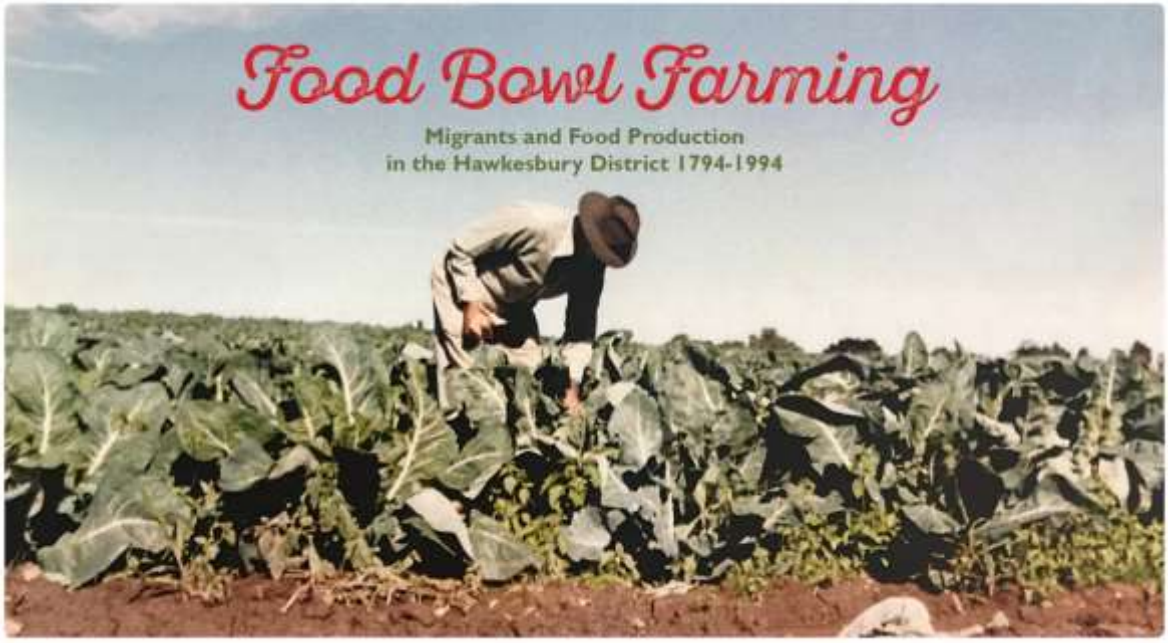

Hawkesbury Regional Museums exhibition *Food Bowl Farming* explores the rich migrant farming history of the Hawkesbury area. The exhibition was originally made possible through a grant from the NSW Migrant Heritage Centre and has been curated by Dr Kate Gahan and Rebecca Turnbull. It displays an array of objects and photographs related to the district as well as original film footage from the Hawkesbury Agricultural College and insightful oral histories from local migrant farmers.

Migrants and Food Production

The Hawkesbury district has long been termed *Sydney's Food Bowl,* given its proximity to the city and long history of food production. You only need to *Google* the term and a plethora of articles relating to the importance of the Hawkesbury in food production come up.

Farmers and market gardeners from migrant-origin backgrounds have cultivated the district's soil, from the early days of the colony to recent times, shaping the array of foods that are typical in our multicultural society today.

Firstly, there were those from England, Scotland and Wales and Ireland who brought with them sedentary and open field farming practices. These were the first to establish European farming practices in the district.

From the 1860s migrant farmers from China located to the district, they brought with them market gardening crop methods that contrasted with the farming practices of the European settlers.

Then, in the years immediately following World War II continental and southern European-origin migrants came, some turned to farming to make a new life after fleeing miserable circumstances resulting from the impact of the war. They introduced to the district new food and farming preferences.

From the early-1970s new Chinese migrants and migrants from South East Asia joined the farming communities. Like the earlier Chinese farmers they brought with them their differing traditions of intensive horticulture production – or market gardening. This wave of migrant farmers added more new foods and food tastes to the district, as well as the wider Sydney community.

What did they grow?

The earliest colonial farmers typically grew crops of maize, wheat and vegetables with seed brought to the colony with the First Fleet. As horticulture expanded, seed was also retained from harvested crops for planting. Both maize and wheat were milled into flour for making bread.

The varieties of wheat in most general cultivation are the common red lammas, and the creeping wheat: there is also a variety called the Macquarie wheat, having been introduced by Governor Macquarie [1810-1821], and which is native of either Syria or Egypt. The red [lammas] grain is large and heavy, and produces good flour: …. The creeping wheat … ripens after the red: it tillers very much and does not shoot up into spindle till the summer begins to advance, when it runs up and comes into ear quicker than any other sort: the grain is plump but small, and is very little subject to smut: it makes excellent flour: ….The Macquarie wheat is a very hardy bearded kind: the grain is course and flinty. There is a kind also called the dumpey or dumpty wheat: it grows with a short and thick ear and short straw; the grain is white and not much subject to smut, but very difficult to thresh out.

James Atkinson Esq – An Account of Agriculture and Grazing in New South Wales (1825)

Farmers in the Hawkesbury district continued to produce grain throughout the nineteenth century. However, maize became the more important grain produced. Disease, flooding, and the opening up of farmland over the Blue Mountains, saw local wheat production diminish from the 1860s onwards. At the same time the commercial production of vegetables and fruits rose in volume and importance. As the population grew, so too did the demand for fresh fruit and vegetables. At Sydney the George Street Markets were expanded in 1858, and the Campbell Street fresh fruit and vegetable market opened in 1869, to handle the sale of the increasing volume of fruit and vegetables grown in the colony –especially from the Hawkesbury district.

Sydney Fruit Market, 1853. SLNSW

The market in Sydney is well supplied, and is held in a large commodious building, superior to most provincial market-houses at home [in England]. The display of fruit in the grape season is very beautiful. Peaches are also most abundant and very cheap; … The smaller English fruits, such as strawberries, &c., only success in a few situations in the colony, and are far from plentiful. Cucumbers and all descriptions of melon abound. The large green watermelon, rose-coloured within, is a very favourite fruit, but I thought insipid.

Louisa Anne Meredith, *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales, During a Residence in that Colony from 1839 to 1844,* 1844.

Large volumes of peas, beans, cabbages and cauliflowers were transported to local and Sydney markets from farms in the Hawkesbury firstly by boat, then by road. Apples, stone fruits and citrus were also widely cultivated. Vegetable and fruit growing had expanded not only along the district's fertile river flats such as Pitt Town Bottoms and Freemans Reach, but also on higher ground at places such as Bilpin, Grose Vale and Kurrajong. This continued well into the twentieth century.

Loading cauliflowers for market, Hawkesbury Regional Museum Collection

Chinese Market Gardeners

There were more Chinese living in the Hawkesbury district in the late 1800s than is acknowledged. In the 1890s Joa Kong and Ah Song farmed at South Creek. Ah Hoo first leased land from Mrs Forrester at Clarendon, but later worked with a *'party of Chinese gardeners'* near the Richmond Lagoon. In the 1920s Willie Mow Sang gardened at Windsor and employed Charlie Ah Tim and Wong Fat. In the 1930s Yee Ling was reported to be part of the *'Windsor community of Chinese market gardeners'*. Yee Ling worked land on *'Gough's farm adjoining the picnic grounds'* (on the Freemans Reach side of Windsor Bridge) in partnership with the other Chinese gardeners. Newspaper snippets from this era tell us that the district's Chinese gardeners grew a variety of vegetables for sale including peas, French beans, table beets, parsnips, celery, red cabbage, cauliflower, carrots, squash and tomatoes. Whilst they were growing vegetables in keeping with European food traditions, they grew their crops in accordance with their Chinese vegetable production methods- market gardens. Being close to water was important and many located their gardens near the river or its creeks to irrigate their crops. At Richmond in 1889 Ah Hoo and his co-workers used a water lifter installed by their landlord, Mr Onus.

Water pump on the river near North Richmond Bridge, date unknown. Hawkesbury Library Service.

Post WWII Migrant Farmers

Migration programmes stimulated by the outcomes of the Second World War, significantly increased Australia's non-Anglo Celtic population. Many migrant families who came to Australia as a result of post-WWII lived and farmed in the Hawkesbury district. The experience of these community members has been diverse: some took up farming because this was how they lived in their homelands; others saw farming as the best available opportunity to gain work and build a new livelihood on their terms.

An example of one of these is the Speranza family whose oral history is recorded in the exhibition. Joe and George Sperenza migrated from Italy as young boys with their parents and siblings after World War Two. Maria, Joe's wife, also migrated from Italy with her family following the war. After Joe and Maria married they moved to Windsor, together with George and his family; they farmed citrus and then vegetables at Freemans Reach. They remember these times with fondness, but also recall the trials of farm life in the district.

Joe: *Our parents came from an agricultural background, they farmed back in Italy. Even while we were living around Horsley Park, Bonnyrigg and that we always had land, always had a farm. That's how it came about actually.*

Our parents migrated. Actually, my brother, my elder brother Charlie, he migrated in 1948. It actually took him eight days in a plane to get to Australia in 1948. Then my father and another brother came. We were five brothers and a sister. Then in 1951 there was me, George, Lina, my sister and my mother; so three brothers and my sister and mum. In 1951 we came out here. I was 12 years old

That's how we finished up in Windsor - because we sold a bit of property we had at Bossley Park and we bought a farm up there at Mowbray Park and we wanted to grow a few potatoes. We went up there looking for seed and met Barry Saul. He wanted to sell his farm near Windsor. He was getting old. His son wasn't really interested. We started to buy. We bought one bit of land off him at first. That was in '75 and then the rest '77 I think it was.

George: *On the farm. We had to change a few little things because the farm was bigger than what we were used to and we had different machinery. We had to do it a bit different. Even the type of soil that we had we had to do different. Then we introduced growing different crops for a different time. Capsicums, instead of growing them early we grew them late so picked right through till winter, which sold better. At Christmas everybody had capsicums. In winter, you couldn't sell them.*

For the most part these migrants adopted typical farming practices that operated in the Hawkesbury; but while these migrants may not have grown crops that were typical their native homeland cuisine –their mere presence in the community soon created demand for a broader diversity of fresh produce than was previously available.

Scheyville also played a major part in the lives of migrant farmers in the Hawkesbury. From 1949 it functioned as a Migrant Hostel for post-WWII migrants. Here the families lived and worked the Scheyville farm, some of the district's farmers came to rely on these workers to assist in planting and harvesting their produce.

Industry

In the 20th century some large holdings were sold and subdivided to create smaller farms more suited to the production of fruits and vegetables. There was a new demand from the canning and processed food sector. Canning was pioneered locally at the Hawkesbury Agricultural College in the 1890s. In the 1920s Rosella opened a canning and preserve factory at South Windsor and the Nepean Tomato Factory opened at the site of the old butter factory, on The Terrace, in Windsor. The Rosella factory operated the longest up until 1978. Foods grown and canned in the district included tomatoes, beetroot, green beans, gherkins, cauliflowers, corn and mushrooms. The impact of the canning industry on local food production also extended beyond both these factories, with the district's growers meeting the demand of other factories located in greater-Sydney.

Inside the cannery at HAC, 1950s. Western Sydney University Archives.

With increasing population and loss of farm land in other areas of Sydney outskirts, Hawkesbury is just as pertinent today as it was in the past as Sydney's *Food Bowl.* In addition, debates about sustainability have also highlighted the growing appreciation of the value of the district's agricultural landscape.

Although the Sydney region contains the largest metropolitan population in NSW, it is also one of the State's most productive and diverse agricultural producers. … Such land is important, not only because of its role in providing Sydney with fresh food but also because of the non-Agricultural benefits which can accrue through protection of agricultural land, often simply for its amenity value and non-urban use.

Sustainable Agriculture in the Sydney Basin – An Issues Paper, NSW Agriculture, 1995.