

The Paragon café: a Kytherian dream in the Blue Mountains

When the first explorers crossed the Blue Mountains in 1813 they were struck by the wonderfully brilliant blue of the distant hills. Just over a century later, a young Greek migrant from the island of Kythera, part of the Ionian Island group where the English writer Lawrence Durrell famously wrote “that the blue really begins”, arrived in Katoomba and went on to establish a café and confectionery business that still stands today: the Paragon Café.

Zacharias Theodore (Jack) Simos was born on 15 August 1897 in the village of Kousounari, Kythera. Zacharias migrated to Sydney with



several other Kytherian young men arriving in Sydney aboard the RMS Omrah in 1912. He proceeded to find work in various Greek cafés in Sydney and at Tenterfield, before setting up a business at Windsor, selling fruit and vegetables door-to-door.

In 1916, after having saved enough money, Simos arrived in Katoomba and leased a small shop in Katoomba Street, near the Carrington Hotel, which he named the Paragon Café and Oyster Palace, adapting the word “paragon” for a model of excellence.



First advertisement for the Paragon, 15 September 1916 ‘Jack’ Simos had dreams of turning the Paragon into a high-class refreshment room and was able to pursue this goal



after purchasing the shop in 1921. In that year he was joined by his brother, George Simos, who went on to be lauded as a master chocolate confectioner. The Paragon also began advertising itself as a ‘Sundae and Candy Shop’ to take advantage of the growing ‘Americanisation’ trend in Australian food. By 1926, it was trading as Simos Bros.



In 1922 an article appeared in the Blue Mountain Echo (assumed to have been authored by Simos himself) which portrayed the Paragon as the “acme of good taste and modern ideas presented by an enterprising proprietary that believes in nothing but the best”.

In 1925 Simos engaged an architect and a firm of renown shop-fitters to convert the interior of the café premises into an Art Deco-themed establishment, complete with a soda fountain made from the finest Moruya marble, and booths of



Queensland maple and dark timber-paneled walls.

In 1929 Simos traveled to Europe to study the latest trends in the production of confectionery as well as presentation and packaging ideas. On his arrival in Kythera he met and became engaged to Maria Panaretos, the American-born daughter of café proprietors. Mary (as she came to be known) and Zac together returned to Australia in 1930 and to the Paragon café.

Upon their return, they embarked upon two large extensions at the rear of the café to broaden its appeal amongst locals and visitors alike with the provision of private function rooms. In 1934 the Banquet Hall was added with its distinctive pre-Columbian American perforated plaster friezework. It was followed by the Blue Room in 1936 which was inspired by the ‘modern ocean liner’ style, with mirrored walls, mood lighting and a sprung dance floor. Both were designed by the



architect Henry Eli White (who had also designed the Capitol Theatre and later the State Theatre in Sydney in the late-1920s). Inter-war Art Deco with its vivid decorative styles was particularly popular with milk bars and cinemas during the 1930s and in the Paragon there was an eclectic architectural panoply of Art Deco moderne, pre-Columbian and the functional ocean liner influences at play with their adherence to clean geometry, sweeping lines, decorative motifs, and floral and geometric patterns.

To add a distinctly Hellenic touch to this assemblage, after the war Simos commissioned a Dutch artist Otto Steen to create a series of bas-relief



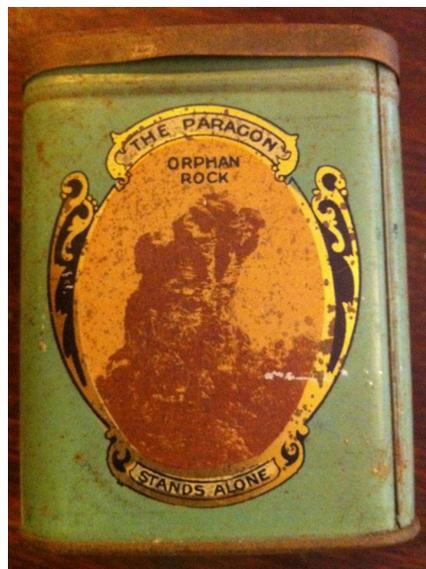
sculptures in alabaster depicting Greek deities, nymphs and goddesses and set against the dark timber paneling above the seating booths of the café. They depicted scenes from Greek mythology, including the judgment of Paris among the three jealous goddesses, a voluptuous Venus with her son Cupid, Pan with his pipes, the flight of Icarus and others.

The Paragon's reputation was far and wide. Its hand-made ice-creams and sundaes blended with syrups and fruit ingredients were popular, as were the bread, cakes and pastries manufactured on the premises. But it was to become famous for its chocolates and other confectioneries sold in exquisitely designed and coloured boxes. The popular Katoomba landmark Orphan Rock became the café's distinctive trademark as it aspired to 'stand-alone' excellence.

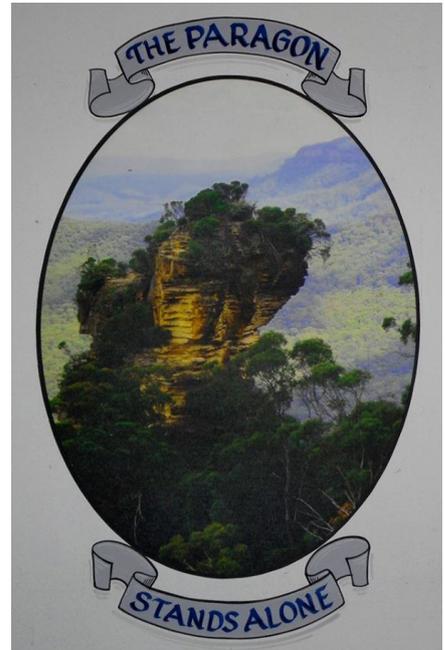
The bakehouse and the chocolaterie which gave The Paragon its name were located upstairs from the mid-1920s, together with the a large refrigeration plant for the ice-cream made on the premises.

As the fame of the Paragon spread and it also started to cater to more adult tastes it would later be described as one of the smartest cocktail bars in the Art Deco style in Australia. Café chairs even carried the "P" motif as branding and marketing figured large in the Simos' promotion of the café in the early 1940s the Simos family home was built: the imposing Art Deco 'Olympus' on Cliff Drive at Echo Point. As one historian has noted, it was the "necessary corollary to the Paragon, blending perfectly with the developed facade of the famous café".

The Paragon is listed on the State Heritage Inventory because of its "state significance", reflecting the



flair and taste of a Greek immigrant family with a wide experience in catering and the need for a high class tea room, sundae parlour, confectionery and ballroom in the inter-war Katoomba for locals and



visitors". The Paragon provided refreshment facilities for visitors who had come to view other attractions like the "Three Sisters" and "Echo Point" as well as being a destination in its own right. It personified how Greek cafés throughout NSW and Queensland in particular reflected an "evolutionary amalgam" of the original Greek coffee house (or kafenion) and the American-inspired oyster saloon and soda parlour.

After 100 years the Paragon Café in Katoomba is truly the "apotheosis" of the Greek café movement in the 1920s and 1930s which was driven in large part by Kytherians such as the Simos family.

Zacharias Simos died on 15 November 1976. Mary Simos continued as manager of the Paragon until 1987 and endeared herself to her customers and visitors for her charm and warmth. The cafe was eventually sold in 2000. Mary Simos died on 15 May 2001 and was buried beside her husband.

In 2016 the Paragon Café remains an exceptionally well preserved Art Deco café and its current operator, the industrious Robyn Parker, and the locally-based Friends of the Paragon are striving to ensure that this iconic landmark in Katoomba survives as a functioning café and living museum.

It is hoped that the Simos legacy will live forever.

George Vardas, May 2016





Peter and Maria Lynch would like to congratulate the Matron of Honour, the Debutantes and their partners on this special occasion.

Congratulations to Amanda Lynch on making her debut tonight and to Michael Constantopedos for partnering her.

