

Oxford Australia Word of the Month

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Neenish Tart – *noun* a small sweet pastry case filled with mock cream, and sometimes including jam, topped with brown and white or pink and white icing.

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Neenish Tart

The story behind the Word of the Month

The **neenish tart** is a small Australian cake with a filling of mock cream, and iced in two colours—white and brown, or white and pink, or (occasionally) pink and brown. It has yet to find its way onto *MasterChef*, but surely it will appear in the 2011 series, or perhaps it will find its way into the upcoming *Junior MasterChef*.

Until recently, the earliest reference to **neenish** we had been able to find was in a 1929 recipe for **neenish cakes**. This is in *Miss Drake's Home Cookery* by Lucy Drake, published at Glenferrie in Victoria. The cakes are made from: 8 ozs. almond meal; 6 ozs. icing sugar; 1 large tablespoon flour; essence almonds; 2 whites of eggs. The filling is made of: 1 gill cream; 1/2 gill milk; 1/4 oz. gelatine; 1 tablespoon sugar; essence vanilla. The icing is half white and half pink.

What is the origin of the term? Leo Schofield, writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1988, said his mother made them from a Country Women's Association cookbook sold in Orange in World War II. When he asked for information, some readers suggested that the word had a Viennese or German origin. But a Mrs Evans said that they were first made in her home town, Grong Grong. She and her sister, Venus,

nominated **Ruby Neenish**, a friend of their mother's, as the originator. Mrs Evans said that in 1913, running short of cocoa and baking for an unexpected shower tea for her daughter, Ruby made do by icing her tarts with half-chocolate, half-white icing. From then on they were known as **neenish tarts**. This is an interesting piece of popular etymologising, but difficult to take seriously.

Many have considered a possible origin in a European language, and some spellings of the word might seem to confirm this: *nienich* (1935), *nenische* (1959).

The new archive of Australian newspapers at the National Library of Australia website has enabled us to check if there is any earlier evidence for the word. On 21 May 1924 there is a brief passage of interest in the Melbourne *Argus* newspaper: "'Culinary' (Brighton) asks for a recipe for **Neenish cakes**'.

This does not add much information, but it is further confirmation that the earliest spelling was the very English-sounding **neenish**. Perhaps the later spellings of the word, such as *nienich*, are remodellings to give the word a continental flavour?

metrosexual
weapon
of mass destruction
burka
barbecue
senior moment
Sudoku
dishlicker
cyberstalking
Naltrexone
pear-shaped
Bioterrorism
karrack
glycaemic
index
stopper
hornbag
witlof
yakitori