Camden cafes and milk bars

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Abstract
The local milk bar is a largely unrecognized part of Camden modernism where the latest trends in American food culture made their way into the small country town by Australian Greek immigrants. The design, equipment and fitout of local cafes and milk bars was at the cutting edge of Interwar fashion. The cafes were a touch of the exotic with their Art Deco style interiors, where fantasy met food without the social barriers of daily life of the Interwar period. Camden milk bars rarely just sold milk shakes unlike their counterparts in the city. To make a living and ensure that their businesses paid their way the cafes and milk bars also sold fruit and vegetables, meals, sandwiches, lollies, sweets and chocolates.

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Camden Cafes and Milk Bars

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The local milk bar is a largely unrecognized part of Camden modernism where the latest trends in American food culture made their way into the small country town by Australian-Greek immigrants. The design, equipment and fit-out of local cafes and milk bars was at the cutting edge of Interwar fashion. The cafes were a touch of the exotic with their Art Deco style interiors, where fantasy met food without the social barriers of daily life of the Interwar period. Camden milk bars rarely just sold milk shakes unlike their counterparts in the city. To make a living and ensure that their businesses paid their way the cafes and milk bars also sold fruit and vegetables, meals, sandwiches, lollies, sweets and chocolates.

The history of the milk bar

The milk bar, along with other aspects of Art Deco style of the Interwar period, are going through a nostalgia boom. Hurstville Museum curator Birgit Heilmann has written an article ‘Sydney has taken to milk’ with memories of the local residents on milk bars in the St George area. The museum recently hosted a touring exhibition ‘Selling an American Dream: Australia’s Greek Café’, which was part of the ‘In their Own Image: Greek-Australians National Project’ based at Macquarie University.

Before the fast-food phenomena exploded in Australia in the 1960s the Greek café was an important influence on Australian eating habits. The mixed grill was supplemented with sodas, milk shakes, hamburgers, ice-cream sundaes, milk chocolate and hard sugar lollies. The Australian Greek café was a transnational phenomena whose origins are buried in the Greek café start-ups on the US east coast where Australian-Greek immigrants, who came from the US, learnt the trade as they came to terms with American modernism.

The first milk bar in Australia opened in 1932 in Martin Place in Sydney. It pioneered many of the aspects of the milk bar and was an instant hit. By the 1940s the milk bar had taken off and combined refined dining, ease of access, local cuisines, soda fountains and the first fast food. The milk bars were popularized in the 1930s with the introduction of the milk stiring machine and the malted milk shake maker, while before this the 1920s soda fountains were popular.
According to Macquarie University researchers Effy Alexakis and Leonard Janiszewski milkshakes were originally a health food made with milk, fruit, cream, eggs, chocolate, malt and other ingredients. Ice-cream, milk fat and artificial flavours were popularised in the 1950s. Milk bars and cafes were a combination of food and fantasy, and in country towns they were a touch of exotica that often combined with the Hollywood movie palace. The Greek cafe, according to Joanne Back at the National Museum, was the centre of entertainment in country towns and the centre of life for the first date and the first kiss in the booth. Greek cafes according to Leonard Janiszewski transferred ideas from the USA and transformed them into a combination of American style food trends with Australian cuisine. They were aimed at the whole family and acted to break down the social class barriers that were common in country towns. Greek cafes were often fitted out in the latest in Art Deco style design and furniture from Europe and USA (streamline Art Deco). Sometimes the temperance movement influence was instrumental in trying to get young people away from the hotels.

Camden Cafe, 95 Argyle Street, Camden

One of the longest surviving Camden sites which hosted a cafe is at 95 Argyle Street, Camden. The site is currently occupied the Cafe Creme Della Creme. Up to 1920 the site was occupied by Jimmy Stuckey who ran a fruit shop and Stuckey Bros sold cakes, bread, there where their bakery was closed and before this Amy Stuckey ran a boot making business.

The first dedicated cafe on the site was owned and run by the Greek Sophios Brothers and called the Camden Cafe. In 1922 the Les and Dave Sophios renovated the site to bring it up to the standard of ‘leading city restaurants’. (CN7/9/22). The brothers owned and operated a confectionary factory at Lithgow which made chocolates. The brothers also operated cafes in Sydney which they sold in 1925, and at Lithgow, which was called the Blue Bird Cafe. The Lithgow cafe operated at a ‘Sundae and Candy Shop’ and boasted ‘an American Soda Fountain’. (1930Freemans’ Journal) The 1925 Camden News claimed that the brothers operated ‘the finest Sundae Shop in the State’. (CN12/11/25)

In 1925 the Sophios brothers sold out to fellow Greeks the Cassimatis brothers. Manual and S. James ‘Jim’ Cassimatis ran the cafe from 1925 to 1946 and in 1935 renamed the business the Capital Cafe. They rented the site off the Stuckeys until 1939. In 1927 the brothers advertised the business as the Camden Cafe and Refreshment Rooms and sold: fruit and vegetables; afternoon tea, coffee, chocolate with biscuits, cakes, sandwiches or toast; ‘meals til late’; fountain drinks and ice cream. Between 1946 and 1950 Ina Cameron and her husband Gordon ran the cafe while Cassimatis’s were in Greece.

Since 2008 the site has been occupied by Cafe Creme Della Creme a continental patisserie.

Cameron’s Capital Cafe 1946-1950

Ina Cameron recalled (CHS Meeting 14/4/2008 and and Camden Advertiser in 2010 and 2008):

In 1946 Ina and her new husband Gordon took over the Capital Cafe in partnership with her brother and sister in law. They spent 4 years there and Ina says that it was a hard 4 years, although ‘I loved cooking’.

‘The day started at 6.00am cleaning up the long fridge and making sure that everything was OK for opening. We worked all day. All that had to be done every morning. We had to get bread early and put in the fridge to cool it down so that we could slice it up and then put out on table to make sandwiches.'
'On Monday we had fruit and vegetables from Sydney market. I had to do a ‘fruit window’ and get rid of bad fruit. On Monday we made 5 gallons of fruit salad and sold a serve for 2/6.

'Meals served a mixed grill, 2/9, steak and eggs, 2/6, sausage and eggs, 2/-We had the best place for tea and coffee. The banana splits were very popular and it felt like we spent half our time making them. We did meals, scones, sandwiches – we did everything. Sausages came from Boardmans, and bread from Stuckeys.

'The shop layout. There was a long window of ice-cream and one of milk. Along the top of the counter there were little containers with flavours for milk shakes. Seats in teh café and closed in booths at the back.

'The buses travelled between the Sydney to Melbourne on the Hume Highway [which ran along the main street] and they would stop in the morning and afternoon. Drivers had a uniform and pretty handsome as well.

'The pictures were twice a week and we would finish up after midnight after the picture crowd had been and gone. Tuesday was Camden sale day and we provide sandwiches, along with late dinner and fruit salad. The girls who waited for us liked to be on that night [sale day] because they got good tips.

' The Chinese market gardeners would bring their vegetable to us, whatever was in season. The Chinese market gardeners grew vegetables along the banks of the Nepean River. They give me a bag of fresh vegetables each time they travelled into town. I enjoyed chatting with the gypsy king who would drop into the store for a cup of tea whenever he was in town to visit the gypsies who lived at the bottom of Chelaston Street.

The 1948 Camden Social Survey stated that Cameron’s café [Capital Café] employed 4 girls and catered to the Pioneer Tourist Car. There are 4 Pioneer buses a day and a Fox tour once a fortnight. The buses usually contain 20 passengers plus the driver. The tours are on their way to Adelaide, Melbourne, Kosciusko and the Riverina Irrigation areas. The authors of the survey felt that ‘the number of tourists does not tax restaurant facilities.’

Camden Café 1938-1945

Len Heame wrote in 2014 that Frank and Mary Heame owned and operated the Camden Café at 91 Argyle Street, (now Camden Pharmacy). The café was a popular stop for servicemen from in the local area [from the Narellan Military Camp, RAAF personnel from the Camden Airfield and the NCOs stationed at Studley Park ECTS]. They came into Camden 'by the truckload and inevitably they all made their way to the Camden Café for a decent meal. Frank and Mary got to know some of the servicemen before they were shipped out to the horrors of a distant war front. There was one US soldier who was a real loner. His name was Chuck and was based at Green’s Corner [Narellan Military Camp]. He had previously worked in a dini in Los Angeles and when on leave in Camden he would always want to held out in the Camden Café. He left a box of his personal items with Frank and Mary and they tried to contact his home after the war without success. The truckloads of young servicemen who came into Camden when on leave had just one thing on their mind – girls- and would end up missing their truck back to their base. They would often come to Frank and Mary asking them to phone a taxi.
Other memories of Camden Cafes

The 1948 Camden Social Survey stated that the hospitality sector (cafes, hotels) were the most common form of employment in Camden and employed 74 women out of a total of 121 employed in the sector. It stated there were 5 cafes in Camden employing 20 people in addition to the 5 owners.

Donald Howard recalls in his memoir The Hub of Camden (2002) the cafes of the 1940s. ‘In the first summer [working at Whiteman's General Store] I found myself consuming 6 milk shakes a week. In those days they were rich and creamy with natural fruit flavouring, but 6 a week meant that 20% of my gross income was being blown on my appetite. I took a drastic step and halved the intake. I was learning that to achieve a certain goal, some sacrifice was often needed. One more lesson for life!’

Fred Gibson, who came to Camden in 1953, recalled there was the Paris Café on the corner of Argyle and Hill Street, Howletts Café is now a hamburger joint. He said that ‘milk shakes were what we drank when you under 20. You never thought of going to the pub. You often bought soft drink – ginger beer – sometimes put a scoop of ice cream in the drink.

In 1938 Pinkerton’s ran a café and they baked their own buns, pastries and cakes. In 1949 Burnell & Sons operated a milk bar at 122 Argyle Street, next to the Commonwealth Bank (recently the site of Gloria Jeans Cafe to 2014). They served McInven’s Ice Cream, iced drinks, fruit and vegetables and offered home deliveries from the milk bar.
Camden Valley Inn Milk Bar

The most iconic Camden milk bar was the Camden Valley Inn Milk Bar which opened in 1939 by the Macarthur Onslows as part of the promotion of their Camden Vale brand of milk. It traded on the healthy qualities of milk at a time when they were promoted by milk authorities in New South Wales. It is one of the outstanding buildings of the Interwar period in the Camden area and was built in the mock-Tudor style that was popular at the time. It was fitted out with the latest milk bar equipment and was noted for having the first drive-through facility in the Camden area where patrons were served milk shakes while seated in their car.

John Wrigley stated in the District Reporter in 2005 that the inn was constructed to promote the sale of Camden Vale milk products which were produced by Camden Park Estate. It was located at the southern end of Camden on the Hume Highway and promotional material boasted: ‘delicious milk drinks of all kinds made from Camden Vale special milk will be served. Camden Vale milk and cream will also be for sale. A feature will be the delicious morning and afternoon teas’.

It was opened during Health Week in November 1939 and RH Nesbitt, the chairman of the NSW Milk Board officiated at the opening. He was given a gold fountain pen and paid tribute to the achievements of the Camden Park Estates Ltd. ‘Doctors Harvey Sutton and Petherbridge set the seal of approval of the British Medical Association upon the proceedings’. There were lots of speeches on the subject of the progress of the dairy industry, the modern hygienic methods of production and distribution with special mention of the ‘keen city demand for the special grade of fresh milk under the name of Camden Vale’. Amongst the guests were Major General James Macarthur Onslow, Dr Harvey Sutton, hygienist, eugenicist and educator and Portia Geach from the Housewives’ Progressive Association of NSW and others.

The inn was designed by architect Cyril Ruwald and the entrance door to the inn was under a porte-cochere in the form of a breezeway or drive-through.

Annette Macarthur Onslow stated it had the appearance of an old coaching stage. She stated in 2005 in the District Reporter that architect Cyril Ruwald was a friend of her parents, Edward and Winifred Macarthur Onslow. They spent much time examining photographs of English country inns and how to achieve the same ‘charming settled look’ in Camden.

Apparently trade in milk-shakes was brisk as the concept was relatively new to Australia as was the concept of a drive-through ‘where one could remain seated in a car and buy take-away milk shakes in waxed cartons’.

Gladys Mead ran the milk bar. Annette Macarthur Onslow recalls: ‘To us children it was a place of wonder with bottles of colourful essences and generous containers of creamy milk which, with a dollop of ice cream and quick whisk, could fill four glasses for 4d. Gladys was a wizard cook. Her Devonshire Teas with freshly baked scones, whipped cream and strawberry jam found plenty of customers.’

Paris Cafe Camden

Ruth Funnell Wotton on Facebook 28 May 2015 says

“ My Aunty & Uncle owed & ran the Paris Cafe on the corner of Argyle and Hill street Camden . I remember as a child sitting on the backstep of the shop and being treated with an ice cream cone … because my mother used to go and help with the busy times of day lunch time etc … Their name was Amos & Dorothy Dowle ….much later years the Summers Annette Mark etc parents ran it I recall ?

Read more about Australian cafes and milk bars

Read more about the exhibition: ‘Selling an American Dream: Australia’s Greek Café @ the National Museum of Australian in Canberra Click here

and @ the Hurstville Museum and Gallery Click here

Read about the Macquarie University exhibition: ‘Selling an American Dream: Australia’s Greek Café Click here and Click here

Read Birgit Heilmann’s article ‘Sydney has taken to milk’ Click here

Listen to more in these podcasts on ABC about ‘Greek Cafes’ on Radio Bush Telegraph 5 August 2014 Click here and the ‘Olympia Milk Bar’ on Radio National on 28 March 2011 Click here

Read more on Sydney Greek milk bars @ Scratchings Sydney Click here and Neoskosmos ‘The Birth of a Milk Bar’, Click here and in The Sydney Morning Herald in an article ‘Milk Bars and Rock Music Living the American Dream in a Greek Cafe Click here

Leonard Janiszewski with the story of Australia’s Greek cafes and milk bars on ABC Local Radio Conversations with Richard Fidler 2 May 2016 Listen Click here

ABC Radio states
When the first Milk Bar opened in Martin Place, Sydney, in 1932, people queued in their thousands for a taste of America. With its art deco design, and single, sweet product, the impact of Adams’ Black and White 4d. Milk Bar was far-reaching. As they spread across the country, to every town on the railway line, Greek-run milk bars and cafes became a focal point of community life: for celebrations, meetings, family meals and romance. For more than 30 years, historian Leonard Janiszewski and photographer Efy Alexakis have investigated and documented the history of Greek Australian culture. They discovered these cafes and milk bars were a kind of Trojan horse for the Americanisation of Australian culture, bringing in American refreshments, cinema, and music.

Further information on Leonard Janiszewski’s Greek Cafes & Milk Bars of Australia Click here

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← Life, horses and the Army at Narellan in WW2

3 thoughts on “Camden Cafes and Milk Bars”

Toula kallistros  May 4, 2016 at 2:15 pm Edit

As i am a shop proprietor in camden i own fresh and cooked seafood and being Greek i love reading about the past of camden my husband and i work together in this business for 42years thank you for the history i will be following your posts

Reply

camdenhistorynotes  May 4, 2016 at 3:49 pm Edit

What are your experiences of running a local business?
Con Diomis  May 4, 2016 at 7:14 pm Edit

Hi,
Talk about the Greeks bringing there expertise to Cafes.
The Paris Cafe was bought by my Mother and Father Colleen and JIMMY Diomis back in the late 60’s around 1968 and sold in the early 70’s I do believe to either the Sumners or Yhe Gooch family.

Dads Hamburger were made in the traditional way and was famous for them.

Prior to the highway being built all the Buses that being. Ansett, Greyhound and other bus companies all stopped as we were the first Cafe that they came upon in Argyle street when heading to Melbourne.

We had the Wurlitzer Jute box playing and also Greek music especially Zorba the Greek dance when the buses pulled up out the front.

JIMMY also worked at the Camden Cafe when he first came to Camden on the 50’s hence how he ended meeting Colleen Curry of Elderslie.

Here is a picture of the cafe and Dad and myself.

Reply

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