

## *Balwyn Historical Society News December 6, 2020*



Greetings.

This will be the final newsletter for 2020. It has been an eventful year beginning with the bush fires and then the long months of lockdowns due to the coronavirus pandemic. Hopefully, a vaccine will be rolled out and we can relax and life will return to normal.

It is time to think about 2021 and consider nominations for the various roles and positions on our committee. Nomination forms will be sent to all members in January and I hope that you will consider joining the committee and planning future activities.

On behalf of the BHS committee I would like to thank everyone for their support and to wish you all a wonderful Christmas with family and friends and to enjoy a happy, safe and healthy New Year.

Marilyn and the BHS committee



### **A short history of coffee – from Ethiopia to Balwyn**

**By**

**Marilyn Poole**

#### **Introduction**

Legend has it that around 800 AD, the world was introduced to coffee when Kaldi, a goatherder in Ethiopia, noticed that his goats were unusually active after eating the red berries of a certain tree. Kaldi took the berries to the local monastery where the abbot made a drink from the roasted berries and noticed that they helped keep him awake during his nightly devotions.

The production of coffee moved to the Arabian Peninsula in the 15<sup>th</sup> century . By the 16<sup>th</sup> century it was known in Syria, Persia, Egypt and Turkey. Coffee was drunk in private homes and was also popular in coffee houses known as *qahveh khaneh* . These coffee houses were the forerunners of cafe society in Europe and their patrons engaged in conversation, listened to music, played chess and watched performances. As so many pilgrims visited Mecca each year this drink known as ‘the wine of Araby’ became widely known.

Travellers from Europe brought back stories of this mysterious black beverage and throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century coffee began to enter Europe from a number of different sources. It has been reported that the Venetians brought coffee to Italy around 1615 and that the Dutch procured coffee in the Yemeni port city of Mokha and smuggled it into Amsterdam. Mokha was a major trading place for coffee from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is from here that we have the English term of ‘mocha’ related to the coffee beans of the area famed for their distinctive chocolatey flavour. Nowadays we tend to use the term mocha for a combination of chocolate and coffee.



*The Port of Mokha*

By the end of the 1600s coffee houses had spread throughout Europe and enjoyed great popularity. As the demand for coffee grew the European nations began the search to cultivate coffee outside Arabia. The Dutch obtained seedlings in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century finding success eventually in Batavia, on the island of Java, in what is now Indonesia. The King of France, Louis XIV, was given a young coffee plant by the Mayor of Amsterdam in 1714. A young French naval officer obtained seedlings from the King’s plant and managed to transport them to Martinique where they thrived. These seedlings are credited with being parents to the coffee trees throughout the Caribbean and Central and South America.

The popularity of coffee drinking throughout Europe was significant. Prior to coffee being available the most common drink was ‘small beer’ or wine as water was often contaminated and unfit to drink. Coffee (like beer) was made with boiled water and provided a safer alternative to alcohol. Those who drank coffee, instead of alcohol, remained alert rather than somewhat inebriated. According to Standage 2006 p. 136) as coffee became the drink of choice ‘Western Europe began to emerge from an alcoholic haze that lasted for centuries’.

## Coffee drinking in England

The first coffee houses in Europe were established in Venice in 1647 and the first coffee house in England was opened in Oxford 1652. Later that year one was opened in London. These new coffee houses were very popular and became a fashionable place to meet, gossip and debate the news. Each coffee house tended to have a particular clientele often defined by occupation or interests.



A 17<sup>th</sup> Century London coffee house

Coffee houses were seen as places where radical ideas were discussed and thus viewed as a threat to authorities. For example, on June 12, 1672, Charles II issued a proclamation to “Restrain the Spreading of False News, and Licentious Talking of Matters of State and Government”. Charles ordered a ban on coffee houses which only lasted eleven days. This ban in fact was a gain. The London coffee houses were known as ‘penny universities’ (as this was the price of a cup of coffee) and considered places where ideas and politics were debated.

Historically, coffee houses were associated with news culture as pamphlets and print news were included in the price. Some British institutions began in coffee houses. For example, the London Stock exchange began in Jonathon’s coffee house in Exchange Alley in 1698 as a place where gentlemen sat and set stock and commodity prices. Lloyds Coffee House was a centre for sailors and travellers and merchants and Lloyds Insurance originated there. However, not all coffee houses were quite so highbrow and some became the haunt of criminals.

### When Coffee came to Australia

According to the National Geographic, coffee came to Australia with the First Fleet in 1788. During a stop in Rio de Janeiro seeds and plants were collected and then planted however they failed to thrive. Coffee was imported and expensive and often mixed with other ingredients such as chicory.

During the late 1800s coffee became a more popular drink in Australia due to the rise of Parisian style coffee shops and also the influence of the Temperance movement. Women in Melbourne complained of drunken behaviour and the deleterious effects of alcohol on family life. Their complaints were influential and so provided an opening for the success of coffee 'palaces'. James Munroe, a Melbourne business man and Temperance campaigner built many of Melbourne's coffee palaces including the Federal Coffee Palace (see below). The idea of coffee palaces quickly spread to Sydney.



*1888 Federal Coffee Palace 539 Collins St, Melbourne. State Library of Victoria*

Coffee was also sold at street corner stalls in Melbourne which provided cheap snacks for Melbourne workers.

In 1879, James and John Griffiths, English migrants, began Australia's first tea and coffee distribution companies at 30 Flinders St, Melbourne which radically changed the way hot drinks were consumed. Before Griffiths Bros. became known for coffee roasting they began producing tea grown on the Dandenong Ranges. At the time, Australians were the highest consumers of tea in the world and the two brothers used this to their business advantage. Griffiths Bros became a household name in Melbourne in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century due to their direct marketing but also their innovative methods of selling their brand. Griffiths Bros made their brand a household name by placing 'Griffiths Tea' signs along railway lines indicating the distance travellers had to go for their next beverage. These signs are highly collectible today.



*Griffiths Tea and Coffee Building*

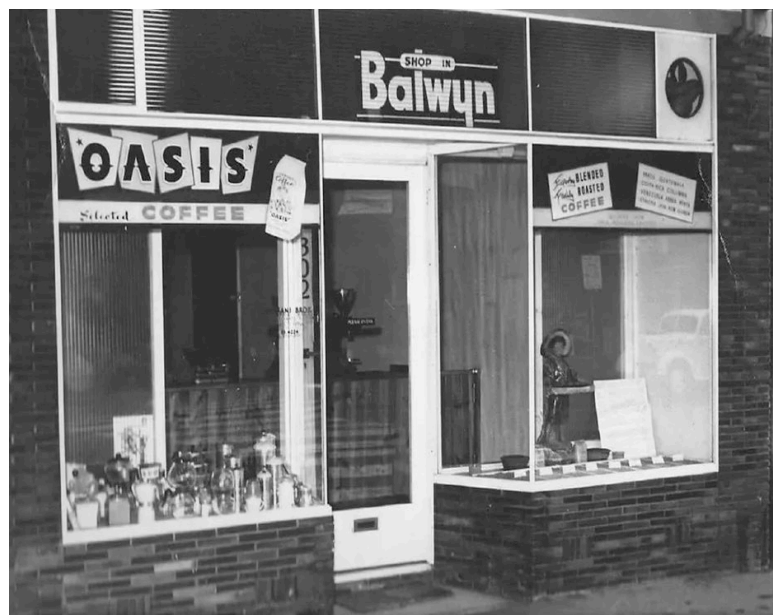
In the late 1920s and early 1930s, espresso coffee machines were introduced to Melbourne. The first of these was in Café Florentino (now Grossi Florentino, Bourke St.) and Melbourne's oldest restaurant. . These espresso machines were mainly in restaurants although some could be found in small Italian grocery shops.

The change in popularity from tea drinking to that of coffee came with the influx of European migrants who not only brought with them their love of coffee but also all the paraphernalia for making it such as grinders and small stove top coffee pots.

A boost to coffee drinking in Australia took place during World War II when American troops were stationed here. In Melbourne, Griffiths Bros acquired a 300 kg coffee roaster in order to supply coffee to the American troops stationed at the MCG.

Coffee culture grew rapidly in Australia during the 1970s and 80s. The Australian barista Alan Preston invented the 'flat white' in 1985 a term which is recognised widely. Today there is an on-going love affair with coffee culture not only in Melbourne but throughout Australia. Hopefully, many of the delightful cafés which characterise our city will recover from the economic blows caused by the COVID19 pandemic.

### **The (Balwyn) Coffee Centre formerly Oasis Coffee**



*The Balwyn Coffee Centre, Whitehorse Road, Balwyn*

In the 1930s, a Greek trader Byron Theofanis travelled to Shanghai trading European goods to Europeans in China. However, during the Communist revolution in 1949 he was forced to leave China but continued trading and roasted coffee in Yokohama, Japan supplying UN troops on leave from the Korean war zone. Theofanis then migrated to Melbourne and settled in Brunswick in 1962 setting up a coffee roasting business known as Oasis Coffee in

Whitehorse Road, Balwyn. He lived above the shop with his family before moving to a family home in North Balwyn.

In 1979 Byron Theofanis sold the retail business was sold to Paul (Nicholas) Theodore the current owner's father. Theofanis developed the wholesale arm and supplied many cafés and restaurants. In 1980, the wholesale arm was sold to brothers Peter and Dennis Patisteas. Six years later they purchased Griffiths Tea & Coffee combining the brands to create Oasis Griffiths Co. Pty Ltd.

George Iliopoulos ran the Balwyn retail business for thirty years but when he retired in 2010 it was sold to George Theodore, second generation roaster, thus returning the business to the Theodore family.

### Sources

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Interview with George Theodore, current owner of *The (Balwyn) Coffee Centre*

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