



Aphrodite and the mixed grill

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writer and photographer



It was a book that was waiting to be written and I think I was always the person who was going to write it. The catalyst was a lovely lady, Maria, who was working in the only Greek café that we still have left in Ipswich. One day I went in there, it was high summer and it was sweltering. I walked in and she said in this thick Greek accent, 'What's the matter with you?' And I said, 'Oh, it's too hot really.' And then she just dragged me behind the counter and shoved me in the cold room. She had this little stool set up and she said, 'I come in here if it's too hot.' Maria was 75 at that stage and had been working in her café from four in the morning until late at night for so many years.

When I came out of that cold room I was looking out from her side of the counter to the street. And that moment was a turning point for me because suddenly that Greek café went from being just somewhere I ordered a milkshake and I began to get an understanding of all those cafés from the Greek perspective. It was the people and their stories that drew me in. Like Maria and her little stool in the cold room. And the man who had a café across the road from the

picture theatre but never got to go to the pictures because he was always at the café.

I started by interviewing people I knew. There was a friend whose parents had a café and she was great to talk to for the kids' perspectives. And my first boyfriend's mum who was a waitress and still has a beautiful album with photos of the café she worked in as a girl. After that, it just snowballed. One person would say, 'Oh, have you talked to so and so? Or, so and so?' I had more leads than I really had time to follow. The work started as honours research and grew into a book. I went for a Regional Arts Development grant and while it was only small, it was so encouraging. It made me feel like, 'Yes, someone else thinks this is a good project.' And it triggered me to go over to Greece to meet with the café proprietors who have gone back. I saw the prosperity that the Greeks are enjoying again after working so hard and I also saw what they'd left behind to come to Australia in the first place.

We probably had 20 cafés in Ipswich over the course of the 20th century and in the city's heyday there were 10 or 12 of them open. I tried to track down every one and get the stories and the photographs. But then I situated the book into a broader context so that it would have better market appeal than just to the Greek community, and just to Ipswich. I had seen people in their 50s and 60s light up when I told them about the project. They had so many great memories of meeting their mates and girlfriends at the

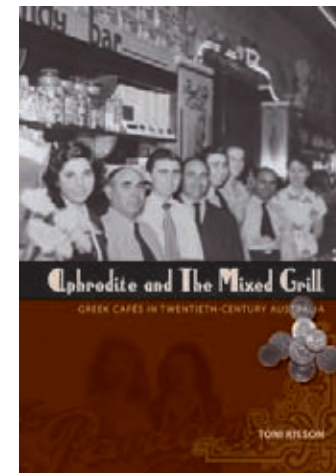
local Greek café. And that idea led me to find some that are still in existence, cafés like the Paragon in Katoomba and the Niagara in Gundagai.

I wasn't too worried about self-publishing but I did decide to invest money in the actual look of the book so people would see it and say, 'I want one!' In theory everything seemed fine and manageable but the day those 1,000 books actually came home in boxes was one of the scariest days of my life. And I'm a woman who has come home with twins! I suppose I was thinking that even though the writing and the research had taken such a big part out of my life and my family's life, when the book actually went to the printer, it would be over. But that was really when it started. Now I had to sell it!

My business plan was to talk the Ipswich Art Gallery into doing an exhibition of the photographs and memorabilia and having a launch of the book there. They did both. I was also really lucky having a media savvy contact who pushed me and I got a very positive response from Peter McCutcheon's *7:30 Report* and that really started a whole stream of live radio interviews: Darwin, Canberra, even Melbourne and Perth. Every time I'd do an interview, the next week I'd get a wave of phone calls, people ringing up or

sending cheques in the mail or knocking on the back door.

If I had my time over, I wouldn't change very much. Except that I would get a website up and running before the book came out. And I'd be more ambitious in applying for a grant. And I'd put a few casseroles in the freezer!





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:

Doris Veneris chats to a customer in her Ipswich shop in the 1960s

Waitresses in their Regal Café uniforms in Ipswich in the 1930s-40s

Inside the Londy family home in Fratsia, Kythera, which gave so many sons and daughters to the café industry in Australia

PHOTOS: TONI RISSON