

## **Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec), New Zealand**

**Gail Pittaway**

### **A Greek culinary odyssey to New Zealand, the furthest shore**

#### Abstract:

New Zealand is perhaps the furthest shore that the influence of Greek cuisine has reached, after receiving Greek immigrants in their largest numbers as part of the general diaspora of Greeks before and after the Second World War. Strong connections were formed between New Zealand and Greece, perhaps none more so than during the Battle of Crete in 1941, where ‘kiwi’ soldiers fought to defend Greeks. The majority of Greek immigrants to New Zealand settled in Wellington, the capital and then the most cosmopolitan of the small nation’s cities, where a major form of employment was in the food and hospitality industry. This paper reflects on the culinary impact of these immigrants on New Zealand after the war, and identifies some of the stories they tell of migration, work and identity through the food they ate at home.

#### Biographical note:

Gail Pittaway is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Media Arts, at Wintec, the Waikato Institute of Technology, in Hamilton, New Zealand. Her research interests include creative writing (poetry, short story and memoir), the teaching of creative writing, and food writing. She has edited two books, *Writers in the Gardens* and *Love Street*, and has had stories broadcast on National Radio, New Zealand, where she contributes regular live book reviews for the Nine to Noon program. She is a member of the New Zealand Communication Association, The Tertiary Writing Network, the New Zealand Society of Authors and has been an executive member of the Australian Association of Writing Programs since 2004.

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Creative writing – Taste – Food history writing – Greece – New Zealand – Immigration

New Zealand is perhaps the furthest shore that the influence of Greek cuisine has reached. In 2010, a new archaeological theory was proposed that, based on three core pieces of evidence, it was Greeks or Egyptians using Greek navigational technology, who first discovered New Zealand, possibly before 200 CE (Hill, Cook & Hilliam 2010), which is long before the time of the traditional version of this, which is that the islands were first discovered by Kupe, a Polynesian explorer, around 900 CE (Royal 2013). The islands that now comprise New Zealand were then settled by Polynesian navigators and refugees from starvation or disaster on the far away islands of Polynesia, a place called Hawaiki in mythology, in the following century. These people called the place Aotearoa, the land of the Long White Cloud, and called themselves Maori (Howe 2012; Royal 2013). By the end of the seventeenth century, the islands had been discovered by Dutch explorers. Captain James Cook first circumnavigated and mapped the area in 1769. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the first European settlements were beginning, but only as trading posts for whalers and sealers and it was not until the early nineteenth century that permanent settlers arrived.

The earliest recorded visitors to New Zealand from Greece were adventurers; fishermen from the early nineteenth century, then a few who joined the gold mining rush of the 1870s. The 1874 census listed 41 Greeks: 40 males and one woman. From early census documents, it is even possible to identify the original sources of the earliest Greek migrants as being the islands of Ithaca, Cephalonia and Lesbos, and the occupations of these people as being sea farers or fishermen (Swarbrick 2012). The woman's occupation was given as 'housewife'.

From 1918 to 1939 there was a slow period of chain migration, by which people from the same families or township followed other neighbours and relatives to another destination. This has been a significant pattern (Swarbrick 2012). New Zealand, however, received Greek immigrants in their largest numbers in the middle of the twentieth century as part of the general diasporas of Greeks before and after the war. The majority of later Greek immigrants to New Zealand settled in Wellington, the capital and then the most cosmopolitan of the small nation's cities. A major form of employment for those who made it to this shore was in the food and hospitality industry. Again Wellington, with its many rocky headlands, small-pebbled beaches and well-established fishing fleets was an appealing location and Wellington became known of as the 'Greek Capital' of New Zealand (Greek Orthodox Community of New Zealand 2012).

In a unique book tracing the many Greek establishments that grew up in the central thoroughfares of Wellington, *The Hellenic Mile* (1995), author Zisis (Bruce) Blades, son of an immigrant family, records food establishments run by Greek families. These include a fishmonger shop 1885, and a 1903 'Oyster Saloon', an eating establishment specializing in seafood, a type of eatery which was also very popular in Australia at this time (Blades 1995: 12, 13). In two of Wellington's central streets, Cuba Street and Lambton Quay, nearly half of the businesses from 1890 to 1980 were run by Greek families, and more than by any other immigrant group. Furthermore, 80 per cent of these businesses were food-related: cafes, bakeries and milk bars, as well as fishmongers and butchers.



Fig. 1. The Golden Gate Milkbar, Wellington, 1940. Alexander Turnbull Library, Greek Orthodox Community of Wellington and Suburbs Collection (PAColl 4924), Reference: 1/2-178217; F

The most significant period of Greek migration to New Zealand was from 1949 to 1961. This was prompted by two factors: the economic and political unrest in Greece at this time, and the shortage of a labour force in New Zealand because of loss of lives or able bodies after the casualties of World War II (Blades 1995: 12). During the war, strong connections were formed between New Zealand and Greece, on many levels, from political and military to personal, and perhaps none more so than during the Battle of Crete in 1941, where ‘kiwi’ soldiers fought to defend Greeks in battles at Rethymnon, Heraklion, Maleme and Galatos in particular. Many wounded New Zealand (and Australian) soldiers were rescued or protected by local villagers at great risk – nursed to health and then sent over the mountains to rejoin their regiments. A number of these brave civilians faced reprisals for these actions.



Fig. 2. New Zealand Soldiers and people of Galatos, Crete. Alexander Turnbull Library, War History Collection (PAColl-4161), Reference: 1/2-178243; F

One of those New Zealand soldiers, Ken Little, is quoted in a booklet memoir *Crete 1941 Eyewitnessed*, by Costa Hadjipateras:

In actual fact, Crete has never ended for me. I remember those people with deep affection and gratitude. We exchange cards, letters and photographs. As a people they gave so willingly and without thought of themselves (1989: 290).

Another descendent of Greek immigrants, Maria Verivaki, collected interviews in a book called *Stories of Greek Journeys: Greek Migration and Settlement* (Verivaki & Petris 1990) which documents interviews with Greek migrants to New Zealand. It includes one tale of how a New Zealand soldier, Anthony Madden, was helped by a young girl as he lay wounded in the hills of Crete. Years later, Mr. Madden revisited Crete, tracked down the young girl, by then married, called Zahoula Kondoyiannaki and with three children. In gratitude for their wartime kindness to him, Madden and his wife invited any members of her extended family to come to New Zealand to live and work, under his sponsorship; an offer of reciprocal kindness which was accepted by Zahoula (Verivaki & Petris 1990: 76). Her husband had been ill and there was no work for her to do in Greece so, in 1963, the couple and their three children arrived in Wellington to make a new life. At first they moved to be near the Madden family who farmed sheep in a small remote rural community called Waipukurau about two and a half hours by train from Wellington.

In an effort to bridge the strangeness of this new adventure for these migrants, Mr. Madden asked his local shopkeeper to find Greek-styled food to make his guests feel welcome. I can only surmise what that might have meant in the austere post-war culinary climate (although New Zealand did not have rationing at this time) that was dominated by a meat and potatoes diet – tomatoes, cucumber, hard cheese, perhaps a jar of olives from Australia?

Another story documented by Maria Verivaki is that of Stathi Yiavasis, who migrated at the invitation of his relatives and was put into the food business from the moment he arrived in New Zealand around 1925. Yiavasis is quoted as explaining:

Instead of sending me to high school (it wasn't compulsory at the time) my relatives decided to put me to work immediately. They helped bring me over here, I didn't complain. I didn't see the sun during the first six months of my life in New Zealand because I worked from early in the morning till late at night in my uncle's shop. I lived upstairs and worked downstairs (qtd. in Verivaki & Petris 1990: 39, 40).

He continues to elaborate how, despite not having been involved in culinary-related businesses in their homeland, many Greeks still ended up in such employment in the new country:

We didn't have a skill or trade but we could cook, so that's what we did. All the Greeks would bring out their relatives and put them to work in their own businesses. We all stuck together; we helped each other out (qtd. in Verivaki & Petris 1990: 39, 40).

Stathi Yiavasis went on to buy his own business, a fish and chip shop in Molesworth St, Thorndon, in central Wellington, which he operated for 37 years. This became a favourite of the politicians and civil servants who worked and lived in that district. The Beehive, New Zealand's parliament building, is just across the road.

Owning one's own business was a dream that could be achieved in the new country; as another Greek businessman stated:

Long hours, standing all day, working with running water and not for huge profits. But rather than go and work for someone else you were your own boss! And you could save! Because you worked so hard you did not have time to spend it! (qtd. in Blades 1995: 32).

Even those migrants who were well qualified in professions or skilled trades in 'the old country' found themselves working on contract in the primary industries in rural areas, such as the timber industry (McGill 1982). After working out what were usually two year contracts, they often moved back to the city, usually Wellington, and, as often as not, into a family business in some aspect of food preparation or delivery; cafes, restaurants, 'fast food' – which was becoming very popular in relation to the British styled fish and chip shops – and, during the war, the new American culinary contribution, the milk bar. So why did so many continue to move into the food business? My theory is that where language might be a problem in the English speaking colony, the language of gastronomy, of food-appreciation, preparation, presentation and transaction is international.

After World War II, there was a concentration in New Zealand on re-establishing the country as a producer of primary goods with an emphasis on dairy products, and especially, milk and a very bland, mild-tasting cheddar cheese. Mutton was farmed and butchered predominantly for the British market but was also readily available for Sunday roasts, mince, chops or barbecue. As an island nation, however, fish and shellfish have always been plentiful in New Zealand, and Italians and Greeks have been leaders in catching and cooking it.

As Burton notes, with the dominant culture and, therefore, the food culture being British, many immigrants adjusted to the simpler culinary demands of the majority populace by establishing fish and chip shops (2009: 65). Most traditional Greek cooking necessities were unknown or unobtainable in the required quantities, for example, olive oil could only be purchased in pharmacies as a medicinal product, as could rose water and orange flower water, however gradually, the Greek owned shops provided a market for the importation of traditional Greek delicacies and staples. These were first sold to fellow immigrants, but eventually to an expanding clientele. Gradually, jars of olives, pickles, tins of olive oil, and delicacies such as feta cheese, taramasalata (fish roe dip) and dolmades (stuffed vine leaves) made their way onto the kiwi table, most likely via Australian importers.

Vegetables familiar to Greek consumers such as courgettes/zucchini, capsicums and other peppers and chillies, aubergines/eggplants, artichokes and many varieties of beans and peas were unknown in mainstream New Zealand shops. However, almost every suburban home had a large area of garden, and in New Zealand's moist, temperate climate, more adventurous home gardeners experimented with many of these crops. New Zealand's customs officers cannot have been as strict as they are today, for many seeds of these plants appeared and were traded, both officially and unofficially, in the next decades.



Fig. 3. Stergios Papaioanou (left) and George Yiappos fix the menu for the Paramount Cafeteria before opening for business, Wellington, 1961. Alexander Turnbull Library, Reference: 1/2-1780431; F

To return to the story of the Kondoyiannaki family, the place they first settled in New Zealand was so remote for them, and so far removed from their Greek community, that they eventually moved closer to Wellington, which was perhaps even more attractive an option after the construction of a Greek orthodox church in the centre of the city in 1947. This was later rebuilt in 1970 (Verivaki & Petris 1990). In Wellington they would have been able to meet up with other migrants – Greeks who had already relocated once, to Rumania, an influx of 267 young women from Crete ‘drafted’ as domestic workers in 1962 and, then, in the 1970s, Greeks from the civil war in Cyprus. By 1982, in a population of just over 2.5 million in the whole of New Zealand, 5,000 people identified themselves as Greek in the general census, and of those, 4,000 (or 80 per cent) lived and/or worked in Wellington (McGill 1982).

By 1927, a Pan Hellenic Association had been formed, with approximately 75 members (Blades 1995: 13) followed by an Apollon Greek Association of Rumanian Greeks after World War II, to cope with growing numbers of Greek migrants, and both are still based in and around the Greek Orthodox Church complex in Wellington; the first converted from existing wooden buildings, in the 1940s. A newer reinforced concrete building was completed in 1971 on the slopes of Wellington’s Mount Victoria in Hania Street, an area in which many Greek families have made their home. Hania in Greece and Wellington in New Zealand have been sister cities since 1981 and the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Crete. This Byzantine-modelled church has adjacent buildings for community events and the all-important Greek language school has been run since 1937, teaching Greek language to the New Zealand born generations (Greek Orthodox Community of New Zealand 2012). Here, too families and friends meet at the regular round of meetings; religious, social and sporting. In 2014, Greek language is taught on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, from 3.30 to 5.00pm, in several sites around the city and there is also a Greek language school in Christchurch in the South Island, a city which is home to the second largest Greek population in New Zealand. On Sundays, in Wellington, there is a Sunday School and the church has also been the centre for Greek dancing as well as sports teams – soccer, or football, for the boys and netball for the girls (McGill 1982: 96).



Fig. 4. The first Greek School in New Zealand, about 1939. Alexander Turnbull Library, Greek Orthodox Community of Wellington and Suburbs Collection (PAColl 4924), Reference: 1/2-177645; F

Over time, the celebrations of the Greek community have become a part of Wellington's already cosmopolitan events calendar (Blades 1995: 13). In particular, the *Paniyiri* or Greek food festival, which usually runs on a weekend in February, at which Wellingtonians, Greek and non-Greek, as well as visitors and tourists can taste souvlaki, calamari, pita bread, loukoumades (biscuits), baklava (sweet nut pastries) as well as drink ouzo and Greek coffee, or purchase imported Greek goods (Greek Orthodox community in New Zealand 2012).



Fig. 5. Women selling Greek cakes at Paniyiri, Mrs Stella Bares on right. Alexander Turnbull Library, Greek Orthodox Community of Wellington and Suburbs Collection (PAColl 4924), Reference: 1/2-1798351; F

Many of the offspring of those original food industry workers did not stay in the family business. Education was important for migrant families and the members of the next generation often moved on into professions such as law, teaching and the civil service, as did the authors of the books celebrating their forbears, Verivaki and Blades. Like Stathi's son, upward mobility became desirable:

We certainly helped out in the shop, but we were never expected to. Mum and Dad didn't try to keep us there ... Their priority lay in educating us' (qtd. in Verivaki & Petris 1990: 39).

Gradually, as assimilation and education changed these families, it became obvious that the food industry had been a way of grabbing a foothold on this new soil – a place to work hard and show results. Food was not the focus of this effort but a means to the end, and their Greek cuisine never dominated the menus of their bars, cafes and shops, in the way that the Asian and Italian fast food shops would dominate in the 1980's and American burger bars in the 1990s. However, New Zealand's most enduring and influential food writer, Alison Holst – who has produced at least one cookery book each year over the previous three decades – included a significant number of Greek, Greek-styled, or at least Greek-influenced recipes and information in her *Best of Alison Holst* collection in 1990. The index of this volume lists Greek salad, taramasalata, eggplant dip, moussaka, various filo pastry recipes, and fish and chicken pan fried, grilled or barbecued, with variations of sesame seed, lemon and oreganum along with lamb dishes roasted with rosemary, honey and lemon, and also kebabs.

More than anyone, Holst's approval of this cuisine has meant that few summers in New Zealand pass without Greek salad served with lamb kebabs, and filled filo pastries are perennially popular, particularly as savouries, either purchased to be heated and served or made at home using prepared filo pastry. There are now fast food shops selling a variety of Mediterranean foodstuffs such as kebabs and souvlaki in most towns in New Zealand alongside the persistent fish, chips and burgers. There are still specialty shops in Wellington, Christchurch and Auckland serving the local community many delicacies imported from Greece, while in other parts of the country, there are Greek shelves and sections in most delicatessen shops and supermarkets.

In Wellington, the influence of Greek food and food provision is still clearly evident at the *Paniyiri* Greek Food Festival. The following interview with Stella Bares, the founder of *Paniyiri*, which has now been running for fifty years, was reported in a community newspaper in February of 2013. This publication, *Capital Times*, is delivered free to all households in the city, and I will leave Bares' musings on obtaining the necessary ingredients in New Zealand to provide the conclusion to this discussion, as it summarises well the changes and rate of that change. When asked, if obtaining these ingredients was difficult, Bares replied:

Not anymore, but when we first arrived yes it was difficult. For instance for many years you couldn't buy capsicums anywhere in Wellington. Some Greek immigrants brought a few seeds with them in their pockets and these were distributed within the Greek community. Greeks are great gardeners. They love their glasshouses. In Greece every house has a lemon tree, a vine and a fig tree. My grandmother used to say the sign of a happy housewife was if the husband had a good lemon tree.

Many households with gardens, particularly in the North Island of New Zealand, have at least one of these three trees nowadays. If Mrs. Kondoyiannaki arrived in Waipukurau today, she would only miss her church and language, but not her food





Fig. 6. Maria and Christodoulos Toulis dance at their wedding, 1991 (money is pinned onto their costumes in accordance with Greek Cypriot tradition). Alexander Turnbull Library, Greek Orthodox Community of Wellington and Suburbs Collection (PAColl 4924), Reference: 1/2-179754; F.

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