



'Farewell Dr Roland' fundraising dinner for Carcoar Hospital Museum  
Photo Jacqui Newling © Sydney Living Museums

## **A recipe for success: practical tips and suggestions for museum interpretation and programming through food**

Jacqui Newling © Sydney Living Museums 2015

### **An appetite for history**

In recent years there has been a significant shift in context for social history museums. Research has shown that buildings, grounds, collections and displays are not enough to engage modern audiences. Rather, museum audiences respond to social-emotional connections with places, objects and stories. Museums need to find ways to connect with audiences and let visitors feel they have a connection to the museum, its messages and stories.

We all eat. The foods we consume and how we procure, prepare and eat them are dictated by cultural, societal and personal constructs. Our food reflects our circumstances, values and our identities, on macro and micro scales. This was no different in history, and food is now actively used as a means of investigating and understanding our historical 'other'. For communicating history and heritage, therefore, food is a wonderful conduit because we can all identify with it; you don't have to be a historian or an academic to understand food and eating.

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Food-related buildings and spaces, collection objects, historic references and stories are useful platforms to open up wider concepts, whether they be historical stories, social entities such as gender roles or class issues (upstairs downstairs), science and technology, environmental issues including sustainability and waste, or curriculum-linked concepts for primary, secondary and tertiary students (eg where food comes from, food technology, ESL language skills).

### **Memory and intangible heritage**

Memory and personal experience are powerful factors in connecting people to their museum experience. Recalling a forgotten food or the smell of something cooking can transport you into another time and place, and reconnect you with lost family and friends. Recipes, cookbooks, utensils and equipment, or more significantly, taste, can prompt binding connections with the past.

Personal food stories demonstrate the power of food in memory and daily life across all generations and cultural backgrounds. They are something we can all share, whether discovering common ground or opening up new ideas and celebrating difference. For regional or community museums especially, there is opportunity to develop programs by listening to the audience, tapping community memories and using those memories to create or enrich programs.

Food has always been a shared experience and women especially have long exchanged compliments, ideas, techniques and recipes with each other as tokens of shared tastes and experiences. These, in turn, build a sense of community among social circles. Memories of shared tables and exchanged recipes keep friends and family connected regardless of physical distance. When these memories are unlocked as part of the museum experience they increase a visitors' investment in the museum and identify with the stories being told.

### **Public programming**

Public programs tap into the 'experience economy'. They bring life and activity to otherwise static objects, displays or spaces, and create opportunities to explore hidden stories.

Gastronomy programming literally gives visitors a taste of the past. It provides an invitation for us to compare our own eating habits with those of past generations, to appreciate differences and discover direct connections with people in the past through similarities. Whether a program or just a pause for conversation during a tour, visitors have an opportunity to recognise themselves or conjure memories of their own experiences within the food theme, building a personal relationship with the museum and its stories.

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Programs can take the form of house, kitchen and garden tours with hands-on or tastings components, 'masterclass' style workshops with industry specialists. They can be as simple as an afternoon tea gathering to read extracts from personal letters or journals and period-appropriate recipes which demonstrate the food culture of a particular time, a particular food or food personality, or the evolution of a dish; a community jam- or produce-swap or a themed dining event framed around a historical event or a provenanced menu.



'Farewell Dr Rowland dinner'. Community members 're-enact' original speech and toasts from Carcoar, 1867.  
Photo © courtesy Carcoar Hospital museum

There are many advantages in using food for interpretation and programming:

- Food is a useful 'hook' for new audiences who may not necessarily be museum-goers
- It offers sensorial and experiential experience engaging all five senses – sight, smell, taste, touch and sometimes even hearing
- It is audience-focused, shifts the approach from objective to subjective, material to personal
- It can help make historical concepts and past lives more accessible to visitors
- Food-based interpretation can develop and strengthen community engagement and involvement through local food history and heritage
- Developing strong social and cultural interest in food helps attract attention from local newspapers, radio and social media, to heighten the museum's public profile

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Gastronomy in the museum masterclass 2014 Photo © Rebecca Pinchin Central West Museums

## Program planning and development

It is important to develop programs that meet your audiences' expectations but also have a direct relationship with your museum (or current exhibition), and support or help deliver your museum's message.

- What is your museum's message?
- What time period or community does your museum represent?
- Conduct a gastronomic audit – evaluate your food-related collection items, museum features, research material, community members and their heritage stories.
- Who are your target audiences? Tourists, local community members, special interest groups, aged care or seniors groups, youth, children & families, school groups.
- How might you exploit food-related assets and connections to develop audience-based activities or programs?
- What spaces – gallery, garden, outbuildings, education areas, neighbouring or local community facilities, can you use for story-telling or hands-on activities?
- What outcomes are you seeking – quantitative or qualitative? eg increased visitation, reaching new audiences, sharing knowledge or skills, fundraising, renewed publicity or media interest, public awareness?
- How will you evaluate the program's success?

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## Concept development

- What do your museum's objects, food stories or traditions represent? What meaning do they carry? What is its modern equivalent/alternative/legacy – how has it been preserved or modified?
- What stories can they tell? How can they be interpreted – scope or options for different audiences?
- How does it reflect or draw on your museum's message or premise.
- Who might respond to it or connect with it in a broader context?
- How might you turn it into a meaningful, enjoyable, deliverable program for visitors?

This core theme or concept becomes the foundation of your program. You can then develop program content, delivery and marketing strategies.

## Viability and sustainability

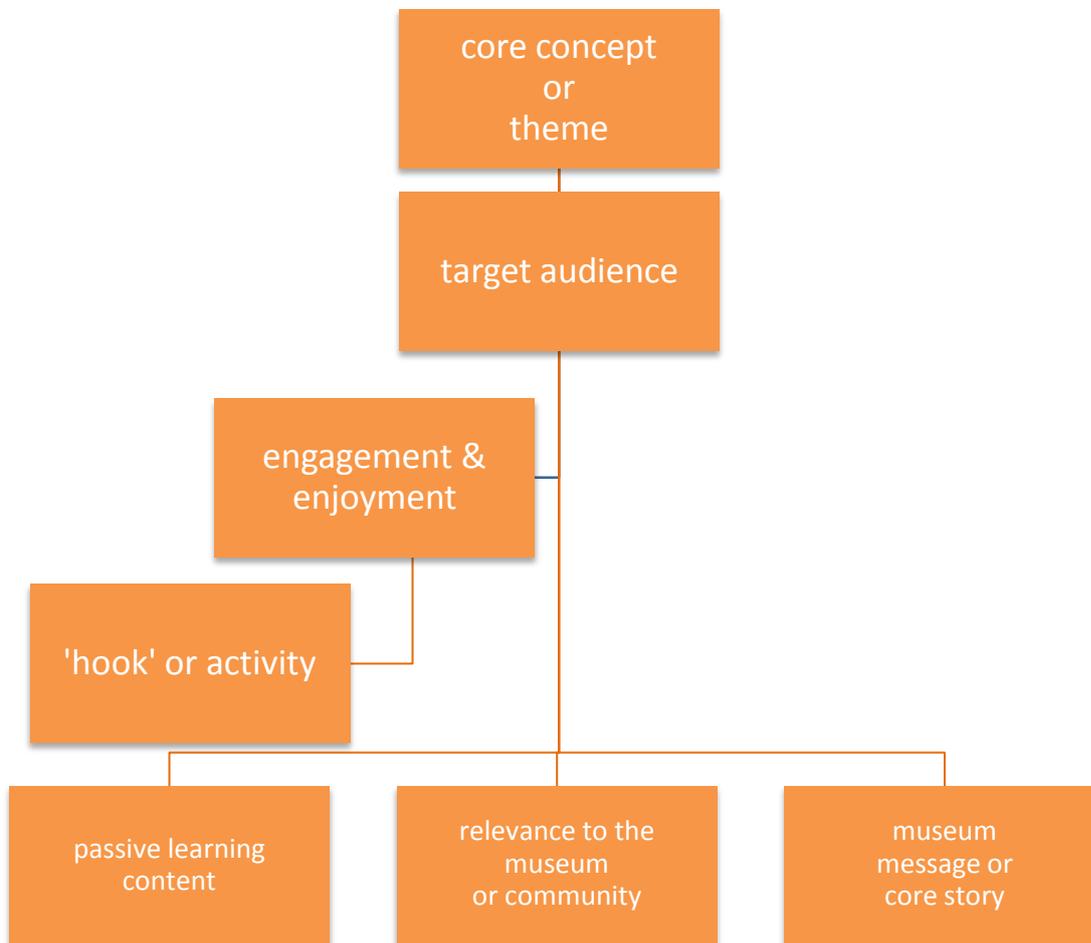
Programming must be an enjoyable and rewarding experience for your visitors, but also for your staff and organisers. Be aware of your limitations and realistic about your resources - it needn't be an extravagant affair and sometimes less is more.



'History on the menu' Jacqui Newling serving tongue with olive canapés. Orange Wine Week 2014.  
Photo © courtesy Central West museums

# GASTRONOMY IN THE MUSEUM

## Program content development



## Audience-focused content development

- Decide what form your program might take: a talk or lecture, a demonstration, a hands-on workshop, a focus or themed tour, a guest speaker or specialist, a combination of the above.
- Develop a mind map and story board for the program.
- What will people see/do/engage with? Consider your offer from your audience's point of view: What's in it for me? What will I see? What will I do? What will I learn or discover? Will it be fun/challenging/hard work? Will it be good value? Will I enjoy my time?
- What senses will be activated – sight (slide show, objects on display, reading recipes,

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menus, cookbooks), touch, smell or taste, 'do'? Can people handle objects? What food can be sampled or made that connects or reflects the theme?

- How can you activate emotional connection – reverence, intimacy, immersion? Could you use images, smells, reading old recipes?
- How can you create opportunities for people to share their own stories or skills? In the program itself or on digital media – facebook, photo-sharing or a blog?
- What research is required? Will you need to test techniques or recipes?
- What supporting materials will you need – laminates, samples, props, copies of recipes or menus, tastings?
- What's special about this program over a regular museum visit?



'Farewell Dr Rowland' souvenir menu and placecards for Carcoar Hospital Museum  
Photo Jacqui Newling © Sydney Living Museums

### Research tips and resources

You can build on your core theme through wide ranging inquiry and research. Object, period, place, people and practice can all add up or intersect to create and support an overarching story. Copyright and permissions and ethics evaluation may be required for use of images, intellectual property, personal material, manuscript recipes etc, so check before reproducing in any way.

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- Start with your own collection and community for historical references, then cast your net more broadly, looking for theme-specific and wider contextual resources.
- Primary materials – official documents, literary works (including poetry and fiction), artworks and photographs, newspaper articles and advertisements (increasingly online through [National Library Australia Trove](http://trove.nla.gov.au/) <http://trove.nla.gov.au/>)
- Published cookbooks and recipes, family recipe and cookbook collections, anecdotes and references from letters, diaries, journals.
- Go to the local community for recipes, stories, images or objects. Ask older people what was done in ‘their day’.
- Test, explore, experiment and familiarise. Test the recipes or technique. Watch YouTube videos to get an idea of what might be involved.
- Online sources - Google scholar, library databases, government statistics and websites, respected museums or cultural institutions blogs.



‘Sue Milne, Marie Hammond and Jenny Maher invite you to the Packham pear exhibition in Molong this weekend.’ Photo © Phil Blatch Central Western Daily May 9, 2015

### Program planning and troubleshooting: what obstacles will I face?

Conduct a walk through from both the visitor’s and the museum’s perspective.

#### Visitors’ experience

- What sequence/route/pathway will it take? Where will you be when?
- What will happen in each place, what will be required in each segment/place?

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- Will the audience be able to see and hear me? Where will you position yourself or presenters? Where will the sun or light source be?
- How long will people be standing in one spot? Is there seating for those who need it? Is it suited for those less mobile?
- Dietary concerns – do I cater for individual needs or do we put up a disclaimer or allergy warning on program information and ticketing?

### Logistics

- WHS - conduct a risk assessment for staff and visitor safety and site impact
- Power and water supply: dish washing and hand washing amenities (especially for food handling activities). Is everything charged – are there back-up batteries?
- Site access and security – if the program is after hours, do I need to notify security staff?
- Will my activity – for example, a cooking demonstration – activate smoke alarms? Who will isolate and reactivate alarm systems?
- What is the wet weather contingency?
- Parking restrictions – for example, a two-hour program in an area that offers one-hour parking meters.

### Food hygiene and safety

- Are there adequate and safe food storage and preparation facilities? Does the program involve high risk foods? Are staff aware of food handling rules and safety standards?
- Strict food hygiene and safety standards must be maintained when offering food in your museum. Formal food handling accreditation may or may not be required, however, staff that handle food for others' consumption must be aware of food safety standards and must follow your state's policies (for example [NSW Food Authority's guidelines](#)) for your organisation's category eg businesses, charities, groups and volunteers. Check local council guidelines for minimum food service requirements.

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## Marketing and promotion

- How will you tell your audiences about your program? Website or social media? Regular newsletter? Local newspapers or radio? Posters or flyers in local businesses and community outlets?
- Write a short blurb and press release. What, who, where, when and perhaps why: Use active and enticing language - discover, taste, reveal, experience, experiment, hands-on and include an appealing image



Pate with Packham pears. Photo © courtesy Molong Historical society

**‘A village claims its slice of history: the birthplace of the Packham Pear ... Champion Country Women's Association cook Merle Parrish who happens to be a distant descendent of the Packhams will cook using the pears at a *fundraiser* for the Molong Museum on 27 April.’** **Melanie Pearce, ABC Central West, April 22, 2015.**

## Evaluation

Verbal feedback is useful in the immediate sense but difficult to quantify and more formally review.

- Design a short visitor feedback form or electronic survey to assess visitor enjoyment and engagement. What did they enjoy most? Least? Was it good value for money? What could we improve on? How did they hear about the program? Would they be interested in future events?

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- Conduct an internal project review or debrief after each program – what worked, what didn't, how can be done differently next time? Consider WHS, research and development time, resources required, prep and setup, power and water, hand washing amenities, security and alarms (heat and smoke sensors), food costs, marketing and publicity.

### Concept and program development checklist

Once you have established your theme or core concept, and developed an activity or program, evaluate how the activity or program meets the following criteria:

- Museum message and identity: how does it convey or support your objectives?
- Provenance, relevance and meaning: what aspects of your museum does it harness, highlight and activate? What is the connection to the exhibition, collection, property, local history, heritage or contemporary issues?
- Program content: is it audience-focused? Does it tell a story or present an argument? Is it well researched? Do you have the resources to deliver it (time, facilities, skills) - will you need external assistance or partnerships?
- Interpretation and storytelling: how will you tell this story? Where will it take place? What will it entail – conceptually, materially and experientially?
- Audience: How will people engage in the concept? What will happen, what will people do? How will they benefit? What's in it for them? What will they take away with them: a feeling? A memory? A skill? Will your audience become ambassadors for your museum and your message?
- How will people hear about the program? What media channels will reach your target audience?
- Community engagement and involvement: are there opportunities for community involvement – local or industry based?
- How will I measure the program's success?

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Jacqui Newling with her book, *Eat your history* Photo © James Horan for Sydney Living Museums

Jacqui Newling is a graduate of Le Cordon Bleu masters in gastronomy through Adelaide University. She is resident gastronomer at Sydney Living Museums and curator of SLM's *Eat your history* projects. Jacqui runs Colonial gastronomy workshops and talk-taste-tour experiences and historical dining events. She co-curated *Eat your history: a shared table* exhibition at Museum of Sydney, is 'the Cook' in [The Cook and the Curator](#) historic food blog and is author of [Eat your history: stories and recipes from Australian kitchens](#) co-published with NewSouth Publishing, 2015.

Established in 1980, [Sydney Living Museums](#) (SLM) is a place-based museum and heritage organization, opening 11 different sites to the public including 3 museums, 6 house museums and a convict barracks. Our buildings date from 1793 to 1950 with landscapes that feature archaeological footprints, Aboriginal rock carvings, formal 'pleasure' gardens, two kitchen gardens, semi-rural farmland and even a beach. It is a truly diverse portfolio of properties which house thousands of collection items and stories.

## GASTRONOMY IN THE MUSEUM

This fact sheet is derived from ***Gastronomy in the museum: interpretation and programming through food*** a one-day masterclass for museums professionals (curators, programming and interpretation coordinators, food and beverage managers, volunteers) held in Orange, 2014 as part of [Sydney Living Museums](#)' partnership with [Central New South Wales Villages of the heart](#) project. Masterclass participants performed a food memory exercise, made butter and ate it, identified food related assets and conceptual themes from their museum or collection, and workshopped ways to develop theme-based programs and activities within their museums.