



Living in country towns and isolated from their people, Greek cafe owners sometimes struggled to be accepted into local society. Harassment during World War One was enough to prompt a group of Greek businessmen to draw up this 'Up-Country Shopkeepers Pledge'. Such was their desire to demonstrate their loyalty to Australia. Reproduced with kind permission from Australian National Maritime Museum and Hugh Gilchrist

I ZOI EN AFSTRALIA – LIFE IN AUSTRALIA



Life was difficult for the young men who were sponsored to come to Australia and worked for friends and family. The hours were long with little or no free time and many were exploited by their countrymen. Here a group of young Greek cafe owners and workers relax with a drink. Inverell, c1914. Courtesy Australian Hellenic Historical Society



Life in Australia was published in 1916 by a group of Greek businessmen. It was the first publication in Australia in Greek. The 10,000 copies produced were mostly sent home to Greece and were intended to provide an account of the success that could be found in Australia showing photographs of successful cafes and their proprietors proudly posed out the front. Photo Marce Homer

Greek newcomers to Australia had a bigger impact on cafes and milk bars than any other culture. During the second half of the 19th century as oyster saloons sprang up around Australia, Greek migrants took this craze for seafood and turned it into the milk bars and cafes of the 20th century. In NSW and Queensland most came from the island of Kythera whilst in Victoria, many were Ithacans and in Western Australia those from the tiny island of Kastellorizo predominated. Finding it difficult to gain employment, many Greeks were forced to find new opportunities in Australia for themselves and their families.

The first Greek fish cafe came about when Athanasios Kominos (later Comino) of Kythera was told by his doctor he needed to find light work and eat more fish. Upon visiting a fish shop he was impressed at the ease with which the proprietor battered, cooked and served the fish. So, with partner John Theodore he opened a fish shop at 36 Oxford Street, Sydney in 1878. Legend has it, that upon receiving an order for battered oysters, the pair battered, cooked and served them still in the shell!

From this beginning came the steady flow of Greeks to Australia to work in the cafes as the call came from friends and relatives to come over and start a new life. These people would then go on to open their own cafes, requiring more workers and thus the process of migration continued. Many arrived as young men of 14 and 15 and worked long hours scrubbing floors and cleaning furniture to pay off a sponsor (the person who had financed and arranged their migration to Australia) or a loan and save for their own cafe.



Interior of a Greek cafe from Life in Australia, 1916.

We beg you to make it known in your esteemed journal that those of our fellow-countrymen who come here must have some knowledge of English; otherwise, they must have their return fare, because there are no jobs here. So, because it is impossible to get a job in an Australian shop, if one has no English, it would be better if they stopped coming here, where they can expect to encounter unemployment and adversity – for which we are not responsible.

Letter from Comino brothers to a newspaper in Kythira, 1898, from Australians and Greeks, Volume I: The Early Years. Hugh Gilchrist, Halstead Press, 1992.