THE FOOD OF FANTASY: GREEK CAFÉS AND MILK BARS

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The café was not only a place where everyone gathered... They were places that gave a certain character to their towns and communities... They were beacons of wonder and delight... They offered the comfort of what was familiar, with the dazzle and sparkle of something new[1](#edn1).

Peter Comino, Greek café proprietor, 1950s – 60s

Style was an essential element of Australia’s Greek cafés and milk bars – an emphasis on exotic, captivating appearances, that initially retained British tastes, but by the 1930s, American aesthetics had begun to dominate.
‘Greek cafés... offered the dazzle and sparkle of something new.’

Hollywood Café, Pitt Street, Sydney, NSW, 1940s, Phillip Phillips (Koutsoukis), on extreme left, was the proprietor.

Photo courtesy D. Vanos, from the ‘In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians’ National Project Archives, Macquarie University, Sydney.

From the 1930s to the 1960s, Greek cafés and milk bars expressed the glamour and allure of America – dazzling Art Deco streamlined reflective surfaces, multi-coloured etched mirrors, badged silver-plated and ceramic tableware, flashing neon lights, gleaming soda-fountain counters, exotic marble-topped tables or highly-polished wooden booths, with waiting staff in stylish uniforms that matched the interior décor. Later, ‘international modernism’, which flourished in the United States following World War II, would provide splashes of bold primary colours and a design simplification that emphasised geometric forms.

But a new world of delights offered by Greek-run enterprises was not limited to just the visual and tactile. Accumulatively, their architectural décor, food products, commercial packaging ideas, marketing concepts, technology, and an association with cinema and popular music, were essentially selling a dream – an American dream – the fantasy of a life-style that was better, richer, fuller. Sodas, milkshakes, ice cream sundaes, milk chocolates and later hamburgers, were the all-important key food elements wrapped within an aspirational fantasy of being able to enjoy American popular culture. A conscious melding of food and fantasy.
The Victoria Café, Perkins Street, Newcastle, NSW, 1930s
Photo courtesy J. Varvaressos, from the ‘In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians’ National Project
Archives, Macquarie University, Sydney

Greeks had begun to enter Australia’s food-catering industry during the gold rush era, 1850s – 1890s. By the 1910s, their involvement was becoming quite pronounced. It provided regular income, maintenance of the family unit, independence from union restrictions upon foreign labour, potential socio-economic mobility – particularly for succeeding generations – and only required limited formal education and knowledge of English. By the late 1930s, their numbers were such that the Greek-run café and milk bar had become an indelible part of urban and rural communities. That continued until at least the mid-1970s. In addition to quick service, long opening hours, and competitive prices, they offered British-Australians their familiar main meals of steak and eggs and mixed grills, together with an American spider soda drink, milkshake or ‘American Beauty’ fancy ice cream sundae to wash it all down, whilst sitting in booths listening to the jukebox within an environment that seemed to capture a ‘sense of Hollywood’. For Steve Margaritis – who worked at the Balonne Café in St George in southern Queensland – by the 1950s, that beguiling fantasy was well and truly entrenched: ‘After the pictures, about 100 or 150 happy and excited people would come into the café... The pictures promised them Hollywood. The café continued the illusion’.[2](#edn2)

The transmission of American influences to Australia by early Greek food caterers should not be surprising – particularly when considered within the context of the global movements and networks of the Greek diaspora in the modern era. Quite a number of Australia’s early Greek settlers had worked in the United States as caterers in diners, cafés, drugstore soda ‘parlors’, confectionery stores and
refreshment rooms, or were regularly corresponding with relatives and friends still working there in the industry. Ideas, experiences and skills picked up from America were then applied within the Australian catering context. Victor Cominos' grandfather (also named Victor Cominos), worked in food catering in the United States before migrating to Australia:

*He arrived in Emerald [Queensland] in 1921... the business... was called the Paris Café and American Bar. The technology from America was used... everything was upmarket... I think the early Greeks... [who went] to the United Sates... saw things... they became modern.*[3](#edn3)

As a psychological means to attract and generate product sales, the start of the 'value-added' union between food and fantasy emerged through the predecessors of Greek-run cafés and milk bars – Greek-run oyster saloons and soda/sundae parlours. Unlike British-Australian oyster saloons that traditionally targeted working-class males and limited their sales essentially to oysters and beer, Greek-run oyster saloons broadened their range of clientele to include women and families, and their food offerings to include 'American-style' confectionery, milk chocolates and ice cream, as well as fruit and red meat. Just before the 1910s, the American 'front-service' soda fountain began to appear in these establishments. By the mid-1910s Greek-run oyster saloons were evolving into soda and sundae 'parlors'. And it is here that we first witness the fantasy elements emerging.

*Canberra Dining Rooms and Oyster Saloon* Queanbeyan, NSW, 1914

Note the signage on the central window: 'American Confectionery & Ice Cream.'

Photo courtesy N. George, from the *In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians* National Project Archives, Macquarie University, Sydney
Soda fountains were the original, modern, 'light fantastic' – the back bar and soda pump column featuring coloured lights, stained glass and reflective surfaces. Colours would bounce off back-bar and side-wall mirrors, gleaming glass essence bottles with silver and gold tops, as well as glossy service-counter surfaces and highly-polished silverware and marble dining table tops. The gurgling and whoosh sound of the soda pump in operation combined with the all-pervading scent of organic essences as their containment bottles were opened to add flavour to the liquid, further intoxicated the senses. For many Australian rural town folk, this was also their first experience of electricity – generators were used to operate the shop's fountains and lighting long before serviced electricity came to country regions. Front window displays of milk chocolate boxes and fruit in coloured wrapping paper, and the serving of ice cream in decoratively-designed silver-badged dishes, captured customer attention and enticed the consumption of these foods – the smooth, rich, creamy, sweet taste of American-style milk chocolate and ice cream beguiled Australian palates. Additionally, highly-polished badged silverware provided a sense of well-to-do fine dining — a stylistic, socio-cultural device signifying that refined dining was available to all, not just the affluent. The fantasy and exotic 'wonderland' nature of these eating establishments was often highlighted in publicity photographs taken at night – emphasising that a new world of visual and gastronomic pleasures awaited potential customers.

Packaging was an integral part of the fantasy of Greek-run eating establishments – particularly in regard to 'American-style' milk chocolates and sugar candies. Decorative boxes and tins utilised the psychological suggestion of quality and value, stimulating and intensifying heightened expectation. Whilst such packaging was not altogether new in Australian retailing – particularly for high-end products – its sophistication reached new heights of expression and intent in Greek-run catering enterprises, where 'packaging' style, serviced 'brand': initially, that of individual soda/sundae parlours and cafés (like the famous Paragon Café at Katoomba west of Sydney), and later, international and Australian confectionery companies. Some Greek-run cafés adopted the names of popular milk chocolate brands – Blue Bird Café, White Rose Café, Red Rose Café, Black Cat Café, and California Café. Such intense focus upon packaging of confectionery arguably has American origins – with American confectioner Milton S. Hershey, leading the way in the 1890s.
By the mid-1930s, staff uniforms had consciously become a significant element of a Greek-run café's and milk bar's visual branding. Stylistically, uniforms incorporated the colours, clean lines and bold graphic forms of the external facades, interior furnishings and branded caféware of these catering businesses. Each establishment distinguished itself from its local competitors by highlighting and contrasting different design elements. For example, the pastel blues and yellows and strong Art Deco architectural lines of Gunnedah's Busy Bee Café in north-western New South Wales, were repeated in the enterprise’s female staff uniforms, with 'Busy Bee' decoratively embroidered upon its top left-hand side shawl collar.[4][#_edn4] The trend continued into the 1940s and 50s, the female staff uniforms of Darwin's Star Milk Bar, mimicking the dominate green colouring of the establishment and emblazoned with a red six-pointed star – the milk bar's logo – on the left-hand side chest of the uniform and on the right-hand side hip pocket.[5][#_edn5] At the start of the twentieth century, uniforms in catering businesses had tended to imply 'service' through class stereotyping – staff dress reflected 'domestic servant' attire, in line with the traditional 'exclusive' social stratification of public eating in Great Britain. Uniforms now reflected a business' 'brand' over and above suggestions of domestic servitude. This change expressed another influence transferred from the United States. Uniforms were integrated into the stylistic fantasy of a business' product packaging, architectural elements and furnishings – all harmoniously working together towards inducing food sales.
The commercially conscious, symbiotic relation between fantasy and food – in order to both stimulate and enhance the sale and customer experience of product consumption – was well expressed by the overall architectural aesthetic appeal of Greek-run catering enterprises. By the early 1930s, European Art Deco angular forms and exotic materials dominated – the style architecturally articulated an aesthetic that embodied ‘machine, travel, speed’. Highly-polished white or blue-grey Carrara marble surfaces, streamlined stainless steel counters, glittering gold and silver shaded mirrors, hard-edge signage, chromium and jade-green fittings, glossy laminates and acid-toned glass doors, all aligned Greek cafés and milk bars with what one writer of the time has called ‘a flair towards the art modern’. [6] (#_edn6) However, given the depth of the appeal of the food-catering ‘American fantasy’ propagated by Greek eating establishments, development towards a distinctly American Art Deco architectural temperament soon emerged: California’s ‘Streamline Moderne’ which championed the curvilinear. In Australia it was popularly referred to as the ‘Hollywood style’, the ‘American style’, the ‘ship style’ the ‘ocean liner style’ and the ‘P&O style’. It became the iconic architectural signature of Australia’s Greek cafés and milk bars for the greater part of the twentieth century. One Greek-Australian shopfitter, Stephen C. Varvaressos, was particularly instrumental in progressively applying the style to existing or new Greek-run cafés and milk bars.[7](#_edn7) Jack Castrission points out that in 1938, when his family’s Niagara Café at Gundagai, south-west of Sydney, was refitted to the ‘latest Hollywood style’, it became ‘Australia’s Wonder Café’:

All coloured glass and shiny metal surfaces, curved wave-like entrance windows, large reflective mirrors, polished marble, wooden booths, neon lights out front,
and it had a domed ceiling design filled with stars and the night sky... It was like an oasis in the desert. It was a pleasure palace, and the locals loved it! [8](#edn8).

At this time, picture theatres, like Greek cafés and milk bars, were embracing the new American Art Deco curvilinear trend. Eventually, picture theatre proprietors began to incorporate milk bars into their ‘picture palace’ complexes, taking the seductive association of food and fantasy to one of its most commercially successful expressions. The union of these food-catering businesses and picture theatres offered the tastes, sights and glamour of ‘Hollywood’ like never before and became a socio-cultural metaphor for modernity. Betty Goninan of Coolah, in central-western New South Wales, recalls eagerly lining up with others after the pictures to wait for available seats in the Coolah Café (operated by Peter Feros) during the early 1960s – ‘a long line would stretch from the Coolah picture theatre across the road right to the café’s door’. [9](#edn9) Peter Comino of the Niagara Café in Singleton (north-west of Newcastle) in New South Wales, recalled that ‘when the picture theatre next door was operating we were at battle stations behind the counter... speed was of the essence... the café was simply bursting with people wanting to be served!’ [10](#edn10) Paul Calokerinos who managed the York Café in Manilla (in northern New South Wales) during the 1950s, stated that ‘Everyone would come to town and go to the pictures and then the café...

... Our trade from the Palais picture show was amazing, simply amazing!’ [11](#edn11) Screening primarily American films, picture theatres, reinforced the existing American fantasy of Greek-run eating establishments in Australia – duplicating the working relationship between popular eating establishments and cinema entertainment in the United States. As Mary McDermott, who waitressed in Greek cafés during the 1960s points out:

*Greek cafés were a little bit of Hollywood glamour, a little bit of American life... That’s why they were called the Niagara, the Monterey, the California and the Golden Gate!... That’s why they were next to picture theatres*[12](#edn12).
Civic Picture Theatre, Kelly Street, Scone
A striking example of Californian ‘Streamline Moderne’ Art Deco architecture. The complex included a milk bar and has been owned by the Coroneo family since 1943.
Photo by Effy Alexakis from the ‘In Their Own Image: Greek Australians’ National Project Archives, Macquarie University, Sydney.

Quite a number of Greek café and milk bar proprietors in Australia actually acquired local picture theatres, running both simultaneously, and reaping the benefits of the synergy. Others took up licences to sell confectionery, chocolates, ice cream, and flavoured drinks down the aisles of the auditoriums before, during sessions and at interval. One Greek food caterer, John Kouvelis, developed one of the largest early picture theatre chains in the eastern Australian states, inclusive of milk bars, under his company name of J. K. Capitol Theatres Pty Ltd; in 1946 he sold his cinema holdings to Hoyts.[13](# edn13)

By the 1950s, a new architectural style began to emerge in Australian Greek café and milk bar design – a confident departure from the Art Deco vernacular: ‘international modernism’. Again, American inspired examples were primarily harnessed, and the fusion of food and fantasy to attract patronage continued. With an emphasis on simplification of form and dramatic, dynamic explosions of colour, Patricia’s Milk Bar near Wynyard Station in Sydney, operated by Sam Akon (Economopoulos), and The Legend Café & Milk Bar in Bourke Street, Melbourne, operated by Ion A. Nicolades, are outstanding examples. The former featured a ‘space age’ relief mural by designer Douglas Annand, constructed from found
objects and painted with bold primary colours, whilst the latter’s ‘jazzy’ interior design was orchestrated by sculptor Clement Meadmore and featured seven mural panels by ‘geometric abstractionist’ artist Leonard French.[14](#edn14) The Legend Café’s design, furnishings and mural are an important part of the history of Modernism in both Melbourne and Australia. Indeed, the café was used to promote ‘Modern Melbourne’ during the 1956 Olympics. With its bold terrazzo floor, diagonally patterned fluorescent lighting and coloured stools stunningly complementing the dramatic vibrancy of colour, line and abstract geometric forms of French’s mural series, the Legend is considered by architectural historian Michael Bogle to have been ‘one of Melbourne’s most visually exciting cafés’. [15](#edn15) Such was the eye-catching daring of the café’s design, that it not only attracted Melbourne’s CBD workers, shoppers, theatre and cinema patrons, but also the city’s avant-garde artists such as Clifton Pugh, Arthur Boyd, John Perceval and Fred Williams.[16](#edn16) The Legend’s fresh visual spectacle of food-catering retail design firmly reinforced the commercial significance of connecting food with fantasy.

The Legend Café & Milk Bar: Bourke Street, Melbourne, Vic., c. 1956
Considered to have been ‘one of Melbourne’s most visually exciting cafés’. Photo courtesy I. A. Nicolades and L. French, from the ‘In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians’ National Project Archives, Macquarie University, Sydney

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, jukeboxes were increasingly appearing in Greek cafés and milk bars as part of their entertainment component – as an audial stimulus it added to and heightened the fantasy environments of these catering enterprises. American servicemen on leave had initially stimulated the jukebox
trend during World War II. Con Nikakis points out in regard to his family’s café, the George N, in Melbourne:

*Dad, put a jukebox in the café – all ‘Swing music’*[popular in the United States in the late 1930s and early 1940s] – *in response to the US servicemen on leave... It was a big flashy thing... The pressure was on, that if you didn’t get one [a jukebox] the Yanks wouldn’t come in... An unofficial queue would develop as to who would pick the next song.* [17](#edn17)

Indeed, US military personnel were attracted to Greek cafés and milk bars because of their American elements – the cafés were ‘a home away from home’. [18](#edn18) American, and to a lesser extent, British popular music were heard in Australia’s Greek eating establishments, well before the music’s broad acceptance on Australian radio. Peter Stratos’ family had milk bar/cafés in both Geraldton and Perth in Western Australia. He remembers how the local communities quickly accepted the jukebox as part of their cafes’ attraction:

*We had a jukebox in 1955... Locals wanted to be entertained by their favourite tune whilst eating a hamburger, or downing an American milkshake or sundae treat. The music added to their sense of shared eating and social pleasure... ‘Bodgies’ and ‘Widgies’*[youth subculture – males and females] *would stick around for hours... They were well and truly hooked.* [19](#edn19)
Irene Pantazis’ family ran the Rendezvous Café in Darwin during the 1950s and 1960s: ‘We got the jukebox in the shop around 1958 or 59. Bill Haley was the craze… the locals, particularly the young people, went wild’ [20](#_edn20) Ray Barry claims that when a jukebox was placed into the Hunter Valley’s Denman Café by its Greek proprietor, Harry Logus, during the 1950s, ‘it was always being played – American rock music like Bill Haley… there was standing room only!’ [21](#_edn21) Robert Buchan of St George in southern Queensland remembers that ‘it used to cost sixpence per play to listen to a jukebox record in the 1950s and 60s… and we’d all go to the Greek café to listen and have a feed whenever we could’ [22](#_edn22) By the late 1950s, the food and fantasy union provided by Greek caterers had nourished the emergence of the ‘rock’n’roll’ generation in Australia.

From the early twentieth century Australia’s Greek food caterers were serving both food and fantasy – the consciously melding of the two proved too seductive, too mesmerising, for British-Australians to resist. Greek cafés and milk bars,
together with their predecessors, Greek-run oyster saloons and soda/sundae parlours, by essentially selling an American Dream, provided their customers with a sense that they had experienced a moment when life was better, richer, fuller – and isn’t that how food-catering outlets want their customers to feel, even today?

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[2](#ednref2) Ibid., p. 17.


[4](#ednref4) The Busy Bee’s female uniform and elements of the establishment’s interior decor were utilised to highlight the style relationship in an exhibition by the authors, titled ‘Café Dreaming: Greek Café and Milk Bar Style’ held at the Macquarie University Library Exhibition Space, between 16 April and 30 May 2018.


[7](#ednref7) For an insight into Stephen C. Varvaressos see: Alexakis and Janiszewski, pp.84–85.

[8](#ednref8) Ibid., p.17.

[9](#ednref9) Ibid., p.16.

[10](#ednref10) Ibid., p. 16.


[12](#ednref12) Ibid., p.14. This quote is an extension from what appears in the acknowledged publication. The full quote has been extracted from a recorded oral history interview conducted by the authors and held in the ‘In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians’ National Project Archives, Macquarie University, Sydney: Mary McDermott (née Conway), Nyngan, NSW, 4 October 2002.


[14](#ednref14) Ibid., pp. 50–54.


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