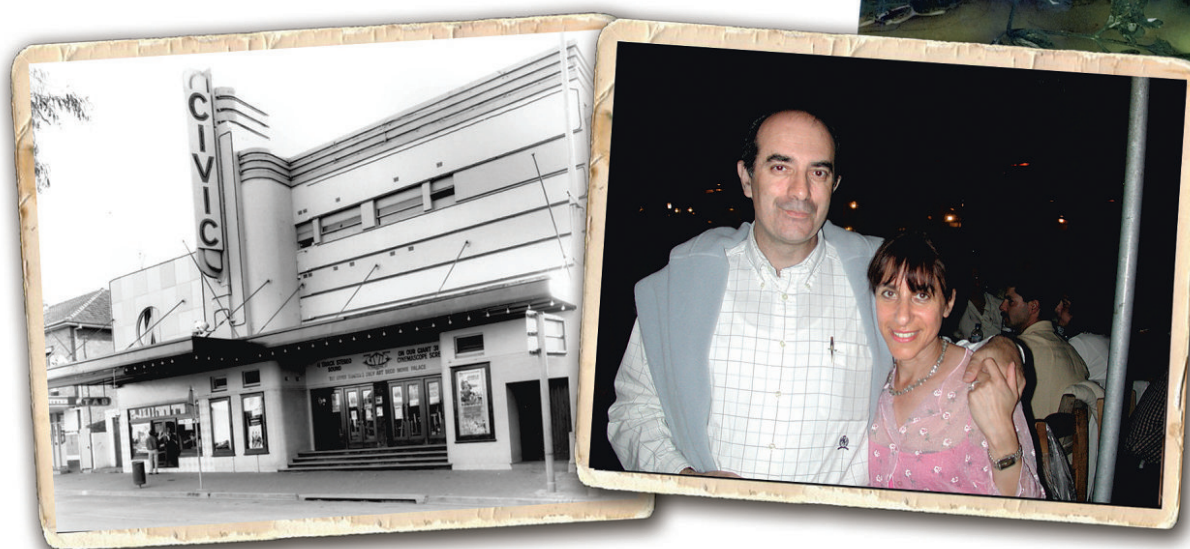


A BITE FOR SORE EYES

Hunter-raised ophthalmologist Minas Coroneo can see bountiful health benefits in the Mediterranean diet, writes NEIL JAMESON.



A DOCTOR'S JOURNEY: The Coroneos in Kythera in 2000; the cookbook their trip inspired; and the cinema owned by the Coroneo family in Scone.

In 2000, Minas Coroneo's passion for public health caused him to stage an unusual protest.

The eminent eye specialist, dismayed at the way the state's hospitals were being "ransacked" to pay for the Sydney Olympics, packed his family off to Greece.

There, near his parents' birthplace on the island of Kythera, and using equipment donated by local charities, he set up a clinic in the island's old folks' home.

Professor Coroneo was amazed by what he found.

"Of the 61 patients, 40 per cent were over 80 and another 40 per cent over 90. [But] only 5 per cent showed evidence of macular degeneration. For Australians of this age, one would expect that about 40 per cent would suffer from this disease."

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is the most common cause of blindness in Western countries.

In explaining this radical difference, Coroneo noted that it was "difficult to avoid the fact that diet may play a role here and in a large number of degenerative conditions".

On returning to Australia, he knew that

lecturing would only achieve so much. In the style of prevention being the best cure he set about selling the olive-oil rich Mediterranean diet as a first line of prevention.

Ten years on from that Kythera sabbatical, in partnership with his wife Hellene, he has released *Feast Your Eyes – the eye health cookbook*. And what a feast it is! Coroneo might not have been able to persuade the state government to stop splurging on the Olympics, but he managed to recruit a veritable who's who of the culinary scene to contribute their best Mediterranean-inspired recipes to his eye-catching project. No less than 42 leading chefs and cooks have lent their imaginations to the task.

As a recipe book, *Feast Your Eyes* may indeed be unique because, in tandem with the mouth-watering dishes, it delivers the accessible wisdom of the celebrated Coroneo arguing the case for healthy diet. And, as the ancients have long known, the eyes are indicators for so much that goes to general wellbeing.

"Most of the critical issues of the body are seen in the eye [which is in fact an outgrowth of the brain]," he notes, "and, as the eye is largely transparent, ophthalmologists can see

early evidence of this disease in the eye.

"Western diets may contribute to diseases such as heart disease, stroke and diabetes, all of which can affect the eye. These diets are associated with macular degeneration. So, eye doctors are now at the forefront of promoting healthy diets."

Coroneo traces the history of post-war research, especially that conducted by the remarkable American physiologist Ancel Benjamin Keys, who found that, in spite of the deprivations of the war, populations of such places as southern Italy and Crete remained protected from cardiovascular illness. On the other hand, prosperous America was facing an epidemic of heart disease.

In simple language, the author-surgeon fleshes out the dietary patterns of 16 Mediterranean countries and explains why the diet works. In doing so he identifies the role of olive oil in the diet, the importance of plant foods including greens, nuts, potatoes and cereals, fresh fish, wine in moderate amounts and locally grown, seasonally fresh, minimally processed foods.

Such are the ingredients included in the book's range of recipes yielding dishes like

Javier Codina's marinated yellowtail kingfish with ciabatta brushed with olive oil, garlic and tomato; or Peter Howard's dukkah-crusted snapper fillets.

Alfonso Alés, from Bilson's Restaurant, has contributed his recipe for John Dory fillets with artichokes "a la barigoule"; Iain Hewitson has rolled out "true blue minestrone", Mark Jensen of Surry Hills' Red Lantern has presented grilled mullet with wok-tossed water spinach with almonds, garlic and ginger; and Luke Mangan has donated his pan-fried snapper with cucumber and tomatoes.

For those approaching what we call the advanced years, you can sense the win-win here. Plough your way through these mouth-watering, wholesome recipes and you will maintain enough eye power to allow you to keep reading the text and thereby produce more nutritional meals.

For Minas Coroneo, 57, who was trained by and succeeded the late Professor Fred Hollows as Head of the Eye Clinic at Prince of Wales Hospital and Sydney Children's Hospital, this journey started long before he entered medical school in the early 1970s.

It could have kicked off in Kythera but, it's fair to say, Scone in the Upper Hunter is the logical starting point. His dad had arrived there as a young man back in the 1920s.

It was in the Hunter during the 1960s that the son of the owners of Niagara cafes in Scone and Muswellbrook and later a cinema in Scone, trundled off to school each day with his lunchbox packed with elements of a Mediterranean diet.

"At home, we had few ornamental trees – we had olives, figs, almonds, walnuts and grapes," Minas recounts, "and grew okra, eggplant and various varieties of artichoke."

"At school, I had a classic case of 'lunch boxitis'. My mother would usually include standard Greek fare and if I was going to school today it would be considered almost gourmet. Back then, sadly, much of this fine food was furtively ditched."

For Hunter readers, the most colourful parts of Coroneo's narrative involve his adolescence, a good part of it spent in the family businesses of cafes and cinema. It offers a vivid description of the separate worlds inhabited by Anglo-Celtic and "new" Australians.

"To my knowledge, in Scone, the Coroneos were the first of the shopkeepers of Mediterranean or Central European origin. They made a mighty impact on the town when they built their highly decorated shop and refreshment room in Kelly Street . . . Who had ever been served with chipped potatoes accompanying their steak before? Where else could one buy very well-cooked fish in batter? Or ice cream sodas, or sundaes?"

His trips to the big smoke of Newcastle hint at how his longing to be like the other kids drew him away from his family influence, and the Mediterranean diet. He tells of eating his first pie floater at the David Jones cafeteria.



LABOUR OF LOVE: Minas Coroneo and his wife and joint book compiler Hellene.

My mother would usually include standard Greek fare in my lunch box. Back then, sadly, much of this fine food was furtively ditched."

"After a short lifetime of eating Greek cuisine, this was a smash hit for my brother and me."

Through high school and on to medical school at Sydney University, his diet became increasingly Western and less Mediterranean.

"We didn't get taught much about nutrition when I went through uni," he tells *Weekender*. Nor did they learn much about work-life balance.

"Not surprisingly, for many, being medically qualified was a health hazard and meant living a relatively low-quality lifestyle."

"In my mid 40s, overweight and over-committed, I was found to be mildly hypertensive and, worse still, had about eight times the upper level of a substance known as lipoproteina (lpa) in my blood."

High lpa is an independent risk factor for heart attacks and strokes. Coroneo's cardiologist put him on statin therapy involving a course of drugs designed to lower cholesterol, but the patient didn't appreciate the side effects.

The only other known way to lower lpa was through exercise and a diet containing fish oil. Physician, heal thyself.

"I ate fish oil and exercised as if my life depended on it. My levels of lpa came down, as did my blood pressure."

The book project grew from his prescribed "cure" and a conjunction of other ideas. There was the Kythera experience of 2000, the professor's growing awareness of the importance of diet and the real-life events

gleaned from dealing with his patients.

He had started writing a book on eye health when the project changed tack and became part educational resource, recipe book, life history and patient stories. And in published form, it works for charity.

When leading ophthalmologist Frank Halliday retired he handed leadership of the Genetic Eye Foundation, a charity caring for people and researching hereditary eye disease, to Minas Coroneo. The role included raising funds. Hence, profits from the cookbook will go to the foundation.

Compared with other specialists, ophthalmologists are few in number but, says Coroneo, their importance to general health should not be underestimated.

"Ophthalmologists are often well-placed to make difficult diagnoses because in the eye we can tie together basic mechanisms of disease. The eye is a bit like the canary in a coalmine – it picks up disease early."

In *Feast Your Eyes*, the eye specialist is aiming to ensure the canary enjoys a long and healthy existence. As the author-doctor suggests, it's not a bad prescription.

"The recipes are delicious. If they are good for your health and maintaining your sight, then we all win."

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VISIONARY MEDIC

Professor Minas Coroneo has an international reputation for his work on eye disease caused by sun damage and is currently leading a team working on the bionic eye.

He has introduced innovative techniques used in glaucoma and cataract surgery, has developed a dye technique to improve the safety of modern cataract surgery and invented a shunt that may revolutionise glaucoma surgery.

He helps manage the Hollows legacy by co-ordinating one of the largest rural and indigenous outreach eye programs in Australia. As a teacher he has helped develop a laboratory and new techniques for training eye surgeons.