

## **Aphrodite and the Mixed Grill: Gender and ethnic relations in Ipswich's Greek Cafes from 1900 to 2005**

The emergence of a café society in the Ipswich CBD in recent years is marked by the lack of a similar culture in the preceding few decades. Prior to the 1970s, however, a plethora of milk bars and cafés thrived in those same streets and most were owned by Greek immigrants. From the beginning of the twentieth century, Greek cafés and milk bars forged an important place at the heart of the Ipswich community and when older Ipswich residents talk about them their eyes light up. Greek cafés supplied more than just huge plates of good, cheap food; bustling to the clatter of silver cutlery, the hiss of sizzling steaks, and the swoosh of soda fountains, cafés like Londy's, the Ritz, and the Regal Café were public gathering places that helped to nurture a sense of community in a city built on railways and coalmines.

This project investigates the role Greek cafés played in Ipswich's cultural history, situating them in the context of Greek immigration and the Greek café phenomenon throughout Australia. In attempting to identify all of the Greek cafés in Ipswich's history, it covers various decades from 1900 to the present and gathers oral histories from both Greek and Anglo-Celtic Australians. The project focuses on women's stories in order to understand the role of gender in people's experience of Greek cafés. Because they flourished at the interface between an anglophile Australia and a new wave of 'foreigners', however, Greek cafés are also a valuable means of understanding the relationship between Greek and Anglo-Celtic Australians.

First, a discussion of the sources and methodologies employed as background research highlights the value and uniqueness of this project and the important role oral history plays in understanding our past. It also affords the opportunity to examine some of the challenges it presented. Finally, the project would not be complete without a discussion of the demise of the Greek café and the re-emergence of a café society in Ipswich.

## Methodology and Historiography

“I remember [. . .] my dad who left Greece when he was fifteen with his hope his ambitions and a bag full of dreams but spent the rest of his life as a slave to a stove till his dreams were all greasy and his hope had all gone.” – Komninos qtd in Collins et al.

Historians refer to the gravitation of Greek immigrants toward the café business as a singular phenomenon (Gilchrist 1: 190; Conomos, History 117; Janiszewski and Alexakis 1).

Historian Leonard Janiszewski and documentary photographer Effy Alexakis, for example, note the perception that “whenever one goes out west there is always ‘the dagoes’ to eat in,” and they cite Russell Drysdale’s painting of an outback Greek café owner’s wife (“Maria” 1950) as a means of articulating the subject’s status as an icon of rural Australia (1). As Janiszewski and Alexakis point out, however, although the Greek café is “a quintessentially Australian phenomenon,” it is underrepresented in historical research (1).<sup>1</sup>

In the case of Ipswich’s Greek cafés, few academic sources exist. Even Janiszewski and Alexakis, who confirm and elaborate the abundance of Greek cafés in Australia and provide new insight into the Americanisation of Australian eating habits, are primarily concerned with New South Wales, where cafés like the Niagara in Gundagai and the Paragon in Katoomba are tourist Meccas (7).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, former solicitor and member of South-East Queensland’s Greek community, Denis A. Conomos, in a comparatively thorough documentation of Greek cafés in Queensland, makes only passing references to Ipswich cafés (History 104, 104). Even local historian Robyn Buchanan’s recent account of Ipswich in the twentieth century, fails to mention the city’s abundance of Greek cafés and milk bars.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Symons allocates only two lines on page 137 to the Greek café in his treatise on Australia’s food history – *One Continuous Picnic: A History of Eating in Australia*. Adelaide: Duck Press, 1982. In a three volume history of Greeks in Australia, to which he devotes nearly 1,300 pages, Hugh Gilchrist similarly makes no mention of cafés in Ipswich. One chapter – “The Shop-Keeping Phenomenon” (*Australians and Greeks Volume 1: The Early Years*. Rushcutters Bay, NSW: Halstead Press, 1992) – includes a section on Queensland (pages 232-238), but without reference to Ipswich cafés.

<sup>2</sup> *Beyond the Rolling Wave*, a project for the NSW Heritage Office by Craig Turnbull and Chris Valiotis, is a further example of the celebration of Greek cafés in NSW.

<sup>3</sup> Buchanan, Robyn. *Ipswich in the Twentieth Century: Celebrating 100 Years as a City 1904-2004*. Ipswich: Ipswich City Council, 2004.

Official sources are also limited. Fire Department Block Plans and City Council Land-Use Maps are excellent resources, but these are available for Ipswich only for 1918 and 1979 respectively. Building Applications, Electoral Rolls, and Post Office Directories offer useful snippets of information. These sources, however, do not provide a list of Greek cafés because ethnicity is not indicated and because Greek café owners anglicised their names; the picture is incomplete and often contradictory. Other factors concerning Greek names and business practices further limit the usefulness of both academic and official sources in tracing cafés, a task further compounded by the fact that commercial enterprises open, change hands, change name, and close down in short periods of time (Conomos, History 89). While official sources therefore indicate that the situation in Ipswich was consistent with claims that by the first decade of the twentieth century Greek cafés dotted rural New South Wales and Queensland (Janiszewski and Alexakis 1; Conomos, History 104-117), they are inadequate for the task of identifying the extent to which Greek cafés claimed the Ipswich streetscape and understanding what they meant to the people who worked and ate in them.

In the 1910s, Ipswich already had several Greek cafés. By the 1950s there were ten. Unfortunately, while Victorian and Federation buildings are now preserved, fewer art deco buildings survive; not only did the ‘golden age’ of Greek cafés pass, but the buildings they occupied in Ipswich were demolished. Except for the Central Milk Bar, Australia’s original café culture is all but erased from the Ipswich streetscape. It now exists primarily in photographs, artefacts, and, especially, memories. Oral history, then, in conjunction with academic and official sources, is the best means of constructing a history of Ipswich’s Greek café venues and proprietors.

The real strength of oral history, however, is not its ability to track the growing number of cafés in Ipswich from the early twentieth century, but its potential to describe what it was

like to be a Greek or to work for Greeks in twentieth century Ipswich. Because it offers access to the meanings of everyday practices and the stories of ordinary people, oral history is the only means by which Greek cafés may be understood as a cultural phenomenon. A project of this nature has not previously been undertaken in Ipswich and, because the current generation of seventy to eighty-year-olds is the primary source of information about the role of Greek cafés, the need to record this history is pressing.