How to pick a tourist in Australia: Select a spot near the toast-and-toppings end of the breakfast buffet at any hotel. There, nestled between the marmalades and three types of butter, will be a bowl of small, yellow-and-red packages. Watch carefully: An Australian will either ignore them completely or pick one up without hesitation. A tourist will pick one up, turn it over, sniff at it, and even—perhaps this is the best bit—taste it. Have your camera ready; Vegemite is a congenitally acquired taste.

An Australian's first taste of Vegemite is buried somewhere deep in the subconscious, along with recollections of his first step and first toast. Despite their best efforts, few visitors to the country will ever forget their introduction to the briny black paste. The Australian passion for Vegemite is often erroneously compared to that of U.S. peanut-butter-lovers. Never forget a friend from the United States saying, "I don't know how you can eat Vegemite. It's dreadful I tried a spoonful once..." Never—repeat—never eat Vegemite straight from a spoon! The taste has been compared to rusty nails, axle grease, or a bloody lip. Basketbally Shaquille O'Neal once said Vegemite tastes like oil and tar mixed together, only worse.

Preparation of the Vegemite sandwich or toast, two favorite ways of "enjoying" the substance, is an art in itself. Vegemite connoisseurs use but a smear of the stuff swirled through plenty of butter. Don't despair if you can't quite savour the dense saltiness the first time around. It took the Australian public a good 14 years after Vegemite was invented in 1922 to really acquire the taste.

Our great distance from the rest of the world meant Australians learned early on to make do. And what to do with the leftover yeast from the nation's plentiful beer manufacture? That was the question that had food entrepreneur Fred Walker scratching his head. He sent Cyril Callister, a smart chemist, to the task. Callister took just a few months to come up with a solution, or, more accurately, a paste: a pure vegetable extract rich in B vitamins.
A public competition with a £50 prize launched the name Vegemite. It hit the shelves in a distinctive light-house-shaped amber jar in 1923, unfortunately in direct competition with the popular English spread Marmite. Sales were slow. In a disastrous play on words, Walker renamed his new product Parwill (IF Ma might, then Pa will). Unfortunately, Pa didn’t and Walker reverted to “Vegemite.”

World War II turned the tide on Vegemite’s popularity. Included in every soldier’s ration kit, it was full of nerve-toughening B vitamins, and, let’s face it, anything improves the taste of bully beef! After the war, these hopelessly addicted returning service-men created the baby boom, a huge new market for Vegemite: the so-called “happy little Vegemites.” The British Medical Association endorsed it, the Australian Medical Journal advertised it, and doctors and nurses recommended it. We were so besotted, we hardly noticed that Fred Walker Company became Kraft Foods Limited and handed our Australian delicacy to U.S. owners.

Before long, every Australian baby boomer was eating “Vegie sammies” and singing the theme song, released in 1954:

_We’re happy little Vegemites
As bright as bright can be.
We all enjoy our Vegemite
For breakfast, lunch, and tea.
Our mummies say we’re growing
Stronger every single week
Because we love our Vegemite.
We all adore our Vegemite.
It puts a rose in every cheek!_

In the 1960s we wondered at the black bread-and-salami school lunches of the postwar immigrants. They must have been equally confounded by our obsession with white bread and oily butter smeared with black what? Most immigrants wisely left the cultural intricacies of Vegemite to their Australia-born children.

By the ’70s, Australian baby boomers were travelling overseas in earnest. In every backpack was a survival jar of Vegemite. No other product says “home” to Australians on the road like Vegemite. A peculiar lack of foreign appreciation meant the black gold was generally unobtainable overseas. Occasionally a cache would turn up somewhere, and homesick Aussies would queue for supplies.

Vegemite became the secret handshake of expatriate Aussies. That had the band Men at Work singing:

_“Buying bread from a man in Brussels/He was six foot four and full of muscle. I said, ‘Do you speak a my language?’/He just smiled and gave me a Vegemite sandwich.”_

As travel became commonplace, savvy traders began to export the stuff. Today it’s possible to order your Vegemite over the World Wide Web.

In the excessive ’80s, the French tried and failed to exploit Australia’s Vegemite obsession with tapenade, an oily paste of black olives, anchovies, and garlic. They regrouped with champagne. Wine buffs claimed the classic champagne grape, pinot meunier, has a Vegemite character. Team it with the bread-and-toast nose of pinot noir and—voilà—the perfect Australian breakfast. Sparkling wine sales soared.

In 1997, Vegemite celebrated 75 years in the kitchens and hearts of Australians. That it has achieved international notoriety rather than popularity only endears it to us more.

The 2000 Olympics in Sydney will bring the world to the breakfast tables of Australia. But be forewarned—spread it thinly!

Details, Details, Details
Surf the Web for Vegemite at (www. vegemite.com.au) where you can hear the Vegemite song.

At Vegemite Central (www. ozchannel.com/vegemite/vegemite.html), check out the Veg Lounge—great works of art inspired by Vegemite— or follow the step-by-step instructions for making a Vegemite sandwich.

Kimberley Ivory is an Australian freelance writer who stomached years of Vegemite-and-cheese school lunches. Happily, she has now recovered and much prefers French champagne.