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How Aussie cafes conquered the world

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It's been a spectacular ascent for the Australian café, a culinary institution that only emerged in Australia a quarter of a century ago. Specialising in a meal that was once rarely consumed outside the home, the Australian café is becoming a ubiquitous presence around the world.

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Australians around the world nodded unanimously in agreement when the [New York Times ran an article \[http://http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/dining/australians-arrive-serving-breakfast.html\]](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/dining/australians-arrive-serving-breakfast.html) registering its approval of the “invasion” of Australian cafes. If any further proof was needed that what the British christened ‘Antipodean cafes’ had arrived on the world stage, a hat tip from the world’s most influential newspaper was surely it. Like other parts of the globe, entrepreneurial members of the Australian diaspora had won over New York’s exacting foodies with their casual but well-run dining establishments; the revivifying breakfasts and brunches Aussies have enjoyed for years have secured their place at the international table.

Unlike, say, the English pub, Chinese teahouse, French bistro or Italian trattoria, the Australian café is a relatively recent invention, only emerging in Australia around a quarter of a century ago. Both its initial local success and, perhaps, subsequent exportability comes down to it being spectacular synthesis of a number of culinary traditions – well-crafted breakfast options, impressive service and superior coffee

“If it hadn’t been for post-WWII migration, Australians would still be eating sausages with mash and drinking beer and tea,” notes Tom Arnel, co-owner of Tom & Serg, an Australian café in Dubai that counts Sheik Hamdan, the Deputy Ruler of Dubai, among its many satisfied customers.

“Traditional Anglo-Australian society was a laidback place with a relaxed style of dining. Then it was hit with immigration from Southern Europe initially, followed by places such as Lebanon and South-East Asia. The food businesses run by those immigrants began to boom in the 1970s and 1980s and they encouraged Australians as a whole to be more adventurous about what they would eat and drink.”

This unique blend of international and local flavours is a defining feature of many Australian cafes today, first emerging in Melbourne and Sydney in the 1990s. With few attractive options for those wanting to eat out for breakfast – or brunch on the weekends – these cafés addressed a gap in the market, first locally and then globally. A younger generation of cosmopolitan Australians enthusiastically embraced café dining. Some would go on to serve as the founders (and customers) of the Australian cafes in cities as diverse as Berlin, Jakarta, London, Moscow, Paris and Tokyo.

Sure, Australian cafés have had their share of favourable headwinds. Their popularity has spread around the world in an era where people in developed nations were eating out more and seeking out quality coffee. The arrival of the internet allowed for an increase in people being able to work remotely, positioning cafes as a place to not only socialise, but work or hold casual meetings.

But that doesn’t explain why Australian cafes – as opposed to some other food and beverage business – took off.

According to Bill Granger, Australian cook and restaurateur, it’s the low barriers to entry and Australians willingness to take a

gamble that has led to the flowering of Antipodean cafes over the last decade.

"Two people can borrow a bit of money and launch a small café, you don't have the overheads you do with a restaurant," says the owner of three cafés in Sydney, four in Tokyo, two in London, one in Honolulu and another soon to open in Seoul.

"Australians have this optimistic, confident, can-do attitude that leads them to do mad things such as open a café in the middle of London and believe that it will probably work out and, if it doesn't, it's not the end of the world," he adds.

Granger, like many others who have examined the phenomenon, puts Australian cafes' widespread popularity down to them nailing a surprisingly rare double – providing customers with both impressive food and coffee.

American Cyndi Finkle and her Australian partner Mel Cain regard the combination as so important that when it came time to name their café in Los Angeles they said it how it was: Coffee+Food.

"There are lots of places in Los Angeles where you can get great coffee but there are very few that also offer great food," says Finkle.

"We offer high quality dining in a causal setting. There is no filler on our menu, everything is carefully crafted and made daily. And all the baristas who work here are trained by an Aussie expat master barista." (That training appears to have paid off given Russell Crowe has been known to tweet about the magnificence of Coffee+Food's flat whites.)

Whether it's a cappuccino, espresso, flat white, latte or macchiato you're after, you can almost always be assured of getting an excellent one made by a well-trained barista at an Australian café. And while the food served – smashed avocado on toast; ricotta hotcakes; bacon with corn fritters, fresh spinach and slow roast tomatoes – seems simple, it will typically be brilliantly executed using only the finest of seasonal ingredients.

Of course, Australians don't have a monopoly on making great coffee and delightful food but Australian café owners have grown up in a society where they are highly esteemed.

"Casual dining and coffee drinking is such a big part of the Australian culture that we've learnt to execute it really well," notes Shelagh Ryan, co-owner of London's acclaimed Lantana cafes.

"Until recently it hasn't been part of the culture in places such as the UK so it's not surprising Australians have cornered that part of the market.

"Whenever I go back to Melbourne I'm amazed at how adventurous the café menus there are, featuring things such as kasundi and miso that Londoners are still not ready for. It was only after I left Australia I came to appreciate just how multicultural our cuisine is and how that shapes the way Australians cook and eat."

Shelagh Ryan also argues that Australian cafes are a hit because, well, they're so Australian.

"We take a very Australian approach to customer service. All my staff love to have a chat with the customers and I do everything possible to encourage that – I don't want them to just be robots taking orders," she says.

"I was conscious of wanting to stay away from kitsch Australiana – we don't serve lamingtons or Anzac biscuits," she adds. "But the menu, which includes things such as grilled haloumi, chorizo sausage, soba noodle salad and lamb belly with labne, is a reflection of the multicultural food that is so widely available in Australia today."

"There's a shorthand I can use when managing Australian staff, they understand that a café is somewhere people want to feel welcomed and comfortable, as well as getting efficient service. With English staff, it is more of a training process to get them to understand we're not the kind of greasy spoon-style 'caff' they're used to."

Consumer demand for Australian cafes currently appears insatiable. Pioneers such as Arnel, Cain, Granger and Ryan are all busy opening new cafes and/or releasing their own cookbooks and food lines. Their success has inspired new wave of ambitious Australian café owners, such as Shot Espresso's Michael Sheehan in London and Brunswick's Alexander Hall in New York, to follow in their footsteps. Just as migrants educated Anglo-Celtic Australians about the pleasures of unconventional food and fine coffee in the second half of the 20th century, so Australians are performing a similar function for the world in the 21st century.

"We get a lot of Australian expats coming in," notes Shelagh Ryan. "But the locals are catching on. They're realising – as Australians have long known – that it's nice to go to brunch on a Saturday or Sunday morning, catch up with friends and family or improve that hangover by having something nice to eat and drink."

"It's very exciting to see so many Australian cafes opening both here in Los Angeles and around the world and I'm thrilled to be part of it," adds Cyndi Finkle. "I don't think they're going to be a fleeting phenomenon; they are based on coffee that hits the perfect note and food that's made with love and I believe that guarantees they will be around for the long haul."