



The newly fitted California Café shop front, 1939

RESTORING A SLICE OF CAFÉ LIFE

The 1920s brought many Greek immigrants to Australian shores who introduced influences that went on to shape the country's popular culture and architecture as well as its culinary tastes. WJ Sanders had the opportunity to peak into this rich historic story when Helen Vanges came to its door. Helen's father was the renowned Evangelos John (Jack) Vanges and owner of rural town Nyngan's Greek café – the California Café.

THE VANGES LEGACY

In 1924, at the tender age of 11, Jack Vanges left the Greek island of Kythera to sail to Australia. He was collected by his uncle Arthur Castrisos, living and attending school at Coffs Harbour. Jack Vanges was a highly accomplished athlete. In his youth he played football, cycled and boxed.

Jack also served the community through public service. He was president of the Group 15 Country Rugby League between 1935 – 1947. From 1951 and until the new RSL Club had the facilities to do so, he donated and hosted the Anzac Day luncheon for returned service men and women, which was held at the Town Hall.

He was very active in many organisations and was elected to various positions including vice president of Nyngan Youth Club (Nyngan Citizens' Boy's Club); president for over 10 years of Nyngan Chamber of Commerce; and president of Great Western Plains Tourist Association. In the 1960s he was elected to the Municipal Council and became mayor of Nyngan serving five terms, during which time he did not accept his mayoral allowance, directing it to be used for the purchase of trees for planting in Nyngan's streets.

Jack was also a member of Rotary which he supported with great enthusiasm. In recognition of his community service, the area near Nyngan's railway station is named Vanges Park, and the Bogan Shire Council erected a monument and plaque to honour Jack and his wife.

HISTORY OF THE CAFÉ

In 1930 Jack's uncle purchased the Golden Gate Café in Nyngan where Jack joined him. Three years later, Jack and a partner bought the café from his uncle. The partnership was short lived, with Jack retaining ownership of the café.

AN AMERICAN STYLE FITOUT

In 1939 Jack refurbished the café in the typical 1930s American style. The whole town turned out on 15 November 1939 for the official opening of the newly re-named California Café. Such local Greek cafés quickly became so much more than just a place to grab a bite to eat, often evolving into the town's social hub – especially for those too young or broke to visit the local pubs.

The California Café's interiors were refurbished by famous Sydney shop fitter Stephen C. Varvaressos to suit the stylised elegance of the Art Deco era. Back-bar designs emphasised coloured lights, mirrors and stained glass while the ceiling was fitted with walnut panelling and wooden walnut benching was installed along one wall. These cubicle/booth patterns were quite popular and were known as 'Italian seating' after the Italians first introduced it to America.

The shop front and windows were entirely reconstructed. The new doors featured an art deco monogram of 'C' for California and bevelled glass. The word 'California' was embossed in chromium steel letters above the windows with a vertical Claude Neon sign suspended above the front awning. New accessories included a 20 foot soda fountain, English crockery and a stainless steel and silver plate service.

CAFÉ WARES OF ANOTHER TIME

The silver plated pieces brought in by Helen included two different sized teapots, a sugar



Right: Photo of the interior of the California Café taken by Frank Hurley. Jack Vanges is behind the bar



EPNS service set before and after restoration



Milkshake container and syrup ladle



bowl, butter dishes, tea spoons, larger ice-cream spoons, thick milkshake canisters and an iconic syrup server. All items were made from EPNS (electro plated nickel silver) and each was beautifully engraved with the words: 'California Café NYNGAN'.

Helen had received a request from Mrs Glad Eldridge, co-ordinator of the Nyngan Inside Story Museum, for photos that could be used by the museum to celebrate the 130th anniversary of the Nyngan railway. This expanded to include original items of silverware. Helen tasked WJ Sanders with the job of restoring the California Café's remaining tea service. Even in their current condition it was clear that these pieces were of quality workmanship.

The majority of the items had been preserved and were in good condition; however the original silver plating was worn back to the base metal on the majority of surfaces. This shows the quality of the metal and craftsmanship of the items, as well as how used they were in their years of service.

CAREFUL PROCESS OF RESTORATION

As part of the restoration process WJ Sanders had to re-shape the lids of the teapots and sugar bowl. The circular shaped finials had also been dented and were restored to a perfect sphere.

Some engraving had become shallow from years of cleaning, so was retraced by in-

Right: Original glass panel advertisement from California Café. Photo George Poulos (www.kythera-family.net)



house engraver Cherie. Once the repair work was carried out, all items were machine hand polished back to the base metal prior to silver plating.

RECORD OF LOCAL HISTORY FOR THE COMMUNITY

The results of WJ Sanders work were outstanding: the old service was brought back to life and looked brand new. The only piece that showed signs of its previous service was the syrup scoop which had become badly pitted over time.

Once restored, the items were donated to the Nyngan Inside Story Museum, which is set up in the heritage restored railway station. The museum collects local family history, relics and items of historical significance. Here the service complements other California Café artefacts featured including a glass panel advertising the numerous milkshake flavours that were on offer, milkshake containers, old signage as well as the original front doors. Nyngan local Lee Atkinson still fondly recalls her teenage years spent at the California Café. 'The coffee may have been instant but the milkshakes were icy cold and creamy and the mixed grills large and meaty.'

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