

FACT SHEET

ITALIANS IN CARLTON

'When I installed one of the first espresso machines in Melbourne ... the inspectors did not know what to make of it. They said I had to obtain a Boilermaker's Licence before I could get a permit to use it.' After a wait of nearly two years, Nando Varrenti finally gained permission to use the machine in his Carlton bar in 1954. His mother, Norina, had brought the machine to Australia from Italy in her trunk in early 1953. From the IHS Oral History Collection.

The suburb of Carlton

The inner city suburb of Carlton came into being in the 1850s. Its designer, Robert Hoddle, envisaged gracious Italianate homes set around green squares and wide tree lined streets. Carlton quickly became a fashionable address with Lygon Street, then as now, at its commercial centre. By 1880, a handful of first Jewish and then Italian businesses were established in the precinct, as were artists like composer and teacher Alberto Zelman Senior.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Carlton had fallen into decline. Its crumbling Victorian terraces and workers' cottages attracted Jewish and Italian migrants drawn by the suburb's low rents, relative comforts and proximity to factories, to Victoria Markets and other sources of employment.

Patterns of migration

Carlton's "Little Italy" came into being in the first decade of the new century, with the arrival of the travelling musicians of Viggiano, who went about recreating the close-knit village community of their southern homeland in a small area confined to Argyle Square and Cardigan Street. Soon after, the deprivations of the First World War brought Friuliani, Trevisani and Vicentini from the north of Italy. The community continued to grow throughout the 1920s with the rise of fascism and the decision by the United States to turn away Italian migrants. Those who were successful in their new home further added to the numbers by sponsoring the migration of family and friends.

After the Second World War, with Italy on the brink of economic collapse, both jobs and food were scarce. Australia, on the other hand, was embarking on an ambitious industrialisation and population program. Italians were quick to respond to the offer of work in factories and on construction projects. Hundreds made their home in Carlton, many drawn to the Italian-owned boarding houses run by an earlier generation of settlers. By 1960, a quarter of Carlton's population was of Italian origin, with the majority living in North Carlton.

The sites and smells of home

The homes and gardens of Carlton Italians began to resemble those of the villages they had left behind. Old Victorian facades were modified, covered in stucco and painted in pastel colours. Parapets were added and verandas opened up to the street. Every inch of the garden was put to use: fruit and vegetables were planted, room made for chickens and for bottling tomatoes and pressing wine. There was space for friends to play cards, eat *al fresco* or play *bocce*. It was not uncommon to find a workshop which doubled as a kitchen and cellar at the rear of the house. In his

backyard workshop, musician Giovanni Cera would fashion mandolins over a pot of boiling minestrone.

On Sundays after mass, Italians would descend on the parks and gardens of Carlton for the traditional *passaggiata* (stroll). The Exhibition Building, with its Italianate domes and arches and elegant gardens, was one of the most popular meeting places and a backdrop to countless photographs sent home to family and friends in Italy.

As the community of Little Italy grew, so too did businesses that were able to meet the need for Italian-speaking staff with a personalised approach to the provision of Italian products and services. From the late 1920s onward, the shopping precinct took on the character of an Italian village with migrant-owned grocery and fruit and vegetable shops, barbers, bakeries, patisserie shops, gelaterie, cafes and restaurants, music shops, booksellers, and tailors and shoemakers. These businesses were family affairs where parents and children served behind the counter and lived on the premises.

Grocery shops dotted the suburb, with names like Agostino's, Dalla Toscana, Di Santo's, Lorenzoni's, Valente's, Varrenti's and the Valmorbida family's King and Godfree and Lygon Street Foodstore. Until the 1970s these were the only outlets where Melbournians could buy tomato paste, quality pasta, extra virgin olive oil in bulk, and seasonal cakes such as the Christmas *panettone* and the Easter *colomba*. These shops, along with restaurants, were an important income stream for the manufacturers of locally made Italian products such as Tibaldi smallgoods, San Remo pasta and biscuits, and the Perfect Cheese company's dairy produce. Anyone wanting to buy traditional Italian-style breads could drop in to Carrazzo's or Frank Polesel and Guido Migliorini's Exhibition Bakeries.

Two of the most successful grocery shops were run by women. Widowed and with a small child in tow, the ebullient Genoveffa Donchi arrived in Australia with nothing but determination and a good head for business. Dalla Toscana opened its doors in the late 1920s and became a roaring success, surviving even the strong anti-Italian sentiment of the war years. Norina Varrenti launched her "High Class Continental and Australian Grocery and Delicatessen" in 1952. Mamma Varrenti's shop became a lifeline for the newly-arrived, who would congregate in the doorways for information about work opportunities and accommodation, and news of those left behind in Italy.

Italian tailors appeared in the neighbourhood from the 1920s onward. Family businesses like Andreetta, Bisetto and Basso, Cavedon, Gradito, Del Monaco, Papaleo and Di Mase would become associated with style and quality and do much to influence fashion in Melbourne. In the 1950s and 1960s, Prospero Papaleo, founding secretary of the Lygon Street Traders' Promotion Committee led a movement to modernise Lygon Street shopfronts, giving the precinct what is now considered to be its quintessential Italian flavour.

One of Carlton's first Italian barbers, Giovanni Angerame, opened his Lygon Street salon in the mid-1930s. In 1938, he sponsored the migration of his brother Ernesto, who trained under him before establishing his own business. In the 1960s, Ernesto became the official barber to the Carlton Football team. From 1949 to 1984, he was proprietor of the celebrated Sportsmen's Saloon, a combined barber and tobacconist shop where local and visiting sportsmen would congregate to drink coffee and gossip over a haircut.

Beniamino Braida's Federated Granolithic was one of many Italian terrazzo and construction companies operating from Carlton. The business had premises at Villa Castelnuovo in Palmerston Street from 1935 till the early 1970s.

Former Olympic champion cyclist Nino Borsari opened his Borsari Emporium, the first large-scale operation catering to the needs of an Italian clientele, at the corner of Lygon and Grattan Streets in 1941. He and wife Fanny sold sporting equipment, Italian newspapers and magazines, jewellery, cutlery, crockery, *bomboniere* (wedding keepsakes), furniture and electrical goods. A neon sign, featuring Borsari on a racing bike, still graces the corner where the shop once stood.

Mass migration in the 1950s and 1960s and a growing interest in Italian food and culture within the broader Australian community saw the establishment of Italian espresso bars and restaurants including Caffè Sport, La Gina, University Caffè, Don Basilio and La Cacciatore. Toto's, one of Australia's first pizza restaurants, opened to great fanfare in the late 1960s. These venues, with their cheap meals, sly grog and billiards, became central to the cosmopolitan life of Carlton as newly-arrived migrants from local boarding houses rubbed shoulders with artists, intellectuals and students from The University of Melbourne.

Secular and religious life

Between the wars, Italian children attended St George's School (part of the Sacred Heart Catholic Church) in Carlton, or St Mark's and St Brigid's in North Carlton. By the 1960s, the majority of students enrolled at St George's were Italian.

Father Ugo Modotti, who arrived in Melbourne in 1938, was the first priest to deliver Italian sermons at the predominantly Irish St George's Church. In the decades that followed, St George's would become the favoured venue for Italian weddings, funerals, baptisms and confirmations. The church hall was regularly booked for community dances, concerts and fundraisers. Another focal point was the Lourdes Grotto, in the church grounds. Built during the Second World War by Italian terrazzo and cement workers, the Grotto was an assertion of cultural pride at a time when the community was publicly vilified. It served as the backdrop for festivals, processions and photographs commemorating family milestones.

Clubs were central to the social life of the community from the 1800s onward. The largest, the Cavour, was a tram ride away in South Melbourne. Most clubs, like the anti-fascist Casa d'Italia in Palmerston Street, Carlton held dances and concerts, ran English classes and organised political and fundraising events. Mass migration in the 1950s and 1960s brought a larger and more diverse Italian community to Carlton. This era heralded the establishment of hundreds of regional clubs, some in Carlton and nearby Brunswick and the majority in suburbs beyond the city fringe.

By the end of the 1960s, the welfare needs of this growing and increasingly aging population led to the establishment, in Carlton, of the welfare assistance organisation COASIT.

Carlton today

Carlton retains something of its Italian past in the local architecture and the many Italian bars, restaurants, delicatessens, gelaterie, bookshops, and music and clothes shops. While much of Carlton has become gentrified, cheap highrise accommodation ensures that the suburb still attracts migrants, who nowadays hail from Africa, Asia and the Middle East. During the 1970s, factories and businesses moved to the outer suburbs, and Italians—with their preference for minimising travel and maximising time with friends and family—followed.

Italians in Carlton in the Italian Historical Society Collection

You will find a range of publications, photographs, correspondence and other documents relating to the Italians in Carlton in the following collections:

- Candela Collection
- Del Monaco Collection
- Document Collection
- Fashion Collection
- Food Collection
- Library
- Newspaper Collection
- Opera Collection
- Oral History Collection
- Photographic Collection

See also the following Italian Historical Society Fact Sheets:

- Contribution of Women
- Italian migration 1850-1900
- Italian migration 1900-1945
- Italian migration 1945-1970
- Map: Italy
- The Arts
- Trades and Professions

Further reading

The resources listed below can be accessed at the Italian Historical Society.

Publications

Carlyle, D (ed) 1992, *Bridging two worlds: Jews, Italians and Carlton*, Jewish Museum of Australia, the Italian Historical Society and the Museum of Victoria, Melbourne.

Castles, S et al. (eds) 1992, *Australia's Italians: culture and community in a changing society*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, New South Wales.

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Maguire, R et al 1993, *The Italian connection: Italian artists in nineteenth century Australia: seminar papers*, National Trust of Australia, The Rocks, Sydney.

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Sagazio, C 1988, *A walk through Italian Carlton*, National Trust, Melbourne.

Yule, P (ed.) 2004, *Carlton: a history*, Melbourne University Publishing, Victoria.

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Italian Historical Society Journal 1993-, Italian Historical Society—COASIT, Carlton, Victoria.

Internet sites

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Martinuzzi-O'Brien, I 2002, *Italian Australia Records Project (IARP)*, Victoria University, Melbourne, <http://w2.vu.edu.au/iarp/Default.asp>

Museum Victoria 2003, *Immigration Museum*, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, <http://Immigration.museum.vic.gov.au>

National Archives of Australia 2005, *Welcome to the National Archives of Australia*, NAA, Canberra, <http://www.naa.gov.au>

State Library of Victoria 2004, *Pictures catalogue*, SLV, Melbourne, <http://sinpic.slv.vic.gov.au/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&PAGE=First>

Audio-visual

Australia's Italians: 5 interviews 1988, video recording, Italian Historical Society—COASIT, Carlton, Victoria.

Hard work and hope: Australia's Italians 1989, video recording, Italian Historical Society—COASIT and Equality Press, Carlton, Victoria.

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