Wellington cafe culture 1920-2000

Introduction - the daily grind

The Oriental Bay Tea Kiosk, 1914

This exhibition on the history of café culture in Wellington is a group project by seven graduate history students. We were the inaugural class of the Master of Public History (MPHist) offered by the History Department of Victoria University of Wellington.

In 2000, the Master of Public History programme was run part-time, enabling people already working in the field of public history to participate. Besides the required background in history and academic research, we brought to the project a variety of other skills and experience. This mix is the metaphorical caffeine that stimulated our group work.

How the group project arose

Two courses were offered in 2000, PBHY 501: 'What is Public History?', and PBHY 502: 'Presenting the Past'. The latter focussed on the various ways in which history can be packaged for a general rather than a solely academic audience. The aim of the group project was to achieve a practical outcome in the form of an on-line exhibition. The subject - a history of Wellington café culture - was chosen because of its potential interest to a range of people. Presentation of the results of our research in a website exhibition was seen as a way of engaging a wide readership.

How we defined the subject

The date range chosen for our investigation into the history of Wellington's café culture - 1920-2000 - covers a period in the city's development when places selling food and drink were beginning to increase in number and develop distinctive characteristics. We do acknowledge that such establishments existed in Wellington before this time, although they may have been few and far between. We use the term 'café culture' to convey the spectrum of activities, patronage and connections arising from the development and proliferation of cafés.

How we approached the job

First we chose seven different research topics. We designed our results for the web and wove them together to create this site. The original topics proposed - music, gender, ethnicity, class, age of patrons, techniques of coffee making, and how cafés have shaped Wellington - were rejected. Material on some of these topics was too thin to support a reasonably substantial narrative. Next we considered a chronological approach. This was more workable, and vestiges of that idea remain in the present approach. But it was seen as too arbitrary. We decided that the more we became enthusiastic about our topics, the more interesting our contributions would be. After much discussion we ended up with the present seven topics, incorporating themes such as gender, social class and age of patrons where these were significant.

Sources

We used written sources such as books, articles, newspapers, magazines, manuscripts, and local directories. Other information came from archived tapes and films, interviews, on-the-spot investigation and, of course, our own past experience.

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Overview: 1920-1950 - Wellington cafe culture

What did Wellingtonians do before there were coffee houses? Tea rooms and milk bars, 1920–1950

by Rosemary Mercer

The central city

Wellington city centre consists of five main streets: Lambton Quay, Willis Street, Manners Street, Cuba Street and Courtenay Place, and the blocks formed by intersecting streets. The route from the site of the railway station at the north of Lambton Quay to the end of Courtenay Place is easily walked in twenty minutes. Trams or buses, with frequent stops, might take almost as long. If we walk or ride this route at intervals between 1920 to 1950, where can we drop in for a drink or a snack?

Bleak streets?

It is nearly 1950 before there is much sign of the café culture that flourishes along the same route in 2000. Pick up a 1937 Visitors' Guide. Where are the advertisements for places to eat? Not one, apart from a mention of the cafeteria in the new Wellington Railway Station.

The indexes of building permits issued by the Wellington City Corporation (WCC) from 1918 to 1935 confirm this impression. Only six building permits to establish new restaurants in the streets of Lambton Quay, Manners Street, Willis Street, Cuba Street, and Courtenay Place were issued during this period, though additions and alterations to established eateries and public bars did occur.

Escape to the suburbs

How could today's sparkling capital city, with its arts festivals and its café tables spilling onto the pavement, have been so dreary? During the period 1926–1945, Wellington people moved to the outer suburban ring at three times the rate of any other of the four main cities. Come five o'clock, the daytime central city population headed away by tram, bus and train, except for many men who chose to spend an hour with their friends in a pub first, especially on Fridays.

Greek proprietors

This emptiness created a marketing niche, and it was hard-working immigrants, in this case the Greeks, who spotted it. Greek chain migration to New Zealand began after the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, and resumed in earnest between the two world wars. By 1966 the Greeks were the most highly concentrated ethnic group in the Wellington-Hutt urban area. They settled near the city centre, especially in Mt Victoria. Comparatively little capital was required to start a restaurant business, and little knowledge of English was required. The whole family could help during the long working hours in grill rooms and milkbar/restaurants. Stanley Nicholas Garland, born Stratis Nicolas Galanis, was one Greek immigrant who set up several successful restaurants offering traditional English fare in Wellington during the 1930s.

Genteel aspirations

The D.I.C. Tearooms, c. 1928

Leisured wives with discretionary spending money shopped in the city, and the big stores—Kirkcaldie and Stains, D.I.C. and James Smiths— were quick to see that tea rooms were essential amenities. The typical image was of high ceilings, cane furniture, palm trees, silverware, white tablecloths, and waitresses in crisp black and white uniforms. For the less affluent, an outing to such tea rooms might be a birthday treat.

Cheap, and maybe clean

These days, Courtenay Place is alive with night clubs, gourmet cafés and theatres. In 1920 it was the shopping area closest to the inner city boarding houses and private hotels of Te Aro and Mt Victoria. People here needed low-cost meals as well as refreshments. Those frequenting the area included recent arrivals from country districts looking for work, transients, and seamen.

An advertisement from Wellington's *Evening Post* of 3 March 1920 shows the wide range of snacks and meals that a Courtenay Place tea rooms might sell.

> Under New Management. Wanted Known - We have opened the most up-to-date Luncheon and Tea Rooms in Courtenay-place. Early Breakfast 1s 3d, Morning Tea 9d, Hot Lunches 1s 3d, Afternoon Tea 9d, Hot Tea 1s 3d, Late Teas 9d, and Dainty Specialty Suppers 1s 6d. Cleanest and Cheapest Meals in the Dominion. The Club Tea Rooms, 125, Courtenay-place.

The Club Tea Rooms are advertised as 'clean' and the suppers as 'dainty'. Wellington women were apt to express doubts about the 'cleanliness' of refreshment places. The reasons for this condemnation were more subtle than a demand for strict hygiene. 'Dainty' was then the most favoured adjective for describing sandwiches and cakes. In the days before electric bread cutters, dainty sandwiches were something of an achievement. At home the trick was not to cut 'doorsteps'.

Different names for eating establishments

The variety of food and drink served did not differ as much as the following names, all used to describe Wellington eating establishments between 1920 and 1950, might suggest:

cabaret
café
cafeteria
coffee palace
confectioner
lounge
marble bar
milk bar
pastry-cook
pie shop
refreshment rooms
restaurant
soda fountain
tea rooms

The Miramar Tea Rooms, c. 1910

You could have a meal in a pie shop or a pastry-cook's. Confectioners were also milk bars in later years. Soda fountains took their name from the apparatus for making ice cream sodas and sundaes. Tea rooms merged with cabarets, which were places to eat and drink and to dance, during the day as well as the evenings.

Apart from the period during the Second World War, when it was stopped because of the blackout, the rather festive Friday night shopping for a family might include a meal at the Rose Milk Bar or the California Coffee Shop. This function has been taken over by fast food establishments such as McDonald's and KFC. Nowadays cafés have extensive menus of kinds of coffee, not to mention food. Alcohol is often available, and the tea-room/confectioner combination has been replaced by the café/bar.

Milk bars

The milk bar at Vance Vivian's Corner, Cuba Street

Milk bars appeared one by one in Wellington streets in the 1930s. Unlike the tea rooms, they had not come from England with immigrants. They flourished in the United States during the prohibition years of the 1930s. The stationing of American troops in Wellington during the Second World War led to an increase in the numbers of milk bars. The appetite of the Marines for milk was intensified by the lack of drinkable coffee and their dislike of tea. From 1920–1950, 'coffee', to most Wellingtonians, meant 'coffee essence', liquid coffee and chicory served in hot milk.

The changing social function of cafés

The milk bars had one function which was later taken over by coffee bars: they were places for young people to meet. Young women would also wait there while their partners were at the pub, a male preserve. And they became, notoriously, an after-school gathering place for secondary school students. It was European immigrants who were most prominent in establishing the first coffee shops, encouraged by the resident population of Jewish refugees: professionals, artists and musicians who had already during the war years helped shape Wellington's distinctive cultural scene.

Overview: 1950-90 - Wellington cafe culture

Coffee, coffee everywhere: cafés in Wellington 1950–1990

By Peter Attwell

The first coffee bars

The 'culture' of 1950s cafes

In the late 1950s and through the 1960s coffee bars sprang up all over Wellington city, with names like La Scala, the Picasso, Sans Souci Coffee Shoppe, Tete a Tete, and the International Coffee Lounge run by Wellington celebrity Carmen. In those days the long established tea rooms closed in the afternoons, the pubs (very much a male domain) at six o'clock, and the restaurants, which served a narrow range of meals, generally closed by 10 pm and couldn't serve liquor. There had been one or two coffee houses in Wellington from the 1940s, such as the French Maid in Lambton Quay, established by A. D. Singleton. Fagg's Coffee Roasters sold coffee beans and ground coffee to the small home market, made up largely of new immigrants who rejected with distaste the coffee and chicory essence that New Zealanders called coffee. But the explosion of coffee houses from the late fifties was to change all that, and change New Zealanders' life styles as well.

Filling a social gap

These new coffee bars filled a social gap, opening during the day to cater for office workers, city shoppers and university students but, more importantly, remaining open through to the early hours of the morning. It became 'the thing to do' to go to a coffee bar after the pictures. These were places to talk or read the newspaper, to pursue romances, or just to watch and listen to others. The air was usually thick with cigarette smoke in an era when most people smoked unaware of the dangers.

The décor was different, and the coffee...

The lighting was dim in these coffee bars, and the walls often featured posters of bull fighting or scenes of European cities. Fishing nets, floats and driftwood were also used to create atmosphere. The furniture was usually sparse: small formica tables, cane chairs, and some bar stools. There was no effort to establish a distinctly New Zealand ambience; the look was pseudo-European or at least foreign, and therefore sophisticated.

The coffee was generally of the Cona type, bubbling away in glass bowls, or perhaps instant coffee, which had recently arrived on the New Zealand market. A few of Wellington's coffee houses gave pride of place to one of the new types of Italian espresso machines. These operated with a lever like a beer pump and were somewhat unreliable, but the sound effects were impressive and an additional spice of danger came from the rumour that they sometimes blew up!

Food (and drink)

Whichever coffee shop you visited, you could obtain at reasonable cost a light meal, toasted sandwiches, or some fancy cakes; indeed the food was a big part of the appeal of these establishments. And if you were smart and knew where to go, you could get your coffee laced with rum or some other liquor. The Monde Marie in Roxburgh Street was one such establishment, and its proprietor Mary Seddon battled unsuccessfully for years to get a licence to sell wine at her coffee shop.

Entertainment

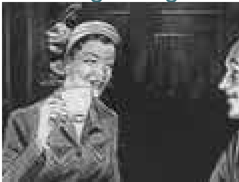
The coffee houses offered a range of new attractions: the Mexicali and the Sorrento were two establishments prosecuted by the city council for allowing dancing on their premises on Sunday, the day of rest. The Casa Fontana in Victoria Street broke new ground by featuring live jazz concerts. Touring overseas artists like Theodore Bikel and Tom Lehrer sang at the Monde Marie, as did New Zealanders such as Peter Cape, writer of the quintessential Kiwi song 'Down the Hall on Saturday Night'. Down the road at the Chez Paree coffee bar, patrons entered through a fake cave to sit and listen to local renditions of the latest folk songs.

Art and literature

Inside Suzy's coffee lounge, 1960s

Harry Seresin's coffee house above Parson's Bookshop in Lambton Quay was a focal point for writers, poets, artists, musicians and academics. Located on a mezzanine floor in Massey House, Wellington's first high-rise building, it had a stylish décor which reflected the owner's European background, with original art works on display and classical music playing softly in the background. Many of these coffee shops were started by European immigrants like the German-born Seresin (who later opened the Settlement in Willis Street featuring poetry readings, art exhibitions and a resident potter) and Dutch woman Suzy van der Kwast, whose coffee shop in Willis Street introduced New Zealanders to exotic new food such as smorgasbord lunches, carrot cake, Dutch apple flaps and cheesecakes.

The beginning of the end



An advertisement for Amber Tips tea

By the end of the 1960s there were more than 60 coffee shops, bars or lounges in the central Wellington area, yet within a few years they began to disappear. New Zealand society was changing. The advent of television in the early sixties was one major influence, as people stayed home in the evenings addicted to 'the box'. Another factor was the relaxing of the liquor laws after a referendum in 1967, with hotels now able to remain open until 10 pm in the evenings and serve food.

Ironically, the success of the coffee shops contributed to their own demise. The simple but varied meals they offered helped New Zealanders acquire a taste for something more than steak and chips or ham salad. Restaurants with a more sophisticated international cuisine began opening in the 1970s. These restaurants could also stay open late and they appealed to a new, more affluent and well-travelled generation.

An end and a new beginning

From the seventies the first wave of coffee bars began to wane and they closed one by one. Typical was the Renown Coffee Lounge in Lambton Quay. It was originally a milk bar opened in the 1930s, then a coffee lounge, but in 1992, as the last such establishment in one of Wellington's busiest streets, it finally closed. In a sign of changing times, it would be replaced by a deli/café providing sit-down and takeaway service, with specialty breads, salads and espresso coffee. Another wave of café culture had begun.

Design and technology - Wellington cafe culture

The impact of design and technology on Wellington café culture, from the 1930s milk bar to the 1960s coffee bar

By Gábor Tóth

The first milk bars

Although Wellington's first restaurants opened in the nineteenth century, the mid 1930s saw the emergence of a different type of establishment, the milk bar, which in many ways was the forerunner to the modern café. This essay considers how design and technology influenced the milk bar and later, the café.

Building permit records reveal that the first Wellington milk bar opened in 1936 at 64 Willis Street. Known as the Black and White, it was owned by Greek immigrant, Mr D. Pagonis. Within a year it had been joined by the Milky Way (4 Manners Street), the Popular Milk Bar (13 Courtenay Place), the Rose (222 Lambton Quay), and the Golden Gate (78 Courtenay Place). The Tip Top dairy company operated at least four milk bars in the central city, and the Opera House also had a milk bar.

Changes in layout

The internal layout was quite different from restaurants, where tables were arranged in rows or at regular intervals. Milk bars were often fitted into the ground floor of long, narrow Victorian or Edwardian buildings. The area at the rear, once kitchen space, could now be used for customer seating. Individual booths began to appear, giving greater privacy for patrons. But the most important feature was the bar itself. This generally stretched for almost the entire length of the establishment, replicating the classic American public bar which Wellingtonians would have been familiar with through exposure to Hollywood films.

New construction materials

While the Art Deco and Streamlined Moderne styles had only limited impact on the construction of new buildings in Wellington, they were influential in commercial interior fit-outs. Products such as stainless steel and plastics were now available to architects; one new material was a cladding sold in New Zealand under the brand name of Vitrolite. It was a pigmented structural glass which could be sculpted, cut, laminated, curved, coloured and illuminated. The clean look of Vitrolite and the ease with which it could be hung meant that it was often used for 'modernising' an existing building.

It was also an inexpensive substitute for marble counter tops, table tops and rest-room partitions, and had hygienic qualities unmatched by wood. Initially only black and white Vitrolite was available, but soon there was a full colour range. The lavish use of Vitrolite in the Black and White gave that milk bar its name. Large panels of black and white Vitrolite sheeting decorated the bar, while walls were clad in a combination of Vitrolite and heavy sheets of mirrored glass.

Milkshake machines

Patrons sitting at the bar could watch milkshakes being made in machines almost certainly manufactured by US firm Hamilton Beach, which pioneered the milkshake machine in 1911. By the early 1930s, the company had developed and patented the multiple spindle machines, which were commonplace throughout New Zealand until the 1970s.

Espresso machines

After 1938 milk bars spread to the suburbs, and no more opened in the central city until 1958. However, in the early fifties cafés started to emerge. They introduced Wellingtonians to espresso coffee and the espresso machine. Descriptions of the hissing, spitting contraptions of the fifties suggest that espresso machines similar to that patented by Italian Luigi Bezzara in 1901 were the first to appear in Wellington's cafés. They featured a tall cylindrical boiling chamber which had to be of a substantial size to create the required pressure. Excess pressure could cause a blow-out, or in extreme cases, a boiler explosion. There is some indication that early cafés were required to obtain insurance to cover damage or injury.

In 1938 the Italian company, Cremonesi, revolutionised the process of espresso making. A hand-operated (and later electrically-powered) piston was used to create a far higher pressure while the temperature of the water was held just below boiling point. This ensured that superheated water would not burn the coffee, producing a bitter brew. These machines gradually began to arrive in New Zealand during the 1950s. They were still expensive and temperamental, and few people had the necessary skills required to maintain them. Parts became almost impossible to obtain when the Labour Government's 'black budget' of 1958 increased import restrictions. Gradually simpler styles of coffee (such as Cona) took the place of espresso.

Café design

The interior design of early cafés, like that of milk bars, was innovative. Formica came to dominate: it offered a hard-wearing surface and was available in a huge range of colours at low cost. For those cafés that could afford the expense, fine wood veneers were used. Two cafés in particular reached a standard of interior design which would have equalled any in Europe at the time: Harry Seresin's Coffee Gallery above the bookshop run by Roy Parsons in Massey House, Lambton Quay, and Suzy's Coffee Lounge in Willis Street.

Harry Seresin's Coffee Gallery

Massey House and the café-bookshop within it were designed in 1952 by Austrian émigré, Ernst Plischke, though the building itself did not open until 1957. It was the first time in Wellington that the 'International Style' had been seen on such a large scale. The main door opened through massive panes of glass which reached the full height of the ground floor level in single sheets. The café was on a mezzanine level, reached by a 'floating' stairway. Patrons sat surrounded by panels of rimu and sycamore veneer, and at the northern end of the café could look out over the bookshop and into Lambton Quay. The café is now about half its original size and the view to the Quay is now obscured by additional book shelving, but its interior remains essentially original, testimony to the quality of its classic 'early-modern' design.

Suzy's Coffee Lounge

Suzy's Coffee Lounge, opening in 1964, was designed by another Austrian émigré, Friedrich Eisenhofer, and sported bold primary colours and sharp lines and angles. Unlike Seresin's Coffee Gallery, a sculptured front window screen restricted vision to and from the interior, creating a more intimate atmosphere. Internal screens and modern stained glass windows added to the cosy feeling.

Most cafés, however, did not go to the same trouble or expense to create stylish designs. Many were short-lived affairs where the height of sophistication was a candle stuck into a bottle. This trend, in combination with the use of scrim as a wall covering, led to a tightening up of fire regulations for café owners.

From the early 1970s, cafés in Wellington began to disappear. It was only from the late 1980s that Wellington saw the rebirth of its café culture, and with it, the emergence of a true vernacular style of Wellington café. Today, these establishments display some of the most innovative commercial interior fit-outs ever seen in the city.

A continental touch - Wellington cafe culture

'A continental touch': international and national influences on the development of coffee houses in Wellington from the 1940s to the present day

By Nancy Swarbrick

Global trends

The rise of coffee houses in the 1940s, 50s and 60s was not a phenomenon confined to Wellington, or indeed to New Zealand. While such establishments were an innovation in New Zealand, places where they already existed, such as the United States and Britain, suddenly experienced a proliferation.

The primary reason seems to have been the impact of global war on food consumption. Food scholars agree that war, and the subsequent crumbling of colonial empires, led to world-wide waves of immigration which broke down the boundaries of national cuisines. Additional reasons include post-war recovery, the rise of youth culture, and increasing affluence and leisure. A more specific influence may have been the invention in 1946 by Achille Gaggia of a reliable espresso machine.

The decline of coffee houses in the late 1960s and 1970s seems also to have occurred in countries other than New Zealand. In Britain this was attributed to 'a ruinous combination of urban economics and social agoraphobia'; in Vienna the popularity of bars led to a brief lean period. But in the 1980s and 1990s coffee bars made a comeback. While the café may never have entirely disappeared, in some countries (New

Zealand included) the resurgence was particularly noticeable. Reasons include the increase in international travel, the breaking down of communication and trade barriers, and the impact of global fashions.

European immigrants

In New Zealand, national trends and events also contributed to the rise, decline, and eventual return of the coffee bar. Perhaps the most important was immigration before and after the Second World War. From 1936 a small number of European refugees began arriving in New Zealand. They were dismayed at the absence of cafés, and when establishments such as Wellington's French Maid opened in the 1940s, refugees tended to gather there. In other places, refugees set up their own cafés: for example in Hamilton in the late 1930s Kurt Phillips, a German Jew from Cologne, started the Vienna coffee house.

The American influence

Another early influence was the stationing of American troops in Auckland and Wellington from 1942. While special service clubs catered for these soldiers' cravings for familiar foods, local outlets also emerged to serve the need. In Wellington, coffee shops and milk bars are said to have sprung up along Willis Street and Lambton Quay, while in Auckland places such as Somervells Milk and Coffee Bar were established in response to the American demand.

Changes in New Zealand society

The novelty of these new cafés was more generally appealing. It has been suggested that New Zealanders were by this time more open to trying other types of food and drink, partly because of the rise of a local-born population and the weakening of links with the British food tradition. Moreover New Zealand writers, musicians, artists and scholars - as well as the educated middle classes - welcomed European immigrants and the culture they brought with them. The pervasiveness of American films and fashions may also have encouraged young people to adopt American customs.

Post-war immigration and travel

Post-war immigration brought more European migrants to New Zealand, keen to recreate the ambience of the café in their new land. Assisted immigration from the Netherlands ensured that the Dutch were influential from the 1950s. However, it appears that they were just participating in a national movement, influenced by the overseas boom in coffee houses. Auckland, like Wellington, experienced a sudden upsurge in cafés in the late 1950s and they appeared even in smaller towns. Increased travel among younger people, particularly young women, seems to have been significant.

New Zealand's liquor laws

New Zealand's antiquated liquor laws, which prohibited the sale of alcohol in restaurants and limited hotel hours to 9 am to 6 pm, contributed to the popularity of coffee houses in the 1950s. Many cafés stayed open until late - often the early hours of the morning. They filled a growing need for night-time entertainment. Women, effectively excluded from drinking alcohol in public except in the lounge bars of hotels until the 1970s, may well have found coffee bars a more congenial place to socialise. They often served good food, as the forerunners of licensed restaurants, and sometimes openly challenged the liquor laws by allowing patrons to smuggle in bottles of wine. Futile police raids gained them favourable publicity and in 1960 licensing laws were changed to allow restaurants to serve wine with food. However, the 'six o'clock swill' remained in force until 1967, ensuring that cafés continued to perform a vital social role as places of evening entertainment.

The decline of coffee houses

The decline of coffee houses in the late sixties can also be attributed to national events. The change in the liquor laws in 1967 to allow hotels to remain open until 10 pm provided the public with another form of nightlife. The growing importance of processed foods, including instant coffee, in the diet of New Zealanders from the mid 1960s, could have been another factor. It has also been suggested that as a result of import restrictions after the 'black budget' of 1958, it was no longer possible to import espresso machines or spare parts for them. Finally, the rise of television may have made home entertainment more attractive.

Resurgence

The return of the café in the eighties and nineties perhaps owes more to international than to national trends, although it has been suggested that deregulation and the growth of business enterprises, a more pluralistic society, and the increase in numbers of New Zealanders travelling overseas have all contributed. More restrictive drink/drive laws may also have played a part, making cafés safer and more attractive venues for socialising than pubs.

Is the Wellington café scene unique?

Given the importance of both national and international influences, what was unique about the Wellington café scene? It appears that national trends were reflected in Wellington and it would be rash to claim that it was significantly different in its essentials. However, some local features, including climate and geography, the city's status as centre of government and major port, patronage from the large student and arts communities, and the eccentric personalities of some of the owners and habitués, have helped to shape Wellington's café culture.

While there have been some modifications, it can be suggested that many of the functions of the modern Wellington café are the same as those of its predecessors both in Wellington and elsewhere. Wellington's café society fits into a wider pattern, where developments on both the national and international scene have been crucial.

Music - Wellington cafe culture

Music and its role in café culture

by Wayne Taitoko

Entertainment generally and music in particular have always been a part of the Wellington café scene. The form musical entertainment took was as varied as the establishment which offered it, and changed over time. Influenced by elements such as the popular sounds of the day, the 'theme' of the café, the cultural heritage of the owner and the clientele, music was, and still is, a vital part of the café experience.

The early days

Music in New Zealand during the early part of the twentieth century was greatly influenced by Britain, Europe and America. As well as providing entertainment, music was a vehicle for bringing 'culture' to a far-flung outpost of the British Empire. Concerts and recitals featuring notable classical musicians, both local and international, were the standard form of musical entertainment, and such occasions were significant social events. Composers such as Gilbert and Sullivan were influential during the 1920s, with light opera proving very popular, particularly in Wellington. The performance venues were mainly theatres, opera houses and concert halls.

Immigration, particularly from Europe, was also an influential factor in the development of a musical identity in Wellington. Again, however, these influences were not represented in the cafés and tea rooms, but were confined to theatres and concert halls. The café was very much in its infancy during this time and apart from the occasional guest artist or local celebrity, very little was offered in the way of entertainment at the few cafés or tea rooms in and around Wellington.

At this time entertainment was generally geared towards entertaining large numbers of people. Consequently musical groups, bands and companies were quite large. For example, a musical troupe established in the mid 1920s called the Plimmerton All Blax Minstrel Troupe consisted of no fewer than nine members. This made the task of entertaining in the rather confined space of a café extremely difficult. Another factor was the influence on social behaviour by the concept of the promenade. People regularly took a Sunday walk, to see and be seen. Outdoor entertainment, provided by brass and pipe bands, followed this trend. The café was therefore primarily a place for the consumption of food and drink.

1940–1960

The Second World War significantly changed both the music scene and café culture in Wellington. The big band sound, developed by American artists such as Glenn Miller, began to dominate. Seven-piece bands with lead singers such as Dorothy McKegg were a regular feature at the Skyline Restaurant during the 1950s. The wireless and gramophone were becoming commonplace in New Zealand homes and also allowed café owners to play popular music of the day: 'Most of the coffee-houses have music of some kind, usually supplied by a pick-up and amplifier, generally a selection of light-classical and popular pieces with the emphasis on strings and the volume turned low'. This recorded music might include New Zealand music, such as Maori songs performed by showbands, chorales and concert parties, Hawaiian-influenced sounds of composers such as Ruru Karaitiana and local versions of country and western. However, jazz was by far the most popular form of musical entertainment in cafés.

1960–1980

The 1960s saw changes in musical tastes, particularly those of young people, which affected the kinds of music played in cafés. The popularity of folk music was embraced by cafes such as the Monde Marie in Wellington, which became an important performance venue for local and visiting artists. This trend was soon to be overtaken by a more pervasive form of popular music.

The *Dominion* of 22 June 1964 carried the banner headline 'Beatles Arrive'. The visit to Wellington of the four lads from Liverpool signalled the arrival of a new form of musical entertainment. 'In Wellington, the rock'n'roll and pop music scene exploded into action during those halcyon days...there was also a huge youth club scene in the sixties...And there were the jamborees, the Dancelands, the coffee bars, and the suburban night clubs too'.

Fans of popular music eagerly sought out the musical offerings of the Searchers, the Tremolos and the Shadows. Not to be outdone, local artists also cashed in on the bonanza. Stars such as Ray Columbus, Max Merritt and the Meteors, Howard Morrison, Peter Posa and Lyn Barnett regularly played to full houses in Wellington. The advent of television, with its popular music shows such as 'Happen Inn', was also influential.

This phenomenon, however, did not have an immediate effect on the café culture of Wellington. Much of the entertainment was confined to the dance halls and clubs liberally scattered throughout Wellington. The cafés tended to provide either recordings of popular music or live bands catering for smaller numbers.

The dominance of the dance hall did not last. Changes to the licensing laws meant that pubs and taverns could stay open longer and the major breweries very quickly took advantage of the opportunity to offer live entertainment. But the cafés rocked on. Able to provide a wide range of recorded music, they used it to create and enhance atmosphere.

The 1990s and beyond

The type of musical entertainment offered now often depends on the time of day and the day of the week. Breakfast is accompanied by electronic music provided by the mandatory stereo system or the occasional television set pumping out musical video clips or the 'Juice' channel. This theme usually continues through the lunch period. However, live music is provided at the Ballroom Café no matter whether it is breakfast, lunch or dinnertime. Bodega has been a vital Wellington music venue for over a decade. Axolotl has its jukebox, Calzone 'during the day has reggae and dub sounds, while at night it shifts into restaurant mode, with underlying jazz themes'. Diva Bar proclaims proudly, 'There's a jazz base to the music—cruisey by day and more thumpy by night—Wednesday nights are jazz and cocktail night with a four piece band. On Thursdays it's a Rhythm and Blues Soul night'. Everything from contemporary jazz, to window-rattling opera, to serene classical music, to the latest techno funk can be found throughout the city. These offerings are reflective of both the ambience of the café and the time of day.

Significance - Wellington cafe culture

The significance of café culture in the formation of Wellington's identity

by Jason Gaskill

Changes in the Wellington café scene

From the mid to late 1940s an affinity for coffee, and the places that dispensed it, spread through Wellington and continued into the 1960s. From the mid 1970s until the late 1980s the café scene all but disappeared. Yet today's Wellington has numerous cafés, and the rise of Jungle, Fuel, the presence of Starbucks and the proliferation of 'ethnic' cafés testify it is a thriving segment. Other researchers have investigated why this came to be. I want to turn attention to a different, more theoretical issue: has it mattered?

Is café culture integral to Wellington's identity?

It is often stated that the café scene is integral to Wellington's identity as a city. This prompts several questions. Can you identify 'Wellington' without referring to the social institution of the coffee house? How interconnected are the identity of Wellington over time and the holes-in-the-wall the population tend to frequent? More importantly, how are you able to track the union between these elements, or judge their importance? Other articles in this exhibition indicate there is a link between the cultural phenomenon of cafés and the social identity of Wellington. Often, the prevalence of immigrant proprietors and the cosmopolitan nature of Wellington underlie such claims. However, they need further investigation and independent support—neither of which will be found.

The significance of immigration

Other research into the history of Wellington café culture demonstrates some connection between the presence of Greeks and the emergence of milk bars (the precursor to the café scene) and Dutch immigrants and the rise of coffee houses. These findings imply that immigration and cafés have some link. Given that immigration is one element mentioned in the literature about Wellington's identity, it is interesting to track the progress of café construction and prominence within Wellington, in conjunction with the influx of immigrants. Such a broad-brush approach does offer some superficial evidence that the links between immigration, cafés and social identity may be overstated. The café gap of the 1970s and 1980s in fact coincides with an increase in immigrants.

This inquiry could be further refined to break down immigrant information by specific country, by year, and by physical address in Wellington compared with the location of the cafés. This would establish whether or not café presence matches fluctuations in the number of those immigrants who produced the café culture. However, the basic information provided here is interesting because it indicates that the assumption made by many needs clarification or corroboration.

Immigration trends compared with numbers of cafés

Comparisons across statistical information on the number of cafés by decade and the number of immigrants by decade suggest no consistent connection between immigration and café development. Consider the simple graph, Figure 1, indicating the historical progress of café construction in the greater Wellington region from 1950–2000 in relation to the following, Figure 2, which illustrates the number of immigrants to Wellington by decade.

These graphs tell us that immigration into Wellington consistently increased through the period of café decline, between the early 1970s and the mid 1980s, while the number of cafés dwindled from 93 in 1970 to only 61 in 1980 and only 75 in 1985. Although the culture may not have actually disappeared, it surely plateaued. Yet, one of the primary social identifiers of Wellington, namely immigration, continued to increase steadily, from 985 immigrants in total between 1955 and 1959, to 2800 in the decade of the eighties. The two trends appear to diverge, not converge.

Are cafés a significant cultural phenomenon?

If the cafés and identity are connected, one must argue that at least one cylinder in the engine driving identification and social development died when café numbers dwindled. Something could have taken their place, but then we must ask how integral was such a cultural phenomenon if it could be replaced with no resulting imbalance in social development. The fact that cafés were there, or that people of a particular ilk frequented them, means little if the city would have evolved in a similar fashion from the presence of a different type of establishment. What is important is the fact that there were a lot of immigrants. The cultural baggage they brought with them needs further investigation and some element of non-anecdotal evidence to transform it from bland assumption into historical fact.

Conclusion

The information above shows that is not necessarily the case that cafés are integral to the identity of Wellington if they reflect the make-up of the community, and those espousing the view must positively prove it. Entrepreneurial immigrants, leftist ideals and politicians floating in with the tide of Eastern Europeans, emotive movements against global domination—these have been demonstrated to be socially important. They may have produced cafés, leading to conjecture about the relationship between what people did and why. But such conjecture proves nothing. It merely provides a starting point for further investigation, and an indication of the information that needs to be sought in order to understand our fundamental question.

Personalities - Wellington cafe culture

Some Wellington café personalities

By Diane Pivac

New Zealand in the 1940s and 1950s has been described as a drab and uniform place. From the late 1950s, however, a café culture was established throughout the country. Coffee shops played a critical role in the general opening up of New Zealand. There were people in Wellington actively seeking to change the social milieu to provide alternatives to the ethos of 'rugby, racing and beer' accepted by many, but not all, New Zealanders. This essay will examine the roles of three of these people—Harry Seresin, Mary Seddon and Carmen—and the cafés they established in Wellington.

Harry Seresin

Born in Hamburg in 1919, Harry Seresin was the son of Russian Jewish parents. He was nineteen when he arrived in New Zealand just before the outbreak of the Second World War, a refugee from Nazism. Seresin was struck by the arid nature of cultural life and the lack of social amenities such as cafés. He was the first person to introduce a really stylish coffee shop to Wellington.

Seresin's coffee shop was situated on the balcony above Parsons Bookshop, located on the ground floor of Massey House at 158 Lambton Quay. The bookshop and café quickly became a cultural and intellectual haven in the city. Later Seresin was responsible for setting up the restaurant associated with Downstage theatre, and in the early 1970s he established the Settlement, which combined a café/restaurant and art gallery.

Seresin was a man of imagination, good taste, strong opinion and vision. He catered to the fledgling art and literary community in Wellington and established a cultural haven in the city. Seresin's influence on the city and café culture in Wellington is summed up in an obituary: 'if there is one person Wellingtonians can thank for the professional theatres and countless cafés that enliven the city then that person is Harry Seresin.'

Mary Seddon

Like Harry Seresin, Mary Seddon was a colourful, larger-than-life figure. Unlike him she was New Zealand-born. Staunchly independent, Seddon travelled alone throughout Europe when it was still considered a daring and unconventional thing for a woman to do. Back in New Zealand in 1950 after four years in Europe, Mary Seddon was filled with 'utter despair'. After the lively European lifestyles she had become accustomed to, Wellington seemed dull and boring.

Like Harry Seresin she perceived a gap in New Zealand society, and decided to establish a café, the Monde Marie, where people could go to just sit and talk. The Monde Marie soon became a mecca for folk music enthusiasts. The environment attracted an educated, bohemian crowd.

Seddon's European travels also influenced the choice of food she served to customers. The coffee was Cona, patrons could purchase cheese cake and yoghurt, chili con carne and spaghetti bolognaise, meals were served with a buttered roll and salad, and everything was priced reasonably. At a time when the menu of most coffee bars consisted of toasted sandwiches the Monde was considered to be European and sophisticated.

Carmen

Carmen, the founder of Carmen's International Coffee Lounge, was another flamboyant personality. A transsexual with a colourful past, her reasons for establishing her coffee lounge differed from the more benevolent social aims of either Harry Seresin or Mary Seddon. Returning to Wellington from Sydney in 1967, and approaching middle age, Carmen decided she needed her 'own stage' on which to star. She took the right of first refusal on a clothing factory with a four-bedroom flat on the upper floor. It was, ironically, located at 86 Vivian Street, next door to the Salvation Army.

In many ways Carmen's was like other coffee bars of the era. The opening hours were long, initially from 8 am to 3 am, and later from 6 pm to 3 am. The menu was straightforward but adequate—coffee, tea, soft drinks and a great variety of toasted sandwiches, cakes, pastries and scones. The difference was in the décor, the staff and the availability of sex. Carmen refers to her waitresses as hostesses: 'that is what they were, and with the exception of the lesbians, all my girls were boys or had been boys at some time. They had to be beautiful. That was the mark of my establishment.' While she gathered around her people of all sexual persuasions, it was never a rule that her entertainers and coffee shop workers had to be prostitutes.

Staff were encouraged to sit and talk with the customers to make them feel relaxed and comfortable. A ritual known as 'the cups' was devised whereby a customer could signal his sexual preference without needing to engage in a potentially embarrassing conversation. Regular customers were also able to liven up their coffee by purchasing a nip of brandy.

The café phenomenon in New Zealand in the 1950s helped open up more choices for New Zealanders and led to the relaxation of licensing laws and an increase in numbers and types of restaurants. Wellington forged a distinctive café culture in the 1950s and 1960s partly because of the prominent personalities behind the cafés. Harry Seresin, Mary Seddon and Carmen were all individuals of passion and vision who created alternative forms of entertainment and diversion in an otherwise conformist society.

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