

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF ITALIAN CUISINE IN AUSTRALIA

by Vicki Swinbank

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This is Part One of an edited talk given at the Italian Cuisine Expo held in Melbourne in 1994. Part Two will be published in the next issue.

Attempting to describe the impact and influence of Italian cuisine in Australia is rather like trying to describe the climate - it is so omnipresent that you are scarcely aware of it unless you stop to think about it. In short, it is one of those things that one almost takes for granted, but without which life would be so much the poorer and less interesting; were all Italian influence to be somehow suddenly removed from our midst, we would be painfully aware of its absence.

Possibly nowhere has the influence of Italian migration to Australia been more strongly felt than in restaurants. I think it is probably a commonly held misconception that it is only since the mass migration programmes of the 1950s and 1960s that Italian restaurants have been a dominant feature of the restaurant scene here. In fact, Italian restaurants have existed in Australia wherever any number of Italians settled. This was especially so in the capital cities, most notably Melbourne and Sydney. I will concentrate on the Italian influence in Melbourne - partly because this is where there has been the greatest concentration of Italian migrants, and also because, as a Melburnian, this is the city with which I am most familiar.

One of the earliest contributors was Vincent Fasoli, who arrived in Australia from Como in the 1870s and established Fasoli's restaurant at 108 Lonsdale Street in 1897. This trattoria became an institution, attracting a loyal and enthusiastic following amongst the Melbourne intelligentsia and bohemians of the day, where, over good and honest 'casalinga' cooking, animated discussion, conviviality and music extended far into the night. A typical menu consisted (as described in Michael Symons' history of eating in Australia *One Continuous Picnic*) of an antipasto of salame, followed by a soup or plate of spaghetti (made by the proprietors) and only one main course, which

might be a hearty stew such as osso buco, finishing up with fruit and cheese. All this was of course accompanied by copious amounts of wine - and all of this for a "trifling one shilling and threepence".



From 1897 to 1907 Fasoli's restaurant was located in these premises in Lonsdale Street.

Fasoli's set a precedent for the flourishing cafe society that developed among the Italian community in Melbourne during the 1920s and 1930s. In 1919 Ernesto Molina opened the Café d'Italia at 55 Lonsdale Street. Ernesto had arrived in Adelaide in 1912 from Rome, with his friend and colleague Salvatore (later to be chef at the Florentino), where they worked at the prestigious South Australia Hotel for two years before coming to Melbourne. Molina established his restaurant on the site of the old Rinaldi's Cucina Italiana, a popular eating place run by the Giovanni Rinaldi family since the beginning of the century. At the Café d'Italia good home cooking was served: minestrone, followed by spaghetti, lasagne or ravioli, then a main course of perhaps cutlets milanese, etc. with salad, beans and bread, finishing off with fruit and cheese. After the Second World War the



Ernesto Molina with his son's family in c.1925

restaurant moved to Bourke Street and was renamed Molina's.

The next to follow in this tradition was the famous Café Latin, established c.1919 at 206 Exhibition Street by Philip Navaretti who had arrived in Australia from Milan in 1914. The Latin was at the theatre end of Melbourne, where most of the Italian restaurants were to be established, and so attracted many artists, including Dame Nellie Melba and visiting Italian opera companies. A famous visiting Italian conductor at the time, Paolantonio, is reputed to have said *"the best spaghetti I ever tasted, I had at the Café Latin, Melbourne"*. In 1924 Navaretti sold the Latin to Rinaldo Massoni and Camillo Triaca, and as they say "the rest is history". Rinaldo Massoni, a native of Lucca, had emigrated to Australia in 1911; Camillo Triaca was a sculptor, also from Lucca, who arrived here before the First World War. Both Massoni and Triaca were to have a profound influence on the restaurant scene in Melbourne, a tradition carried on by their sons, Leon Massoni and David Triaca. Later, under the sole ownership of Camillo, and then his son David, the Café Latin

remained in Exhibition Street until 1955 and then in Lonsdale Street until 1984, when it was sold to Bill and Cheryl Marchetti. Camillo Triaca held strong views about the importance of accompanying food with good wine, and did much to educate his non-Italian dining public to drink good quality table wines.

The next newcomer to the Melbourne Italian restaurant scene and which was to have a profound impact on Melbourne's culinary culture in the decades to follow was the Florentino which was founded by Rinaldo Massoni in 1928. With its dark wooden panelling, murals of famous Tuscans and formal atmosphere, it became an institution in Melbourne and a Mecca for those seeking ambience and high quality authentic Italian cuisine. I remember well, as a child, my parents on special occasions making the then long journey up to Melbourne from the Mornington Peninsula to dine at the Florentino.

Like Triaca at the Latin, Massoni promoted the pairing of good Italian cooking with good quality Australian wines. In fact the building which housed the Florentino, was leased from Samuel

Cafe Florentino Menu

FRIDAY 3RD. JULY 1942:

TABLE D'HOTE

Hors D'Oeuvres

Mixed 6d.
Special 1/-

Soup

Consomme **SEMOLINA**
Minestrone
Spaghetti in Sauce

Entrees

FRIED WHITING AU CITRON
LOBSTER SALAD 1/- EXTRA
CHICKEN SALAD
ESCALLOPINE PICCATE
FRENCH CUTLETS
CUTLETS MILANESE
GRILLED LOIN STEAK
ROAST CHICKEN 1/6 EXTRA
COLD ROAST CHICKEN & HAM 1/6 EXTRA
YORK HAM SALAD
SWEETBREAD AU MADERA
BOCONCINI VENETIANI
ICE CREAM 9D.

Vegetables

FRENCH BEANS .. POTATOES
Cheese
CREAM OR ROMANO 6D.
Black Coffee
(Italian Style)

MINIMUM
CHARGE

SEE BACK FOR WINE LIST

A LA CARTE

Hors D'Oeuvres

Large Plate Oysters 2/6
Small Plate Oysters 1/3
Mixed Hors D'Oeuvres 6d.
Sardines in Oil 1/-
Tunny Fish in Oil 2/-
Fillet Anchovies 1/-
Alici Picanti 1/-
Italian Salame 1/-

Entrees

Fish or Chicken Mayonnaise 2/6
Roasted Chicken 3/6
Escaloppe Viennese 2/6
Chateaubriand Parisienne 3/6
Grilled Fillet Steak 3/6
Grilled Beef Steak 2/-
Florentine Omelette 2/-
Vegetable Omelette 2/-
Sweet Omelette 2/-
Plain Omelette 2/-
Rum Omelette 2/6
Pancake Assortie 1/-

Vegetables

Asparagus in Oil 2/-
Asparagus Alla Parmigiana 2/6
French Beans in Salad 1/6
French Beans Saute in Butter 1/-
Artichokes Natural 1/-
Green Olives 1/-
Black Olives 6d.
French Salad 6d.

Careful selection of Vintage, expert handling, long years of maturation in English oak and in bottle, have each contributed to the final achievement - Wynn's Prize Wines

Wynn's Wines have secured the highest distinctions at all Exhibitions in the Commonwealth and at the Empire Exhibition, London.

Wynn, one of the most prominently wine-makers of the time.

The first chef at the Florentino, Salvatore, who had cooked for King Victor Emmanuel of Italy is credited with having created Australia's first 'cassata'. After Rinaldo Massoni's death in 1941, his son Leon, in partnership with George Tsindos, carried on the business, adding the bistro and the cellar bar whose sophisticated but casual decor and atmosphere continues to this day. To step off Bourke Street into the cool dimness of the cellar bar with its dark wooden panelling briefly provides us with the delightful illusion of being in Italy.

In 1925 Giuseppe Codognotto, who had also emigrated from North Italy, founded the Italian Society or Società Italian in Little Bourke Street, moving to its current premises in Bourke Street

in 1932. It was originally established as a club for the Italian community in Melbourne. During the Second World War the word 'Italian' was deleted from the name, to be reinstated during the post-war years. Interestingly, the clientele which had been largely Italian before the war, changed to predominantly non-Italian Australian in the post-war years.

Mario and Teresa Viganò arrived in Australia in 1928 and opened Mario's restaurant in 1932, where they served traditional trattoria-style meals. It was also something of a cabaret as well, a distinctive feature being its singing waiters. Like the other restaurants mentioned, Mario's attracted artists, writers and people from the theatre. All of these restaurants created a vital and vibrant café society where good food, wine, stimulating conversation and entertainment flourished, transforming and

Dinner Party

GIVEN BY

THE ITALIAN SOCCER TEAM "SAVOIA"

TO WELCOME

THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN JUNIOR
SOCCER TEAM

M E N U

Hors d'Oeuvres

a la "Play the Game"

Soup

a la "Mind the Shins"

Spaghetti

a la "Melee"

Scaloppine

a la "Crook Referee"

Coffee

a la "Pick-me-up"



Fruit

a la "Raspberry"

ITALIAN SOCIETY
RESTAURANT

Melbourne,
August, 1939.

commonplace as hamburgers, even if it is sometimes adapted to the Aussie palate, with the addition of pineapple and fried eggs.

During the two decades following World War II, Carlton, (which had previously had a large Jewish population), became the focal point of Italian settlement in Melbourne. I have very fond memories of living in Carlton as a student in the late 1960s and early 1970s; I loved the little Italian bistros where you could get inexpensive authentic Italian home-cooking, the cafés with their continental atmosphere and real coffee and Italian pastries, the treat of enjoying a real fruit gelato or a granita. Even the famous Watson's Wine bar, where students spent many a pleasant long afternoon (when we should have been at lectures!) had an Italian ambience - after all, Jimmy Watson's mother was Italian!

(End of Part I)

enriching Melbourne's otherwise rather dull and drab restaurant scene at the time. These families, or perhaps more accurately these dynasties, were closely knit, as indeed was the whole of the relatively small Italian community at the time, being bound up with each other personally and professionally - intermarriage between the families was common. Individually and collectively, they helped bring about a massive change in Australian eating habits, a change that was to gain great momentum with the programme of mass migration that took place after the Second World War.

Typical of the Italian restaurants that sprang up in Melbourne in the 1950s were Pellegrini's of Bourke Street, and the University Café and Café Sport in Carlton. A majority of post-World War II migrants came from the south - Calabria and Sicily especially, bringing with them their distinctive southern cuisines. It was during the 1960s that many pizza restaurants began. Toto's, opened by Salvatore Della Bruna from Naples in the early 1960s in Lygon Street was reputedly the first in Australia. Now pizza is as





Café Florentino's waiting staff with proprietor Rinaldo Massoni in 1938.

From left to right (bottom row): Ernesto Comunello, Bruno Comunello, Rinaldo Massoni, Moia and Alzo Mazzoni. Top row: ?, Dom Pancrazio, Mazzola, George Tsindos, Joe Molina, Andrea Pancrazio, Johnny Oanazotis and Amilcare (Mick).



Waiting staff at Mario's restaurant are entertaining their patrons singing a popular Neapolitan song, accompanied by Rino and Giovanni Cera.