



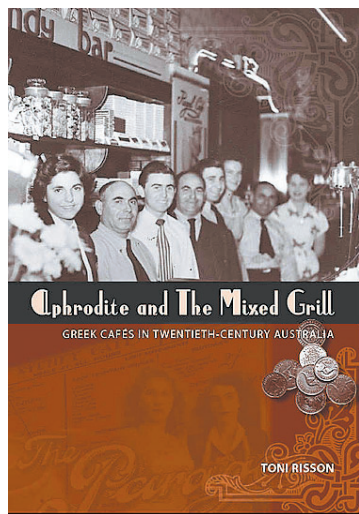
CAFE culture ... Ipswich's Sydney Cafe, Nicholas St; Bundaberg's Blue Bird Cafe; and behind the counter at Ipswich's The Ritz Cafe

This is an edited extract from Toni Risson's *Aphrodite and the Mixed Grill*.



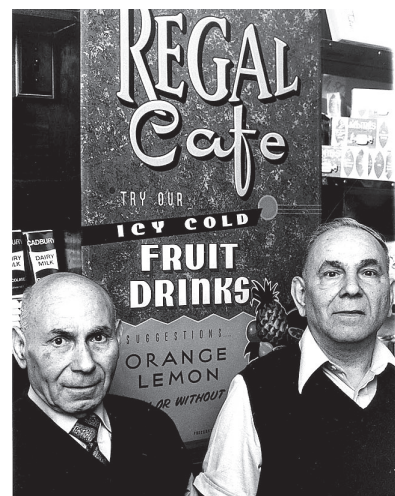
TASTE of history ... Maria Kentrotos, above and right, as a cafe bride marrying Jim Kentrotos in 1958; Ipswich's best fresh juice - George and Jim Kentrotos outside their Regal Cafe.

FOR much of the 20th century, the ubiquitous Greek cafe routinely opened for business before 7am and closed around midnight seven days a week, except for Christmas Day and Good Friday. In addition to meals for travellers, proprietors served hot breakfasts for workers and morning and afternoon tea for tired shoppers. For country people on their weekly trip to town, lunch meant a mixed grill and a milkshake at the Greek cafe, and proprietors chatted with regular customers as they dispensed ice cream for families on evening walks and milk coffee and toasted sandwiches for couples after the evening session at the pictures or a night on the dance floor. But for many Australians, Greek cafes were more than food outlets. Bustling to the clatter of silver cutlery, the hiss of sizzling steaks, and the swoosh of soda fountains, popular cafes such as the Paragon in Katoomba, the Niagara in Gundagai, and Londy's in Ipswich were public gathering places at the heart of Australian communities. Just talk to older Australians about them and watch their eyes light up. Greek immigrants began opening food outlets in Sydney in the latter part of the 19th century. Their oyster saloons, cafes, fish shops, fruit shops, milk bars, snack bars and confectioneries soon dotted the Australian landscape, and before long, the Greek cafe had become an Australian icon.



Australian painter Russell Drysdale also articulates the Greek cafe's status as a national icon in his portraits of Greek Outback proprietors, Maria and Joe, both painted in 1950. Bob Hudson places the local Greek milk bar firmly at the centre of Aussie life in his hit song of 1975: *And they pulled up outside the Parthenon Milk Bar, and standing outside the Parthenon was this beautiful-looking Sheila*. And in 1988, Mark Mitchell drew upon the iconic status of the Greek shopkeeping family in his "bewildful" characterisation of Greek fruiterer Con Dikaletis and his wife, Marika. That the Greek cafe recurs in such a wide range of texts throughout most of the 20th

century is evidence of the extent to which it pervaded Australian life. But the Greek cafe is not just an Australian icon: several Greek historians refer to Greek shopkeeping as a quintessentially Australian phenomenon. Nowhere else did Greek migrants dominate the food industry to the extent that they did in Australia. However, Australia's Greek cafe is not widely represented in historical research. Information on Queensland cafes is particularly hard to find. Food historian Michael Symons, in his landmark treatise on Australia's food history, allocates only two lines to the topic, even though he attributes the Mixed Grill to Greek cafe proprietors. Brisbane historian Denis A. Conomos documents numerous Queensland cafes in an excellent history of Greeks in Queensland, although this forms part of a more general history that concludes at 1945. As a result, few historians have documented the rise of the humble Greek cafe, or its demise. Neither did the public take family photographs in Greek cafes. Although families frequented them and teenagers routinely hung out in them, they were not used for special celebrations. But Greek cafes did change the course of Australia's cultural history and this book seizes a brief window of opportunity to capture the story of local cafes. It is a story which will otherwise die with the people in whose memories it now resides.



# Greek Cafe history

Headst@rt takes a look at some of Queensland's forgotten café history with cultural historian Toni Risson



CLASSIC designs ... from left the Art Deco architecture of Cafe Niagara; Dalby's Paragon Cafe today and as it was in 1936. Picture: State Library Image 41450

## Q & A with Toni Risson

**What prompted your interest in Queensland cafe history?** My interest in Greek cafes grew out of friendships with three women who had associations with cafes in Ipswich. Maureen Sheppard had a photo album documenting her time as a waitress at Londy's in the 1940s. Jo Stewart grew up behind the counter at the Regal Cafe and, after about 20 milkshakes, I became friends with Maria Kentrotos, who has worked in Ipswich cafes for over 40 years. I began to look into these women's working lives and as the significance of the Greek cafe phenomenon became apparent, I realised how little Australians knew about this aspect of our cultural history.

**What are your early memories of cafe life?** Perhaps my fascination with Greek cafes goes further back. Dad comes from Katoomba, in the Blue Mountains, and I can remember walking into Katoomba's Paragon Cafe as a little girl on holidays. It was an up-market cafe and the food was probably more elegant and expensive than the average Greek cafe fare, so I don't think we ate there - as a family of six, we didn't eat out much in those days. But I can still remember the dim, almost ecclesiastical interior, the rich-timber paneling, and the smell of chocolate. And standing before the window display was like looking into a fantasy land. I think I felt about that shop the way kids today think about Disneyland.

**How did you undertake your research?** Once I decided to explore the impact Greek immigrants had on the Ipswich community, my research took several forms: looking at the work of Greek historians such as Denis Conomos, Leonard Janiszewski, and Effy Alexakis; searching archives and council plans for evidence of early shops; looking for evidence of Greek cafes in popular culture; and interviewing proprietors and their children and waitresses. As these people kindly loaned

precious family photographs for copying, the pictorial element became a major aspect of my research. **You've traced Aussie cafe history back to the 19th century. What were the early cafes like?** Cafes of the late 19th century were actually fish shops and oyster saloons. Oysters were popular in those days and were probably fairly basic establishments. But photographs from the 1920s and 1930s are really interesting. Most show a front confectionery counter, often with rows of lolly jars and mountains of chocolate blocks, and then a milk bar with gleaming chrome soda fountains and milkshake machines. The classic marker of cafes of this era is the line of cubicles along one or both sides of the shop, and sometimes down the centre, although the central space usually has tables and chairs. The kitchen is at the back of the shop. But each one is unique with antique lights hanging from the ceiling, potted palms, wall lights, timber paneling, or leadlight front windows. The Art Deco wall mirrors and signs with cafe names are particularly interesting.

**When was the golden age of Greek cafes?** The 1920s and 1930s were the start and it continued until the end of the 1950s, when television arrived. **Can you name some of the more famous ones?** Two of the best-known cafes still in operation - the Paragon at Katoomba and the Niagara at Gundagai - are good examples of this classic Greek cafe style, because they were renovated in the early 1930s and haven't been touched since.

**What part did they play in local community life?** Greek cafes were the social hub of their communities. They were where people bought their smokes or their daily Bex, their chocolates before the pictures, and hot chips at the interval. Customers left their

belongings with cafe staff or met friends for lunch, and older residents claim that despite the fact that Ipswich had about 10 cafes in the 1950s you would walk the streets looking for a table on Saturday nights. **Was there always a connection between local cafes and cinemas?** After the 1950s, their popularity started to wane, as did our love affair with picture theatres. Greek cafes enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with picture theatres. Many Australians went to the "flicks" several times a week and cafes stayed open as late as midnight to serve theatre patrons. Television had a significant effect on both.

**Who created the first "mixed grill"?** Australian food historian Michael Symons attributes the mixed grill to Greek cafes. This combination of meats piled on an oval plate appears, however, in James Herriot's stories of a country vet in pre-World War II Yorkshire, but Greek proprietors certainly popularised the mixed grill in Australia, if they didn't actually invent it. A meat dish was tailor-made for the British-Australian palate and Greek proprietors were keenly attuned to that.

**What part did "chain" migration play in creating cafes in Australia?** Most older Australians understand the part Greek cafes played in their lives, but the significance of cafes for Greek immigrants is less well known. Many Greeks migrated because of the poverty at home and operating a food outlet was one way to make a new life because it didn't entail much capital or expertise. "Chain" migration led to a large percentage of migrants becoming shopkeepers because proprietors sponsored other family members to come to Australia and cafes provided work for newcomers and cheap labour for cafe owners. Soon the newcomer had learnt how to get on in Australian society, and would start his own cafe, and could sponsor others.

**What has contributed to the demise of the Greek cafes here?** Because Greek cafes were intricately woven into the fabric of Australian culture, multiple factors led to their demise. In addition to television, supermarkets, and pre-packaged foods, better cars and highways that bypassed towns adversely affected them. Even a decline in the Roman Catholic practice of eating fish on Friday had a big impact when you consider that between them Peter Londy and Harry Tanos cooked more than 1000 pieces of fish in Ipswich on Friday nights in the '50s.

**Do you think Greek cafes challenged the monocultural perception of Australian society in the '50s/'60s?** Migrants from many other countries arrived before the influx of Greek migrants in the '20s, although, interestingly, the first Greeks got here the same way the rest of us did - as convicts. But, because of their cafes, Greek migrants must have played a major part in challenging the perception of Australia as a monocultural society. There was a Greek cafe in nearly every town in the eastern states - many cafes at the centre of larger towns. Proprietors interacted with a broad section of the community on a daily basis and most seemed to be well liked, although this didn't stop Australians calling Greeks "bloody dagos" and ordering them to speak English or go home.

**What is your next project?** I am working on a PhD at the University of Queensland, mapping a cultural history of confectionery in Australia. Greek cafes will be part of that research, but I would love to hear from readers about their memories of buying, making, winning, wanting, swapping, stealing, reading about, eating, and even rolling Aussie lollies. **Toni Risson is author of *Aphrodite and the Mixed Grill*, a homage to "new Australians" who created some of Queensland's best cafes in the 20th century. *Aphrodite and the Mixed Grill* costs \$49.50. To order, contact the author on 0419 760 861 or email t.risson@uq.edu.au**

1788	1829	1832	1878	1900	1902	1911	1915	1920	1924	1932	1934	1940s	1947	1954	1960s	1970	1972	1981	1990s
Coffee arrives in Australia with the First Fleet	First Greeks land in Australia. Seven Greek sailors from Hydra, convicted in Malta in 1828 for piracy and transported for various terms, arrive as convicts	Aikaterini Plessos (Katherine Crummer) the first free Greek settler arrives in Australia	Arthur Comino opens Australia's first Greek fish shop, at 36 Oxford St, Sydney	1000 Greeks are now settled in Australia	Castrission family opens the Niagara Café in Gundagai	Of the 400 Kytherian immigrants in NSW, 70 per cent work in food-catering	Riots against Greek shopkeepers in Sydney	Greek cafés operate in 52 Queensland towns	US imposes limits on Greek immigration, escalating migration to Australia	Mick Adams (a Greek) opens the Black & White Milk Bar in Martin Place, Sydney, widely considered Australia's first milk bar	Greek shops are looted and burned in riots in Boulder/ Kalgoorlie	Instant coffee introduced in Australia	12,000 Greek are now settled in Australia	Peter Bancroft opens Australia's first espresso café in Lygon St, Melbourne	Olive oil is sold in chemist shops and yoghurt is available through the Greek Club.	Australia's first Pizza Hut, in Belford, Sydney	Greek-Australian proprietors report a shift in attitude with the Whitlam government's multicultural policy and new Australian terminology	Greeks (less than 2 per cent of population) own one-third of all takeaway shops in Australia	Melbourne has the third largest Greek-speaking population in the world after Athens and Thessaloniki
		1871	1893	1901	1910	1914	1916	1922	1930s	1933	1939	1942	1950s	1957	1968	1971	1975	1988	2001
		300 Greeks are settled in Australia	A Greek café/ oyster saloon recorded in Brisbane	The White Australia Policy introduced. First Greek café in Ipswich, The Australia Café. There are four in Brisbane	2000 Greeks settled in Australia. At least 10 Greek cafés and oyster saloons operate in Brisbane. 33 Greek cafés operate in 26 Queensland towns. Greeks introduce the American soda fountain to Sydney.	World War I begins	Jack Simos opens the Paragon Café in Katoomba	Migration escalates when the Turks drive Greeks out of Asia Minor	Australia's first Italian restaurant. Baklava and Kataifi recorded in some Sydney Greek cafés	Census reveals that 99 per cent of the population identifies as British	World War II brings an influx of Americans and the hamburger	Prime Minister John Curtin announces the season of austerity and widespread rationing becomes a way of life	First pizza bars in Melbourne, Adelaide and other centres	400 espresso machines in Australia	Australia's first KFC, in Guildford, Sydney	Australia's first McDonald's, in Yagoona, Sydney	The Newcastle Song, by Bob Hudson, popularises the Parthenon Milk Bar	Mark Mitchell invents Con the Fruiterer and his wife, Marika	Census reveals that 263,717 speak Greek at home