



## fondue sets

An irreverent look at the classic things that define you-beaut Aussie life

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**ABOUT TWO DECADES** before serious kitchen cachet could be found in a smattering of Alessi for Gen-X or a Thermomix for Gen-Y, nothing spoke of culinary sophistication like a fondue set.

What originated in 18th-century Switzerland as a strategy for using bits of bread and cheese that were past their prime became, in the Australia of the 60s, 70s and 80s, a byword for dinner party elegance.

The basics of the fondue set-up were dazzlingly simple.

First, you needed a heat source – most often butane, methylated spirits or more recently gel-based fuel. These were usually encased in a metal vessel and the fuel was set ablaze by an Aussie bloke who warned the family to stand back as he singed either his fingers or his eyebrows, depending on the strength of the flame. Most modern fondue sets have the rather wonderfully named “snuffing lid”, with which to extinguish the fire. Back in the day, however, many an Aussie home was thrown into brief chaos when someone tried to blow out the conflagration without realising what would happen to the nearby paper napkins when they met breath-propelled flame.

Above the fuel source, and supported by either a separate tripod or built-in legs, was another pot. Made from ceramics or more commonly cast iron, it was where the magic happened. The classic Swiss recipe called for a blend of wine and cheese, accompanied by hunks of bread, while sweet variations took our collective fancy, too. Lord only knows how many successful seductions took place beside chocolate fondues, into which pieces of fruit were lasciviously dipped.

The fact that our first fondues tasted faintly of kerosene was by the by – it was high-octane refinement. They were also fun to eat. With a number of diners gathered around the flame, fondue encouraged a convivial interactivity in which bread or meat chunks were lost beneath the bubbling mix, cutlery hovered with polite assurances of “no, after you, I insist” and a tipsy uncle made weak puns around the word “fork”. In short, they gathered friends and

family in a communal activity with its own high-cholesterol pay off.

Even in their heyday, fondue sets were at best a novelty. But they looked so fetching – even when not in use – that they found a firm place in our hearts and homes. We swooned at the fluidity

of the raised cooking bowl juxtaposed against the geometric cooking forks. They were even available in the burnt orange, mushroom and speckled-stone hues found in so many other areas of our homes.

Perhaps we’ve moved on with the recognition that a meal based primarily on melted cheese is not the healthiest of choices. Ditto milk chocolate. However, in our microwave-ready, instant gratification age, the decline of the fondue probably has more to do with time and effort. You couldn’t rush a fondue, it was an undertaking that required low heat, a watchful eye over several hours and serious amounts of elbow grease in the clean-up. It was a special event requiring a contraption that consistently crops up in nostalgic tales of years gone by and deserves a dusting off. Even if it is only a couple of times a year. Now stand back while we rekindle this flame. **hb**

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