



Cafe staff, Sydney, early 1900s.
Photo courtesy of the Sanitarium Health Food Company Archives.

Sanitarium Health Food Cafés, Australia

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Sanitarium Health Food cafés were opened in several cities in Australia in the early 1900s. The cafés were associated with the promotion of public health. To this end, vegetarian cooking demonstrations and health lectures were often held on the premises.

A Small Beginning

At the 1899 camp meeting in Maitland, New South Wales, two tents were occupied by the Sanitarium Health Food Company (SHF). Manufactured foods were transported from the nearby Cooranbong factory to be displayed and sold in one tent. In the other tent, light lunches were served and samples of the factory products provided. At the close of

the camp meeting, the enterprise was apparently removed to a rented shop in Maitland.¹ An inventory of the contents included a list of eleven products offered for sale together with curtains, screens, a tin opener, saucepan, basin, pie dish, milk jug, and oil stoves.² These items indicate a retail shop and small café operated in the one facility. In February 1900, it was reported that the “business is paying its way and increasing.”³ In the 1901, SHF balance sheet the Maitland shop showed a profit of £28.⁴

Sydney Café

Early in 1902, a small retail shop briefly operated in the Royal Arcade, Sydney.⁵ By March, the shop had been moved into two adjacent shops at 283 Pitt Street for a rental of ten pounds each week. One of the shops was refurbished as a café, both enterprises managed by John Burden. Hydrotherapy treatments were offered in one corner of the premises.⁶ Known as the Pure Food Vegetarian Café, it was soon serving approximately two hundred meals each day.⁷

However, the company was overshadowed by debts. Overall debt for 1900 was £1,002 and was carried over into a further debt of £648 for the six months to June 30, 1901. The sister institution, the Summer Hill Sanitarium, showed debts totally £1,855.⁸ Church officials made haste to separate the finances of the SHF, the Summer Hill Sanitarium, and the infant Sydney Sanitarium so that the debts of one failed arm would not be laid on another.⁹ Early in 1904, George Fisher was appointed manager and finances began to improve. In his first year, he found a basement at 45 Hunter Street where he transferred the café. Initially the enterprise was operated on a shoe-string budget, staff agreeing to reduced wages and volunteering extra work hours.¹⁰ A little later, the rooms next door became available and the café was expanded to comfortably seat approximately 120 diners at any one time. The average meal cost one shilling.¹¹ By 1906, the debt was significantly reduced and on the evening of August 19 a celebration dinner was held at which twenty-five gold sovereigns were donated to Elder Edward Gates of the Pacific Island Mission Board, representing the first profits of the fledgling company.¹²

During the fiscal years July 1906 through June 1908, Fisher reported 99,695 meals were served.¹³ In January 1912, one of their storerooms was converted into an expansion of the café and in that same year the number of meals served climbed to 271,899.¹⁴ Fisher began a search

for larger premises and in the meantime opened a branch café at 283 Clarence Street during the First World War years.¹⁵ Eventually, about 1916, the transfer was made from the Hunter Street café and business was consolidated in a more commodious café at 306-308 George Street. Hugh Moseley had assisted Fisher for a few years and assumed full control in late 1919.¹⁶ At the George Street address, there followed a succession of managers serving approximately two years each until 1935. They were Ward Nolan,¹⁷ Paul Otto,¹⁸ Fred Butler,¹⁹ Norman Sorensen,²⁰ Colin Forsyth,²¹ Percy Donaldson,²² and Hector Franks.²³

Under George Adair, SHF general manager, the café was moved back to Hunter Street in late 1935 where it continued to prosper until it closed in 1983. In later years, service was reduced to counter meals only. The succession of managers at this address were Clarence Lane,²⁴ Hector Franks,²⁵ Harold Eiszele,²⁶ Sydney Greive,²⁷ George Adair,²⁸ Ronald Gray,²⁹ Jack Binning³⁰ and Ross Forbes. Its closure was not due to indebtedness or low patronage, but simply a decision of upper management. Discussion about reopening the café never came to fruition.³¹

Melbourne Café

After much searching for a café site to rent in Melbourne, Fisher found one in late 1906 at 289 Collins Street.³² Two staff members from the Sydney café, including Eva Hare, transferred to the Melbourne enterprise³³ managed by Charles Hallam.³⁴ Shortly after its opening, Fisher quoted a newspaper article, that spoke enthusiastically of the menu, mentioning cream, custard, cheeses, lentil and walnut cutlets, creamed parsnips, and beans cooked in an “alluring fashion.” He went on to describe “appetising” sandwiches made of granose biscuits filled with nut cheese.³⁵ The selections were undoubtedly a novelty in the heart of Melbourne’s business district and attracted a class of people who loved nouvelle cuisine.

The premises in Collins Street served their purpose until about 1912 when the owners sold the building and a new site was rented in Chancery Lane at 422-424 Little Collins Street. At that time, Paul Glockler was managing the business.³⁶ He was followed by William Wright³⁷ and Clifford Buik.³⁸ A report in 1922 noted that the number of meals served rose from 67,000 in 1918 to 73,000 in 1921.³⁹ At that time, another move was made to 293 Little Collins Street where there John Sandeman,⁴⁰ Wilfred Smith,⁴¹ Percy Donaldson,⁴² and George Creswell⁴³ managed it in succession. In 1937, the lease expired and the site was transformed into an arcade. When a new site proved difficult to locate, and in view of the fact the café had been losing money, it was decided not to reopen the enterprise.⁴⁴

Adelaide Café

The third SHF café in Australia was opened by Fisher at 28 Waymouth Street, Adelaide, on February 24, 1908.⁴⁵ Lily Dawes transferred from the Sydney café to provide an experienced hand.⁴⁶ Later, Eva Hare transferred from the Melbourne café to serve as manager.⁴⁷ Hare was succeeded by Archibald Rogers. By 1913, the debt caused by extensive renovations before the café opened was reduced from several hundred pounds to seventy-two pounds. At the same time, a search was under way for a more suitable site.⁴⁸ In 1917, one was found at 19 Grenfell Street and manager Lewis Butler,⁴⁹ followed by William Wilton,⁵⁰ endeavored to increase sales by combining café and retail

shop. However, the café section became a liability with repeated heavy losses and was closed by 1922⁵¹ The retail business was later moved to 7a Rundle Street⁵² and another attempt was eventually made to expand into café work, but by 1940 the effort was finally abandoned due to further losses.⁵³

Brisbane Café

The Brisbane SHF café and retail shop was opened in 1913 at 186 Edward Street with Mr. and Mrs. Thompson initially in charge⁵⁴ until Elenor Cooper became manager.⁵⁵ In 1919, Clifford Buik transferred from the Melbourne branch to become manager. During his term, the enterprise required a larger site but no suitable shop could be leased so a building was purchased at 360 Queen Street.⁵⁶ A succession of managers followed, including Paul Glockler,⁵⁷ Fred Butler,⁵⁸ Hugh Moseley,⁵⁹ Charles Tinworth,⁶⁰ Norman Faulkner,⁶¹ and Laurence Piper.⁶² The café business struggled to be self-supporting. It was closed down in 1938 and the building sold, while the retail section was moved to a shop in Adelaide Street.⁶³

The café concept was revived in April 2008 with the opening of a boutique enterprise called “Kitchen” at the 145 Eagle Street branch in the Brisbane central business district. First reports indicated a positive response from the public, necessitating the provision of ten additional tables.⁶⁴ This venture continued until its closure in 2017.

Perth Café

While extolling the evangelistic benefits of vegetarian cafés, Fisher announced that a venture of this kind opened in Perth on March 7, 1916. He had persuaded the Western Australian Conference officials to transfer their administrative centre to another location so that the rooms could be re-furbished as an SHF retail shop and café. The premises were at 103 William Street, the upstairs portion used as the café. Laura Ulrich came from the Sydney café for some months to train Hilda Deering in the cooking department and Paul Otto was appointed the first manager.⁶⁵

The business exceeded all expectations, windfall profits being used in 1922 to purchase central premises at 116 Barrack Street.⁶⁶ William Wilton managed this facility⁶⁷ but by 1926 a further move was made to 757 Hay Street. This proved to be a more enduring site, managed over a period of thirty years by Thomas Dowling,⁶⁸ Gordon Salisbury,⁶⁹ Harry Stacey,⁷⁰ Clarence Lane⁷¹ and Sydney Greive.⁷² In 1940 the café was replaced by a milk bar and counter service.⁷³ After the Second World War, when Maurice Earles was manager, the Hay Street premises were upgraded to a café.⁷⁴ This situation existed while Earles remained in charge, that is until 1966, but then the premises were used solely for retail purposes.⁷⁵

Hobart Café

A short-lived café was listed in 1908 operating at 80 Collins Street in Hobart.⁷⁶ The following year it was located in the Heathorn Buildings on Liverpool Street.⁷⁷ Both ventures were unsuccessful. Another attempt was made at 85 Elizabeth Street, Hobart, from 1926 through 1932. The successive managers were Thomas Dowling,⁷⁸ Harold Halliday,⁷⁹ Gordon Salisbury,⁸⁰ and Robert Riley.⁸¹

Contribution and Assessment

The cafés were always associated with the promotion of public health. To this end, vegetarian cooking demonstrations and health lectures were often held on the premises. The legacy of one such health educator, Laura Ulrich, was preserved by her 1912 book entitled *Good Food: How to Prepare It*.⁸² Also in the interest of good health, hydrotherapy treatments were associated with some cafés, notably the long-running enterprise of the Sydney Café.⁸³

Photographs of the cafés show they were well-appointed, clean, and designed to appeal to the broad middle class⁸⁴ However, they were labor-intensive and required high revenue in order to cover the cost of wages. The Melbourne Café, for example, employed in 1914 a manager and fifteen staff.⁸⁵ As pointed out above, in most cases the businesses incurred financial losses and therefore had to be closed in the late 1930s. Only the Perth and Sydney cafés enjoyed a longer life. Even these two cafés succumbed to the proliferation of rival cafés that increasingly offered healthy lunch-time snack alternatives such as a variety of fruit yogurts, vegetarian pizzas, and takeaway salads and sandwiches.

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