

A short history of frozen fish

Harry, at Cooma

Goodnight Barlow

4 August 2005

Dear Members,

I got thrown out of the Ming Garden last night, which I thought was bit rough, considering I'm a regular Saturday night customer and I was doing them a favour.

I ordered my usual honey prawns and special fried rice and sat down to wait in the blue Sebel stacking chairs that they've got lined up for the takeaway customers, wondering why you never see a spelling mistake on a Chinese restaurant menu. All of a sudden, a kid sitting next to me gives a bit of a gasp and I look up to see a very big black spider marching across the floor from underneath the big bamboo planter box that divides the takeaway patrons from the restaurant proper.

As spiders go she was an absolute champion, and would have easily covered a 50 cent piece and still had legs sticking out over the side. I've got nothing against spiders but I stood up and gently squashed her into the tiles. A simple enough public service you might think, except that it turned out she was carrying the family. Surprised by the sudden demise of Mum a couple of dozen tiny black dots, all half the size of a match head, raced out from under her.

The kid next to me, so far the only other person watching this arachnid tragedy unfold, leapt up on his pale blue chair and screeched 'Spiders! Baby spiders!' His mother leaned over and only managed to spit out 'Cameron, if you ...' before she spotted them as well, yelled 'Jesus Christ' and bolted out the door, without worrying about saving Cameron—I suppose she probably had plenty more just like him at home.

The other takeaway customers had now woken

up to what was going on and they all ran into the carpeted restaurant area and stood there muttering and brushing their ankles.

Hearing all the racket, Frankie, the owner of the Ming Garden, came flying out of the kitchen waving a tea towel, probably assuming that I was another Saturday night drunk. I suppose I did look a bit unsteady on my feet but I was just dancing out of the way of the black dots and trying to squash a few more of them. He starts pushing me towards the door, the other people are yelling at him about the spiders but in all the commotion I finish up outside, with no tea. The last I saw was him talking to the kid, finally realising what the fuss was about and starting to stagger around a fair bit himself.

But I had had enough, and feeling slightly offended I went across the road to Woolworths in search of my other favourite meal, the recipe for which I will now share with you for free: a packet of Birdseye Fish Fingers, an iceberg lettuce, a cucumber, a bottle of MasterFoods Seafood Sauce and a packet of those thin flat Indian roti breads. Don't tell me we don't know how to live down here on Monaro — a meal fit for a king for just under \$11.00.

You fry the Fish Fingers (none of this grilling nonsense, they just don't taste the same), put a piece of lettuce, a long sliver of cucumber, a Fish Finger or two and some sauce on the roti, roll the whole thing up and there you go. As it was Saturday night and I felt that I'd saved a few dollars by missing out on the honey prawns, I opened a bottle of beer, turned on the wireless and was as happy as a lark.

I know what you're thinking: what's this got to do with fishing? Well, stick with it—you'll learn something.

Looking at the Fish Fingers prompted me to

share with you what I know about Clarence Birdseye, a man I've admired and whose career I've followed, and I'm sure as you are all people generally interested in all things piscatorial, you'll be hanging on every word.

Birdseye was an interesting bloke, and quite an outdoorsman like myself. He was born in 1886 in Brooklyn but spent a lot of his childhood on a farm on Long Island. When he was just 10 years old he made his pocket money trapping and selling live muskrats to a customer in England, probably due to the insatiable demands of the sporran industry, I imagine. He bought a shotgun with the proceeds and then, while still a teenager, made a bit more pocket money as a hunter and taxidermist. His first job after leaving college was with the US Department of Agriculture, collecting animal and bird specimens in Arizona and New Mexico.

By 1915 he was living in Labrador working in the fox fur trade. He was fairly adventurous with his eating, trying starlings, blackbirds, whale, porpoise, beaver, polar bear, skunk, lynx and lizards. He would have enjoyed the Ming Garden.

While he was tasting his way through that lot he realised that any meat that had been left out in the Arctic air remained fresh enough to eat weeks later. He also noticed that the Eskimo had the knack of freezing and storing food that lasted many months. This wasn't possible back in New York with the chilling and freezing technology that existed at the time, but he guessed that the secret might be in extremely fast freezing at very low temperatures, which allowed only very small ice crystals to form without damaging the cellular structure of the food. This of course meant that the food's texture, taste and appearance were better preserved, which was probably important if you preferred your porpoise perky on the palate.

In about 1923, in his home kitchen, he invented what he called the Multiple Quick Freeze Machine, made from an electric fan, a garbage can, some steel plates and freezing coils carrying sodium chloride solution. This gadget managed to freeze foods at -40 C.

Now, just in case this comes up in Trivial Pursuit one night, all this happened surprisingly recently: his company, initially called the General Seafoods Company, was formed in 1925. Soon after, the business was restructured with financial backers under a parent company called the General Foods Company. By 1926 he had developed the first commercially viable deep freezer and a production line freezer which weighed more than 20 tonnes. This evolved into a smaller and more transportable machine which later became standard equipment in the food industry and probably took up less space in his kitchen.

In 1929 the whole shebang was sold for \$US22 million to Frosted Foods Company and the name 'Birds Eye' was created as a brand. Birdseye personally pocketed a million quid and stayed with the company, developing the technology and the product range. The first frozen food products went on sale in about 1930. Birdseye then went into a bit of vertical market development by developing freezers that could be cheaply made and leased to retailers, and insulated railway cars for transporting the products long distances.

While all this was going on he had a few other bright ideas and was eventually granted more than 300 patents. Where would we be without his one man whale harpoon gun? Up to our arseholes in whales is the answer! He started another company to develop specialised light bulbs for cinema work and those light bulbs that keep takeaway food warm down at the Ming Garden. In 1939 that little sideline (the Birdseye Electric Company) was sold to Sylvania, which, I noticed last night in Woolworths, is still in the light bulb business.

In his spare time he wrote a novel and then a book on growing woodland plants. When he started to slow down a bit he went to Peru for a holiday and concentrated on refining the process that creates paper from sugar cane waste, inventing a technique that shortened the process from nine hours to 12 minutes.

You won't be surprised to hear that when he died, in 1956, it was from a heart attack.

I don't know what the most popular frozen food is, I guess it might be peas, but personally my favourite is Fish Fingers, which, by the way, were invented in 1955.

Down at the Ming Garden, I hear Frankie's developed a secret process of his own. Somehow he's miraculously converting deep-frozen vacuum sealed 20 kg caterers' packs of beef with black bean sauce into small plastic tubs of duck with cashew nuts and a dazzling range of other unrelated but highly priced dishes. In his spare time he's also working on a pocket guide to spelling.

You've got to hand it to him, when it comes to making a quid, Frankie's got the fever, which I guess is how he got to own the only seven series BMW in town. Frankie's great grandfather walked from Sydney to the Snowy Mountains in 1860 to work on the Kiandra goldfields and there's no way Frankie's going to walk back.

Kind Regards,
Harry

[End]

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