I go to a local café where they sell Vegemite Scrolls. These are like a coffee bun, but with Vegemite instead of coffee. They taste great.



A Vegemite scroll (bun)

Over the years, there have been some wonderful advertisements for Vegemite. The most famous is a television advertisement from 1959 showing marching children singing a song about Vegemite. That tune is instantly recognized by most older Australians. It seems a bit strange today, but back in 1959, that's how advertisements were done.

It's sometimes funny to watch people have their first taste of

Vegemite. There is no doubt that it is not for everyone, but if you have it too thickly spread, it's almost certain that you will think it's disgusting. Actually, when spread thickly, it is disgusting. But when eaten correctly, in small amounts, Vegemite can be a taste which can grow on you. I guess many Australian children grow up with it, so it's not surprising that it has such a strong following in Australia. Have fun eating your first Vegemite.

If you have a question or a comment to make, please leave it in the comments box at the bottom of this page. Or, you can send me an email at rob@slowenglish.info. I would love to hear from you. Tell me where you live, a little bit about yourself and what you think of my Slow English podcast. I will write back to you, in English of course. If you would like to take a short quiz to see if you have understood this podcast, you will also find it on my website. Goodbye until next time.

Rob

Podcast 68 Quiz - Did you understand the podcast?

You can take the quiz as many times as you like.

Start quiz

Vocabulary

appearance = how it looks

army rations = the food carried and eaten by soldiers

brewers = beer makers

bun = a very small loaf of bread you can hold in one hand

can't stand the taste = you hate something

concentrated = when only the most important parts are left

cow = an animal grown for beef and for milk (female)

crackers = biscuits

culture = the way people live and the things they like and do

delights = things which make you happy

developed = made

disgusting = when something is really, really unpleasant

doubt = when you are not sure about something

employer = the person who gives you a job

exhibition = a collection of things which people can look at

extract = something which is concentrated

flavours = tastes e.g. sweet

following = when many people like something

gigantic = very, very large

imports = things brought from another country

in short supply = there is not enough of something

includes = people or things that are in the same group

joke = a story to make you laugh

layer = a single thickness of something over the top of something else

National Museum of Australia = a government museum in Canberra about Australian culture

ordinary = not special

particular = when you are talking about one thing

paste = not quite liquid, but not solid

products = the things sold in shops and businesses

quirky = a little strange or unusual

recipe = a list of things which you put together to make a meal

recognized = when you remember something

rich = a lot of

sandwiches = a food made with bread and a filling

similar = the same

slice = a piece

spices = special flavours

spread = to put a thin layer of something over something else

symbols = something makes you think of something else

thiamine, riboflavin, niacin and folic acid = examples of vitamins

toast = bread which has been slightly burnt

typically = when something is seen many times, average, normal

unique = there is nothing else like it

value = when you think something is worth a lot

Vitamins = things in food which are good for your body

yeast = used to make beer