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The shakes that caused a stir

Few places sidled up to the milk bar more eagerly than Sydney, writes Rachel Olding.

It was 1962. On hot and sticky summer nights, chocolate milkshakes lined the tables of every booth of the Rio milk bar in Summer Hill. A jukebox belted out Elvis Presley and girls in bobby socks giggled at boys from the red leather seats.

In 1952 when the pubs closed at 6pm, everyone would kick on to The Rio. They would be three-deep at the bar; customers such as Johnny O'Keefe and Lionel Long waited for milkshakes. "It was like the *Happy Days* series and I was the Fonz," says Nik Poulos, whose 89-year-old father, George, opened The Rio in 1952 and has worked there ever since.

Big jars of lollies and metal cups of lime ice-cream soda glistened in the eyes of children who lined up at the counter. Businessmen would stop in on their way home for a quick shake. Milk had never been so cool.

But was the experience endemic to Sydney?

Debunking the common belief that milk bars were an American invention funnelled to other parts of the Western world after World War II in an avalanche of American food, music and film, two Macquarie University researchers claim Sydney was, in fact, their birthplace.

About 30 years before Nik Poulos was drinking strawberry milkshakes and scoffing lollies in his father's milk bar, another Greek migrant, Joachim Tavlaridis - who adopted the name Mick Adams - opened the Black & White 4d Milk Bar at 24 Martin Place in Sydney. Adams had travelled to America and observed the early-1930s drugstore "soda parlours" where stand-up and bar-stool trade in soda drinks was favoured over sit-down meals.

Taking elements of that concept, he is thought to be the first person in the world to open a venue focusing exclusively on milkshakes, bought from a bar and consumed standing up without food to accompany, historians Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis write in their paper *Shakin' the World Over: The Greek-Australian Milk Bar*.

It was a roaring success.

"It just seemed to click," Janiszewski says. "It seemed to be this idea of something that was good for you and dirt cheap.

It became a place where people would meet up to talk business or you'd take a date there. The pubs became angry because they were losing all their patrons."

The American milkshake was becoming hugely popular around the world and the NSW Board of Health had begun to promote milk as a health food. Adams undercut other sellers with his bargain four-pence price tag and quickly achieved a rapid turnover of customers.

Highly entrepreneurial and perhaps influenced by the American style of overblown pomp and ceremony, openings and anniversaries were gargantuan affairs. As many as 27,000 people were reported to frequent the art deco milk bar each week, standing at the long, hotel-style bar with soda fountain pumps and state-of-the-art milkshake makers manufactured in America.

"He had this big mechanical cow in the window with oil coming out of it to look like milk and there'd be people two or three deep looking at it," says Adams's daughter, Lilian Keldoulis.

"The police had to keep coming to move them on."

In the decades that followed, milk bars proliferated astonishingly. Within five years of opening the Black & White, about 4000 were operating in Australia.

They lined the outer suburbs and country towns from Stanmore and Strathfield to Broken Hill and Bondi. The concept spread to New Zealand, Great Britain, South Africa, Fiji and America. "I was the coolest kid growing up, my friends were so jealous,"

says Arthur Stanton, whose father Norm, a Lebanese migrant, opened Norm's Milk Bar in Strathfield in 1957. "I'd sneak into the movies [at the Strathfield Melba next door] at half-time. I ate all the junk food - Marella Jubes, Fantales, Jaffas. There were pinball machines and a jukebox and everyone would buy ice-creams and milkshakes to take to the movies."

But with the spread of supermarkets, most milk bars either died or morphed into takeaway businesses. The Olympia Milk Bar on Parramatta Road in Stanmore still stands. But only just. Owned by a reclusive Greek man, the milk bar still has its original soda pumps and empty boxes of classic chocolate bars gathering dust. The dilapidated building rarely has its lights on but the door is open almost every day.

In a Facebook group dedicated to the mysterious time warp, people tell of intrepidly entering to buy a \$2.70 milkshake or toasted sandwich.

"Did you go inside?" one member asked.

"I'd love to, the dude freaks me out a bit," replied another.

"C'mon, mate, go inside, sit down and enjoy a milkshake ... Don't be a CHICKEN!"

"Went for a milkshake yesterday with my teenage daughter," another added. "He didn't spook us out, but the place was really dark and it was pouring rain outside at the time. A great bit of nostalgia, imagine if it could be brought back to its former glory with a few pinballs and a jukebox ... I'd be there all the time."

For milk bars such as the Olympia, the pressures of commercialisation have almost become too much, says Tim Downs, who bought Parry's Milkbar in Caringbah in 2004 and restored it to its 1950s glory.

Parry's was run by Greek brothers Peter and Bill Cassimatis for almost 40 years but when selling milkshakes became less profitable, they began to focus on cigarettes and convenience items. "There are just too many impacts of commercialisation; it makes us very uncompetitive," Downs says.

"That nostalgic, home-made touch will eventually leave and you won't see any milk bars around any more. The only reason some have still lasted is just stubborn operators."

But despite his stubbornness, Stanton, 54, who still flips burgers and makes chocolate milkshakes at Norm's Milk Bar, won't pass on the business to one of his five kids. "It's too hard; I wouldn't put them through that," he says. "It's just not like it used to be."



1) Top photo: The Black & White 4d Milk Bar in Martin Place in the early 1930s.

2) Bottom photo: Dear dairy ... it's all froth and bubble at a Kings Cross milk bar in 1946.

Photo: R.L Stewart

