

Bingara Dreaming

With a date set for the opening of the Roxy Museum, the inspirational story of the Greeks who changed regional Australia forever is about to turn Bingara (Pop 1207) into a place of passionate pilgrimage.

MICHAEL SWEET

It may be a seven hour drive north of Sydney but the tyranny of distance isn't something that should stop anyone with even a passing interest in Australia's hellenic story, or the history of regional Australia itself, from making the journey to Bingara.

After 5 April 2014 there will be an even greater imperative to head there: the Roxy Museum - the final jewel in the crown of the Roxy Theatre complex and the last chapter in the restoration of a truly extraordinary Greek Australian landmark - will finally open its doors.

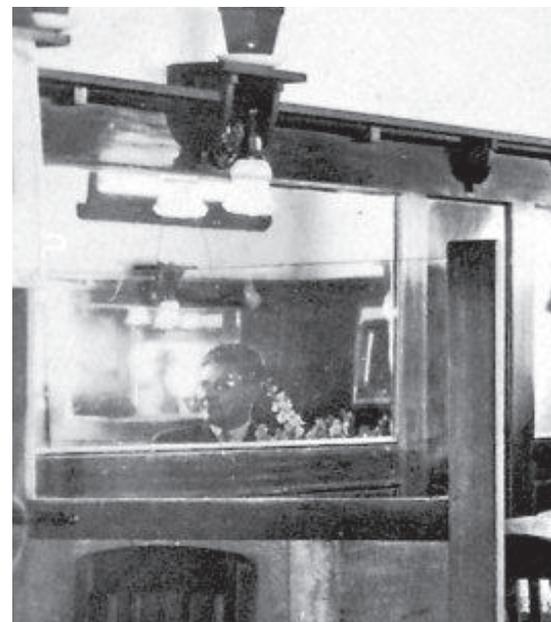
Celebrating the iconic 'Greek café', the inspirational story of the Roxy's founders, and the sheer hard graft of early Greek settlers down under, this is a must-see destination.

With less than six months to go, plans are well-advanced for a series of stunning interactive displays in the historic building, telling the story of the Greek diaspora's experience beyond Australia's cities.

Originally built by three Kytherians in 1936, the Roxy Theatre and adjoining spaces will - after more than a decade of redevelopment - be a shining beacon of memory illuminating the remarkable story of Greek immigration to regional Australia.



Jenni Klempfner of Convergence with Roxy Museum committee member George Poulos discussing the Museum's design.
PHOTO Mike Sweet



Comprising rare memorabilia, photographs, interpretive texts and digital wizardry, the museum will invoke the vivid dream that the Roxy's original creators - and hundreds of other Greek pioneers - realised in New South Wales, Queensland and beyond.

Sydneysider Peter Prineas, grandson of Peter Feros - one of the Roxy's founders - was appointed Curator of the Roxy Museum last year and began researching the Roxy's history in 2004.

His book on the subject - *Katsehamos and the Great Idea* became the catalyst for the building's further redevelopment. Restoration of the café and progress on the museum concept followed.

"I was raised in a Greek café family in a NSW country town. Like many café kids I didn't want to carry on the family business," says Prineas, who apart from his writing, has spent his working life as a lawyer, consultant and environmental activist.

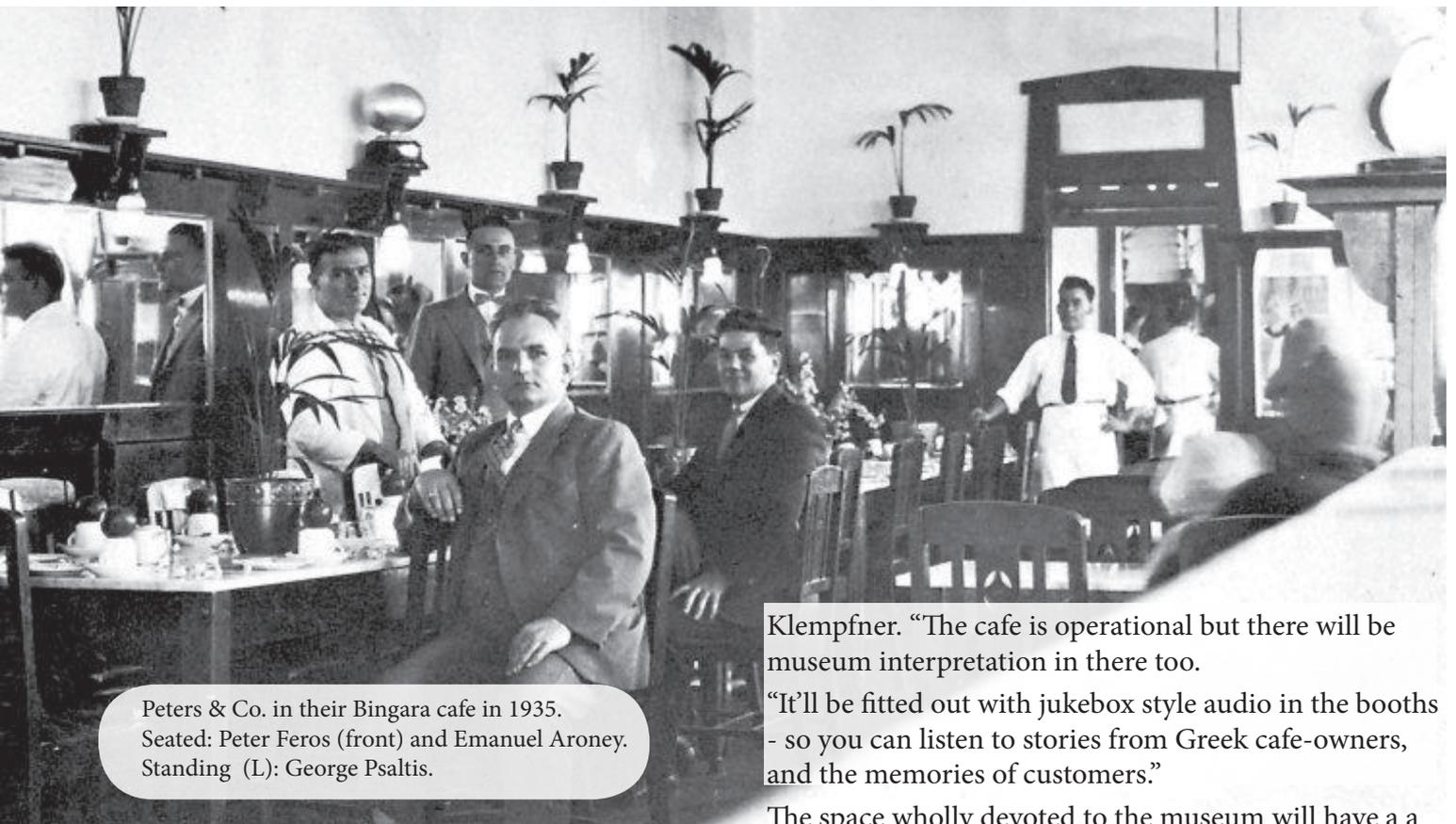
As curator, his intentions are to tell the story of the Roxy building in the wider context of Greek immigration and settlement.

At the heart of the narrative Prineas says, is 'the shopkeeping phenomenon' as first described by Australia's most celebrated chronicler of the Greek Australian experience - historian Hugh Gilchrist.

"There was an aspiration amongst the more successful Greek café operators to extend their interests into picture theatres," says Prineas, "to build what picture theatre historian, Kevin Cork, described as 'Parthenons Down Under'".

Working with former Roxy manager Sandy McNaughton - who was instrumental in much of the early fundraising for the Roxy's refurbishment - raising some \$2m in grants from state and federal government - Prineas has been central to the museum project.

Its major source of income to date has been a \$94,000



Peters & Co. in their Bingara cafe in 1935.
Seated: Peter Feros (front) and Emanuel Aroney.
Standing (L): George Psaltis.

grant from the NSW Government's Arts Program. Other donors include the Nicholas Aroney Trust, the Kytherian Association of Australia, AHEPA and Sydney businessman Nick Politis.

Tackling the design of the museum is the Melbourne-based interpretive design company Convergence Associates - whose previous projects include the Italian Museum in Carlton.

Convergence director Jenny Klempfner says the project is something very special for her Camberwell-based consultancy.

"It's a regional treasure," says the enthusiastic Klempfner - who has twice made the trip to Bingara to research the project.

"My background is in architecture, and to come across a building like that - it's a jewel - a building that's been wonderfully loved and nurtured, both in its inception, and in the last ten years since the council has owned it."

Central to her interpretation of the 50-page design brief given to her by the Roxy's management committee, is to ensure the museum's design responds to the resources available and its management.

"It's a heritage building - and one that's very precious, so we have to tread lightly, the challenge is thinking about who is going to be approaching the museum and how."

With the Roxy's interconnecting shopfronts restored - comprising the traditional Greek cafe - with its elegant art deco fittings and cinema foyer, the museum experience will weave its magic throughout the building.

"We're treating different spaces in different ways," says

Klempfner. "The cafe is operational but there will be museum interpretation in there too.

"It'll be fitted out with jukebox style audio in the booths - so you can listen to stories from Greek cafe-owners, and the memories of customers."

The space wholly devoted to the museum will have a symbolic monument centre-stage - an antique cinema projector.

"We're telling the story of how Greeks came to these country towns. We see the story as a dream - an amazing vision," says Convergence's director.

"We want to create that feeling - of coming from from small villages in Greece that were often very poor. These people who came then had the chutzpah to make a go of it."

One display will focus on 'Greek cafe kids made good'; biographies of remarkable Greek Australians whose early years were spent in cafes.

The first to be celebrated will be pioneering physician Archivides 'Archie' Kalokerinos (1927 - 2012), named Greek Australian of the Century by Neos Kosmos in 2000. By auspicious coincidence Kalokerinos worked in Bingara for ten years and was based in the Roxy building.

The Roxy Museum has a profound tale to tell. Its narrative is not just story of the Roxy - remarkable in itself, but the stories of thousands of Greeks who - through their cafes and cinemas in regional Australia - nourished a young nation and left a legacy of inspiration.

Contributions of memorabilia to the Roxy Museum collection are welcomed. For further information contact Peter Prineas at pphineas@ozemail.com.au

All archive photos courtesy of the Peter Feros Collection. References: Katsehamos and the Great Idea. Peter Prineas. Plateia. 2006. Bingara Roxy Museum Design Brief. 2012. Ph.D thesis of cinema historian Kevin Cork.