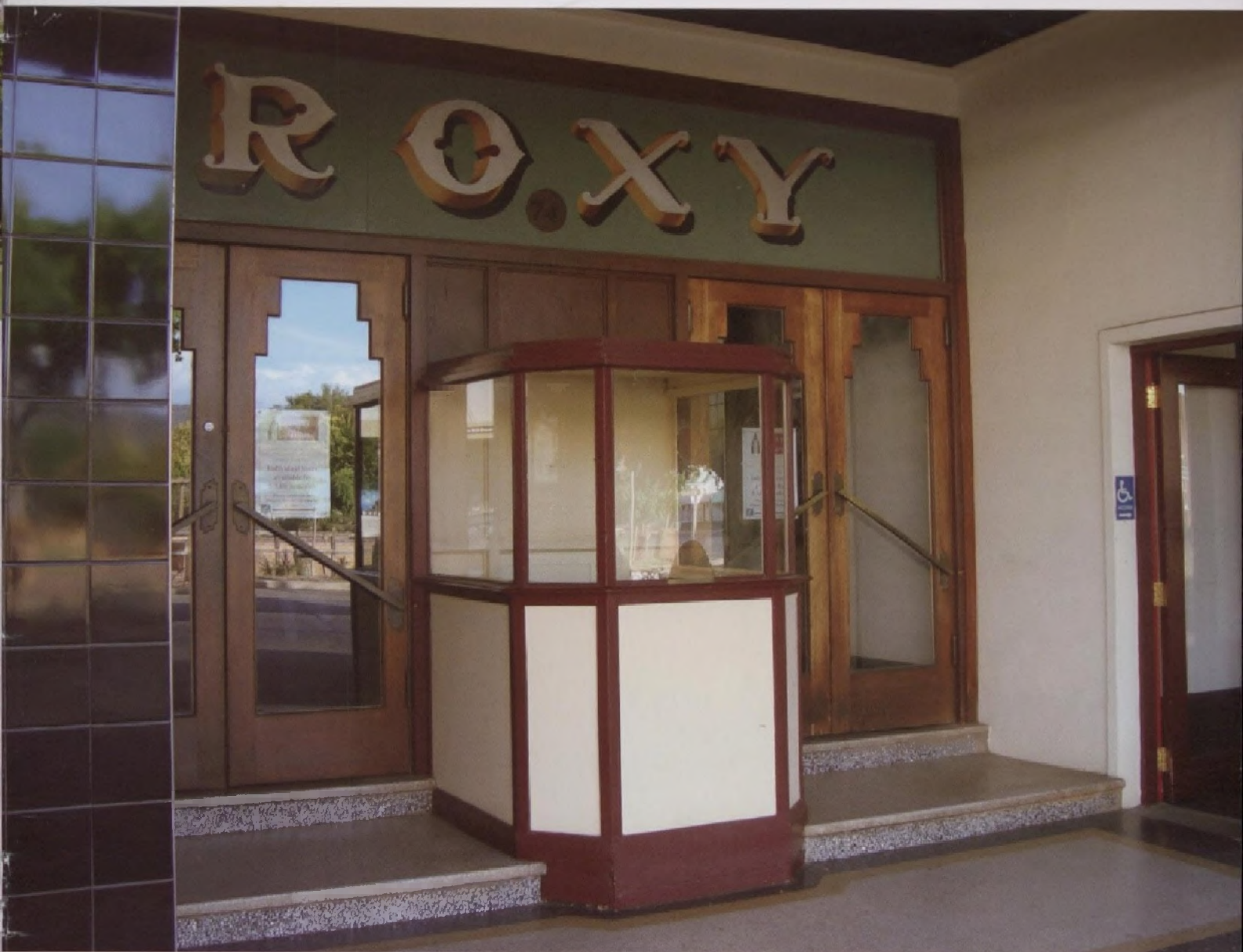


HISTORY

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The Roxy Cafe in Bingara

The Two Wives of Hector Macquarie

Thomas Termouth/Turner

The Sydney Bathing Company's Natatorium

The Roxy Café in Bingara

The final customers have departed, the tables and chairs are stacked and the proprietor has turned out the lights. The dust settles and silence descends. Another Greek café in another town closes its doors for the last time. Another vacant shop front from another time joins the ranks of those lining the street of another fading community, marking the passage of time, the final chapter and the end of an era.

The past decade has seen the closure of a number of the last of the Greek family owned cafés in northern New South Wales. The Busy Bee in Gunnedah, the White Rose in Uralla, Fardouly's Café and Pete's Place in Inverell to name a few, have recently followed suit. The Paragon in Katoomba and the Niagra in Gundagai, in continuous operation for over a century, are the exceptions to the rule.

It seems the final curtain beckons to those few remaining who offer little indication of how brightly their spotlights once shone, they bear slight resemblance to the days when their appreciative audiences queued for the opportunity to share the magic they brought to everyday life.

Greek cafés left a remarkable legacy on Australia's cultural history and played a significant role in the changing landscape of our regions. Almost every town across rural NSW and Queensland boasted a Greek café. Depending on the size of the town, any number could be found at the heart of each community. The evolution of rural Australia, however, has determined that the time has come for these resplendent palaces that once played such a starring role, to take their final bow.

There is nothing remarkable about a story regarding the demise of a Greek café in rural Australia. There is something quite extraordinary, however, about such a café being brought back to life.

Forty-five years since serving its last mixed grill, The Roxy Café in Bingara, northern New South Wales, is being faithfully restored to its original



The Roxy's unfinished facade. (Photo copyright: Peter Prineas)

The story of The Roxy is not just about the venue, the bricks and mortar. It is not just about the striking art deco architecture or its historical significance. It's a story of big ideas, of dreams and visions against all odds. It's a story of heartbreak and ultimately triumph. It is a story that has touched many lives and in doing so has been well documented over the years.

Much of the story was played out in the pages of the local newspaper, *The Bingara Advocate*. Further insights came to light in a PhD thesis undertaken in the 1990s by Kevin Cork, the then President of the Australian Theatre Historical Society. The thesis was entitled *Parthenons Downunder, Greek Motion Picture Exhibitors in NSW 1915 - 1960*, a topic never before explored in Australian history.

The most comprehensive components of the story however, have been provided by Peter Prineas, the grandson of Peter Feros, one of the original founders of the building, through the extensively researched biography *Katschamos and the Great Idea*. A true story of Greeks and Australians in the early twentieth century, the work details the history of The Roxy as a symbol that epitomizes the chapters shared by the two cultures.

The Journey Begins

The Roxy story begins in the village of Mitata on the island of Kythera in Greece, the birthplace of three men in the 1890s who later became partners; Peter Feros, Emanuel Aroney and George Psaltis.

Kythera covers an area of 282 sq km and has a current population of around 3,500 people. Commencing before the turn of the last century, a large number of Kytherians migrated and the majority came to Australia. Some estimate there may be as many as 100,000 Kytherians and Kytherian descendants in Australia today.

At the time, Greeks were leaving a country that was decimated by war with its devastating effects of political turmoil and social upheaval. Australia was the promised land where the dreams of the destitute and dispossessed lay in the cafés, which offered bountiful rewards for the fruits of hard labour.

By the turn of the century, inner city Sydney was home to any number of oyster bars, fish restaurants



Roxy founder Emanuel Aroney. (Photo copyright: Peter Prineas)



Roxy founders Peter Feros (l) and George Psaltis (r) (Photo copyright: Peter Prineas)



The Roxy interior, one of only two photos known to exist of the original interior. (Photo copyright: Peter Prineas)

and refreshment rooms. Those seeking to establish independent enterprises of their own were forced to look further afield. The country towns of New South Wales and southern Queensland embraced these culinary concerns that offered an extensive and affordable array of food, beverages and confectionary to satisfy every pocket and appetite.

Like countless immigrants before them who ventured into rural Australia in search of opportunity, the young Aroney, Feros and Psaltis chose Bingara as the town where they hoped to make their fortune.

Arriving in the 1920s to establish a café, they formed a partnership called Peters & Co, a generic business name chosen by Kytherian businessmen who adopted it as an informal franchise among Greek shopkeepers. Peters & Co were on the road to realizing their dream, despite trading through the Great Depression. During this time of terrible hardship, the food trades were quite resilient. There was not much money around, but a visit to the local café was a small luxury people could afford and they savoured it in the hard times.

The success of the partners' business in Bingara is apparent but not just through their decision in 1930 to invest their savings into The Golden Bell, a new café in Barraba. It would be provided by an unprecedented expansion of their business that the *Bingara Advocate* proclaimed "will herald the Dawn of a new Era in Bingara's Entertainment history"

The enhancements the partners made to their business proved no ordinary undertaking. Peters & Co created an entertainment complex that remained unparalleled in comparable towns of the region. The enterprise included a brand new modern café that seated 140 patrons; three independent shops facing the main street that could be leased to ensure the building's financial viability; a guesthouse to accommodate Roxy patrons, and at its heart, a cinema that was "the most modern theatre outside of the city."

The size of the town did not impede the partners' vision. Bingara, with a population of around 1,500 at the time, was invited to share their aspirations, which knew no bounds in terms of majestic beauty and modernity.

Kevin Cork's thesis traced the history of sixty-six Greek cinema owners in NSW from circa 1915 to the early 1960s. A significant number of picture theatre operators were Kytherians who had or continued to

run cafés. Their impact on cinema ownership in NSW was immense.

Peters & Co were not the first motion picture exhibitors in Bingara. Opening in 1912, Bingara Moving Pictures presented the town with silent films accompanied by a pianist. Twice a week, patrons entered the galvanized iron theatre to take their seats on wooden planks on the gravel floor, or on the dearer seats at the back built up on tiers.

A second silent picture show opened in the Soldier's Memorial Hall in 1931. A distinguished local businessman, Victor Reginald Peacocke, was the presenter of the cinema he named the Regent Theatre. In 1934, around the time that Peacocke introduced Bingara to the first talkie pictures ever seen, Bingara Moving Pictures was consumed by fire and burnt to the ground.

Unlike the modest cinemas Bingara enjoyed, Peters & Co engaged Mark Woodforde, a Sydney architect, to build a picture theatre that could suitably house a palace of dreams. The auditorium would be 104 feet long from the rear wall to the stage and 40 feet wide, with a drop from ceiling to floor of 24 feet. There were steps in the vestibule area to gain height; this allowed the auditorium floor to slope down towards the screen and provide every patron with a good view. The floor's sloping section had seating for 280 customers and the level section closer to the screen accommodated another 470. The level area was designed so that the seats could be removed, revealing a large dance floor made of beautifully joined timbers cut from the cypress pine forests of the north-west.

Cinema Wars

This incensed Victor Peacocke, who was determined to rule supreme in the cinema stakes. In a letter to his local Member of Parliament, he painted a scene of Greek standover men running amok in quiet little Bingara. His letter contained the declaration that he would in fact build his own cinema stating, "I have no intention of allowing the Greeks to put it over me in this way, so I am endeavouring to get in ahead of them... I shall be submitting plans myself during the next few weeks...and I am hoping those of the Greeks will be held up until I can get a start." Peacocke was



The Roxy Theatre [centre] with the Roxy Cafe on the corner. (Photo: M. Metzke)

determined to open before Peters & Co and was elected to Council in the interim.

Victor Peacocke's modest Regent Theatre opened in June of 1935, just 18 weeks after the building was approved. Peters & Co took another nine months to open their doors after a series of continued setback through Council approvals.

Peacocke also sent another letter to the Chief Secretary of New South Wales who was responsible for the regulation and licensing of picture theatres requesting that a building inspector be sent up from Sydney to find something 'untoward' with the plans of the Greeks. Fortunately, the Chief Secretary's office in Sydney didn't comply with Peacocke's requests and on the evening of Saturday 28 March 1936 the opening of The Roxy was unlike anything Bingara had ever experienced.

The *Bingara Advocate* reported that "probably no event in the history of Bingara has caused more interest and excitement." Prior to opening time "it was impossible to wend one's way through the crowd", which 'stormed the streets' the paper reported. Officially opening the new premises, the Mayor declared the theatre to be a 'monument to the town and one of the finest buildings of its kind outside the city.'

And so began the 'cinema war' between Bingara's rival theatres with the intense competition that ensued. The pages of the *Bingara Advocate* provide fascinating documentation, as they are an invaluable record of the films that were being screened, including the cartoons and the clubs that they formed. They also allow us to experience first-hand the unfolding battle between the two cinemas as it is played out amongst its pages.

An advertisement placed by The Regent, three weeks after The Roxy's opening, announced a special bargain night, when the price of admission would be one shilling all over the house, including children at half price. Accordingly, The Roxy was forced to do the same.

The Roxy then hit back, holding a Movie Ball, which it declared, "will be the most spectacular dance event in Bingara's dance history.... That "Uncle" George Psaltis declared he is going as Shirley Temple, and has been measured for a special dress."

But even the spectacle of George Psaltis in a dress and wig full of Shirley Temple curls was not enough. Other marketing ploys were tried, including the offer of "A one pound reward for any lady who will sit alone in the theatre for a midnight screening of the Black Room with Boris Karloff."

Intense competition led to various promotional ruses. The most telling was the installation of two large loudspeakers on top of the Roxy's parapet. These were part of the theatre's RCA public address system and were used for competitive spruiking and to broadcast announcements, music and film soundtracks to the town's residents.

Peacocke continued to make improvements to his Regent Theatre such as upgrading his sound equipment that became far superior to that of The Roxy. His



The side of the Roxy Cafe showing the Mediterranean style of architecture. (Photo: M. Metzke)

greatest innovation however, was the opening of the outdoor picture gardens. This would be achieved by building a projection box on the rear wall of the theatre and mounting the existing projectors on swivels.

With or without the picture garden, the end had come for Peters & Co. In mid-August, just five months since they had opened their doors, the theatre, the café, the shops and the guesthouse were all lost. There were many debts to cover the vast expense of building The Roxy and in September 1936 the three partners signed for bankruptcy. They had lost everything they had worked for since coming to Australia.

Peter Feros moved to Murtoa in the Wimmera district of western Victoria where he would begin the long journey of attempting to recover his fortune through the purchase of the Marathon Café in McDonald Street. His wife and remaining children eventually joined him in Murtoa, where he lived out his days.

Emanuel Aroney remained in Bingara, where his two sons joined him. He continued to manage cafés in the town for the following twenty years before retiring in Sydney.

After a stint in Sydney, George Psaltis returned to Bingara to manage The Roxy Café for a time before returning to Sydney to establish the 'Q Café' in Kings Cross. In the 1950s he moved to Adelaide where it is reported he died alone and destitute.

From all accounts, it appears that George Psaltis was more inclined to entrepreneurial flights of fancy than his two partners. It may well have been his vision to build The Roxy Theatre, and it is likely that he was the driving force behind it. But he was not an astute businessman and his partners may not have shared his vision.

A Sleeping Beauty

The Roxy operated as a cinema until 1958 when it shut down. Apart from the occasional films screening, the odd boxing match or roller disco, it would spend the next forty years virtually lying dormant. Members of a new generation were growing up in the town having never stepped foot inside it. They may well have walked past the façade every day of their lives, with little clue as to the grandeur that lay within.

The Regent was well patronized through the 1950s and 1960s and continued operating until the 1970s.



The refurbished Roxy Theatre is a multi-purpose venue and here it is used for a dinner. (Photo: M. Metzke)

The Roxy Café continued operating under a series of Greek owners until the mid-1960s when it became a freehold title and was sold to Bob and Elva Kirk, who opened a memorabilia shop in the café and lived above it in the residence. It then fulfilled a rightful obligation to the town when it masqueraded as a Chinese café for twenty years before being purchased by the Gwydir Shire Council in 2008.

Prior to this acquisition, a group of dedicated community members recognized The Roxy's significance and began lobbying the then-Bingara Shire Council in the 1990s to purchase the premises and restore them. The Bingara Council purchased the building in 1999 and once it was successful in obtaining both state and federal funding, set about faithfully restoring it to its former glory.

While the story ended sadly for our Greek founders, it ended triumphantly for the Bingara community. The Roxy stands in its original state as testimony to the legacy of what the three partners left behind.

The Roxy officially reopened its doors in 2004. Owned by the Gwydir Shire Council, it operates as a multipurpose cinema, performing arts venue and function centre that includes a variety of conferences, seminars, weddings and private functions. It also houses the Bingara Tourist Information Centre and is open to the general public for tours. Above all, it belongs to the community and the community can access it for numerous events and activities.

Cultural activity plays a vital role in our lives, particularly for those who live in more remote, isolated communities. Through theatre, music and dance, we can reflect on the social and economic challenges that surround us. The arts give us a sense of identity and a sense of our selves. They are a key component in the livability of our communities and are vital in attracting and retaining people in these communities.

The Roxy takes pride in continuing to uphold the prized values espoused in an advertisement placed in the *Bingara Advocate* in 1936 which reads: "With its atmosphere of refined luxury and perfection of service, the Roxy stands as a worthy landmark of progress and a monument to the progress of a Worthy District."

The Final Chapter

In 2009, the Gwydir Shire Council was the recipient of a grant for \$750,000 through the Department of Heritage,

Environment, Water and the Arts under the Australian Government Jobs Fund.

The staged project is multi-faceted and includes: the restoration of the Greek art deco café to its original splendour; a medium scale conference facility upstairs above the café; a museum that celebrates the story of immigration and acknowledges the significance of the Greek café; and the relocation of the Tourist Information Centre

The second stage of the project will see the incorporation of a trade training centre offering Certificate III Level Hospitality Training run in conjunction with the Gwydir Learning Region, the Department of Education and Training and TAFE NSW. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations will fund this training centre.

A museum celebrating Greek immigration to rural Australia will be incorporated into the project. It will pay tribute to the remarkable legacy of the Greek café by recognising the significant contribution Greek immigrants made to rural Australia's changing landscape.

Greek cafés changed the course of Australia's cultural history and left a significant legacy on our culinary and cultural landscape. Very few Greek cafes operate as they did 50 years ago. Even fewer complexes that incorporate a functioning cinema and café remain. Once complete, The Roxy may be the last purpose built theatre with adjoining café operating in New South Wales.

The Roxy Café will become a place of national significance that conserves and protects the important cultural associations between people and place. It will provide opportunities for the celebration of Greek traditions that became embedded in Australia.

The work carried out in the restoration will be undertaken to best protect the significant fabric of the place with minimal disturbance to ensure the culturally significant aspects of the place are respected, retained and preserved.

The restoration of the Café will include the re-instatement of furniture of the period that has been acquired for the purpose, including a 35ft counter with original soda fountain, as well as custom-made display cabinets and shelving which have come from the Farouly's Café in Inverell. The original wood paneling as well as the original booths from the Roxy Café will be reinstated, having spent the last forty years securely stored in a local resident's shed. In a paddock not far from the shed, the original neon shop sign that hung under the awning was found, waiting for the day when it would be lit up once again and take its place at centre stage.

Architectural firm Magoffin and Deakin from Armidale has been appointed to the project. Heritage architect Anthony Deakin was responsible for the restoration of the Roxy Theatre carried out in 2003. The café will be leased to a commercial operator who will work in conjunction with the Gwydir Shire Council to achieve

the collectively desired outcomes. Expressions of Interest to manage the café are currently open.

The Roxy will become a place of great historical significance that exhibits local distinctiveness and a sense of place. Its civic pride and confidence in its heritage, in its cultural facilities and collections are destined to attract people from all walks of life, all wanting to share this unique experience.

It is interesting to note that the The Busy Bee in Gunnedah recently ceased trading and permanently closed its doors. The significance of the café's has been recognized and the National Museum in Canberra acquired its entire collection.

In order to do justice to this important chapter of Australian history, The Roxy welcomes relevant contributions to its museum and would be most grateful to receive items of café and cinema memorabilia to ensure the success of the project. All contributions received will be acknowledged. In his thesis Kevin Cork advised us that:

"If we are to remember these Greeks for their contributions to Australia's social, architectural and technological advancement, then it is imperative that there be Greek landmarks which are acknowledged at local and state level - ones that point to the achievements of the Greek-Australian cinema exhibitors... We cannot allow their histories to be forgotten, not when they provided services that positively affected millions of people, firstly, through their refreshment rooms and, secondly, through their picture theatres."

We intend to do just that as the final chapter of The Roxy story is destined to live on for generations to come.

Sandy McNaughton works for Gwydir Shire Council as the Manager of the Roxy Theatre

Sources:

P. Prineas, *Katschamos and the Great Idea: A True Story of Greeks and Australians in the early Twentieth Century*, Plateia 2006

T. Risson, *Aphrodite and the Mixed Grill: Greek Cafés in Twentieth-Century Australia*, T. Risson 2007

Kevin Cork, thesis entitled *Parthenons Downunder, Greek Motion Picture Exhibitors in NSW 1915 - 1960*.

Note: The black and white photographs are copyright to Peter Prineas.

Bomber Command Commemorative Day Foundation (Inc)

Bomber Command Day Memorial Service

11am, Sunday 6th June 2010

Sydney: Anzac Memorial, Hyde Park

**Canberra: at in Bomber Command Memorial
Sculpture Garden,
at the Australian War Memorial**

For more information please contact Donald Southwell
[02 9449 6515] or southwelldonald@gmail.com

THE COVE'S HISTORICAL WRITING COMPETITION 2009/10

presented and sponsored by the Lane Cove Historical Society for those interested in writing about their local area or any aspect of our national historic landscape. It is a biennial competition in order to give folk time to comprehensively research their area of interest. Up to three prizes maybe awarded every second year to those judged the best entries.

Conditions

1. In this National Competition entries must address some aspect of Australia's Local History, past or present, as you interpret it.
2. Entrants must submit a cover sheet which lists the name and full contact details of the author, including postal and email addresses, phone and mobile numbers; the name of the piece and the exact length of the piece (i.e. the word count excluding the title).
3. Entries must not have been published before but may be offered for publication after the results have been announced.
4. Entries to be sent on A4, one-sided, double spacing, with only the name of the piece and the page number on each page of the entry. Authors' names must not appear on the entries.
5. Do not submit any illustrative material with your entry. Entries with illustrative material will be excluded from the competition.
6. Your entry should include footnotes as evidence of your research. These notes are not counted in the word limit.
7. Entries over 2,000 words will be automatically disqualified.
8. You may submit as many entries as you wish.
9. Forward \$20 for each entry by 5pm Friday 13 August 2010 to "Carisbrook" 334 Burns Bay Rd. Lane Cove 2066.
10. The judges' decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into.

Prizes: First prize of \$200 while 2nd and 3rd prizes are worth \$50 each.

NB: There is no entry form and entries will not be returned. Winners will be announced at 2 pm on Saturday 18 September at "Carisbrook" House. The prize winners will also be announced on the Lane Cove Council website- go to "Carisbrook".

Inquiries: The Manager (02) 9428 1364 or email tea04055@bigpond.net.au.