

‘Very classy’. Cahill’s Restaurants in Sydney 1933 - 1981

July 2026

‘The one next door to the Hotel Australia was my choice’, recalled Margaret Fulton, doyenne of Australian cookery:

Crumbed cutlets and other crumbed foods such as croquettes were much in demand. Many students worked their way through university in the kitchens at Cahills, gaining some extra-curricular knowledge by learning the fine art of crumbing. These crisp and golden-coated dishes enclosing tender lamb cutlets, or creamy melting centres of minced chicken, beef, or lamb were set off with a sauce to suit the dish. Very classy. For dessert, the highlight for young and old was a banana split or an ice-cream sundae served in a pressed glass dish. They were topped with crunchy, toasted nuts, fresh fruit, and sauces to die for. Chocolate fudge and caramel or butterscotch sauces were first seen at Cahills. The caramel sauce became famous and was later sold in jars.¹

She is talking about Cahill’s Restaurants, a chain established by sister and brother Theresa and Reginald Cahill in Sydney. Beginning in 1933, by the end of the 1960s there were 22 restaurants across Sydney city, North Sydney and Double Bay. They were a feature of Sydney dining until the mid-1980s.

This article looks at the restaurant’s food operation from 1933 – 1971. It also looks at other aspects of the restaurants that have not been addressed in two other sources of information Richard Glover’s 2021 article in the Sydney Morning Herald², and the Australian Food TimeLine³.

Pre restaurants history

At 19 years old Teresa was living in Los Angeles where she started as the advertising manager for Peerless Motor Co. She undertaken confectionary lessons at nights. Back in Sydney she wanted to establish her own motor business but didn’t have the capital. She had enough to invest in partnership with Reg in a confectionary shop. This opened in Pitt Street, Sydney, in 1922. Reg managed the production side; Teresa was the marketer. By 1927 they had a factory at Alexandria and five retail shops in the city. They expanded to shops in Melbourne and Adelaide.⁴

What prompted them to turn to the hospitality industry isn’t documented. However, in 1933 they opened the Italian Coffee House. What style coffee they sold is not recorded. However, the first espresso machine in Australia was installed in 1928 at the Café Florentino owned by Rinaldo Massino.⁵ Perhaps the Cahills also offered espresso coffee.

¹ Margaret Fulton, *I sang for my supper* (Sydney, 1999), p. 32

² Glover, Richard, Cahill’s caramel sauce and Sizzler’s cheese toast: food that made us, Sydney Morning Herald 1 April 2021

³ Cahills restaurants begin in Sydney, Australian Food History Timeline australianfoodtimeline.com.au

⁴ The biographical and early business information is from Teresa Gertrude Cahill, Australian Dictionary of Biography 2026 adb.anu.edu.au/biography/cahill-teresa-gertrude

⁵ 1928 First espresso machine in Australia, Australian Food Timeline australianfoodtimeline.com.au

A multiculinary experience

If Sydney in the 1960s can be accused of being a monotone place – constrained by the White Australia Policy⁶ and limited international travel – Cahills offered a gaudy simulacrum of that missing world.⁷

‘See the World on a Tour of Cahill’s Restaurants and Taverns’ a late 60s brochure for the restaurant chain said.⁸ Names of restaurants reflect this, albeit limited: South Seas Trader, The Vienna Woods, Polynesian Shell Bar, Hungarian Csarda, Dutch Village, Mexican, Swiss Village, African Safariland, Asian Trader. Speciality dishes also were from other cuisines: Mild Chicken Curry, Coquilles St Jacques, Chinese Chicken and Almonds, Polynesian Pig Roast, Wiener Rostbraten, Schnitzel, Paprika Chicken, Nasi Goreng, Rookwurst, Chile Con Carne, Bratwurst, Schnitzel. The décor added to the World Tour:

Particularly popular was The Dutch Village, with dummies of Dutch girls wearing clogs, a giant windmill and a display of plastic tulips ... Island Trader in Goldfields House, tricked up like a Polynesian tiki bar.⁹

The Dutch Village, the Island Trader, the Mexican Inn, the London Tavern and the Zulu Bar and Safari Restaurant. Each was tricked up with the appropriate decor.¹⁰

The Colonial Buffet had a ‘Horse and Buggy Atmosphere’¹¹

Waitresses wore uniforms to match the cuisine.

I worked at a couple of the restaurants including the little Dutch inn in my little Dutch uniform.¹²

Family restaurants

Glover is partly right when describing Sydney as a monotone place. There were restaurants for other cuisines in Sydney at the time – Beppi’s and other Italian restaurants, a bustling Chinatown. Now in 1968 advertised eight Bengali Restaurants in Sydney.¹³

But these were restaurants for adults. Cahills restaurants were for families.

For my ninth birthday, mum took me to Cahills for lunch. We were pretty broke, so I ordered the cheapest thing on the menu.

So exciting as a 6-yr old to go the first time with mum when we were "in Town".

⁶ The White Australia Policy was a set of laws enacted in 1901 aimed at excluding Chinese principally, from emigration to Australia. It was abolished by the Labor government in the early 1970’s.

⁷ Glover ... 2021

⁸ <https://theantiquarium.com/products/cahills-restaurants-taverns-sydney-australiabrochure-cahill-restaurants-taverns-c1966>

⁹ Glover, Richard ... 2021

¹⁰ Cahills restaurants begin in Sydney, Australian food history timeline

¹¹ The Antiquarian, [theantiquarium.com/products/cahills-restaurants-taverns-sydney-australia brochure-cahill-restaurants-taverns-c1966](https://theantiquarium.com/products/cahills-restaurants-taverns-sydney-australia-brochure-cahill-restaurants-taverns-c1966)

¹² Comments in this article come from my Facebook Friends

¹³ A Night Out? Where To Go? Let Now Be Your Guide, Now, 12 October 1968 p.6

So 'grown up' not just for the famous sauce but it seemed so luxurious to a 6–7-year-old!

The Caramel Sauce was 'famous'.

Richard Glover and my Facebook Friends recalled Cahill's 'famous' Caramel Sauce.

There was one (restaurant) near the Town Hall and they had waffles and hot caramel sauce with ice-cream - I would be totally sick these days.

I also remember very special caramel sauce, I think on a cake with ice cream.

You could buy a container of caramel sauce to take home yummy.

Service

By 1960 there were two kinds of service. Traditional Table Service – The Tudor Room, The Brasserie, The Clipper.; and Rail Self-Service - The Vienna Woods, The Hungarian Csarda The Island Trader. The latter was a point of difference between Cahill's and other restaurants which retained table service. It undoubtedly was an attractive form of service to many. By 1969, the chain was catering to 10,000 people a day,¹⁴

Cost of eating at Cahills

The basic weekly wage in 1966 was \$36.37 per week.¹⁵ Cahills dishes were very affordable. The cheapest Specialty dish in 1966 was Kidney Saute 75c. The most expensive was Lobster Menchue \$2.50.¹⁶

Cahills as a venue for functions.

The restaurants were a venue for a range of occasion.

MORE THAN 160 GUESTS attended the dinner dance at Cahills Elizabeth Street restaurant on Saturday which was organised by the younger set committee of the Lady Mayoress War and Patriotic Fund to raise funds for the Lady Mayoress' Clothing Fund.¹⁷

Doctors from R.P.A, celebrate.

CURIOUS passers-by who wondered if a deluge of waiters had descended upon Cahills restaurant might like to know that the masses of immaculate, evening-suited gentlemen were doctors celebrating the beginning of Royal Prince Alfred Hospital's "Back-to-P.A." Fortnight.¹⁸

Blue & White (J.N.F. Youth Club)

Sun., Aug., 5 pm.

Beatnik Night at Cahill's Restaurant, 251 Pitt St.¹⁹

Dr. Benjamin Spock, well-known American anti-war campaigner, will appear in Sydney in the next week as follows: —

... WEDNESDAY, JUNE 23: Dr. Spock and Mrs. Spock will attend an "Another

¹⁴ Glover, Richard ... 2021

¹⁵ Australia Minimum Wage History, Employsure 2026

¹⁶ The Antiquarian ... c1966

¹⁷ For the Lady Mayoress' Clothing Fund, The Sydney Morning Herald 17 June 1940 p.2

¹⁸ Doctors from R.P.A. Celebrate, Around the Clock The Sun 25 August 1949 p.24

¹⁹ Blue and White, The Australian Jewish Times 14 August 1959 p.8

Mother for Peace" luncheon at Cahills restaurant, 51 Castlereagh St., beginning at 12 noon. Bookings only, through Moratorium office (26-6201), charge \$2.50. AT 5.45 pm Dr. Spock will attend a buffet dinner with members of medical and allied professions, Cahill's restaurant, 33 Martin Place. The charge of \$6 a head will include a reserved seat for the subsequent public meeting.²⁰

Gypsy Band

In 1937 Cahill's Tudor Room was the venue for several appearances by a Gypsy Band.

The farewell concert of Sasha Arlinsky's Hungarian Gypsy Band will be given at Cahills Tudor Room Restaurant in Martin Place to night when the band will conclude a successful season of seven weeks at that establishment. A special programme of the gypsy melodies of all nations has been specially arranged for the occasions the band appearing both at dinner when the first session will commence at 7 o'clock and later at supper when it will continue until 11 30.²¹

I didn't find references for any other such event at a Cahills restaurant.

Cahills during World War 2

Like other restaurants World War 2 impacted on Cahills.

The management states that it is impossible now to give the degree of service provided in the Cahill restaurants for many years. This, however, is one of the unfortunate results of the war and is due chiefly to lack of staff owing to the demands for both men and women for war services.

As any housewife knows, many of the foodstuffs we once enjoyed are unavailable these days and will be off the menu for the duration of the war. Cahills, however, will continue to provide such food as is available, coupled with the best services that depleted and sometimes inexperienced staffs can provide.²²

Cahills as an employer

In September 1946, 450 women in the restaurant sector including from Cahills went on strike. The strike was about the failure of the companies joined in the dispute to adhere to award conditions that came into operation.

As a result, no meals were served in one-third of Sydney's restaurants. The strikers decided that they would report for duty on Monday Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday each week but that they would not work on Friday and Saturday morning.²³

I could find no reports on the result of the strike.

To enable married women employees to continue working during school holidays, a city restaurant will provide a creche for their children. The "creche" will be in the staff recreation room, in the basement of Cahills Pitt Street restaurant. It will be open from 10 am until 4 pm, with a young mother to watch over all the children.

²⁰ Spock in Sydney, Tribune 15 June 1971 p.12

²¹ Gypsy Band, The Sydney Morning Herald 4 December 1947 p.5

²² Good Food in Enjoyable Surrounding at Cahills, The Farmer and Settler 15 April 1943 p.10

²³ Strike in Sydney Cafes Girls In Dispute Over Award, The Advertiser 9 September 1944 p.7

Already 10 children have been "enrolled." 'During the day they will be taken to the Botanic Gardens and Hyde Park. They will be given a lunch of sandwiches and milk.

Manager, Mr. Nandor, said: "The school holidays are a very busy period for us, we can't spare the staff off duty."²⁴

The Chocolate Factory

A Facebook Friend gives description of the working of the chocolate factory.

We used large flat trays packed with cornflour, onto the flattened surface we would press a wooden sheet with raised dimples of wood. This would leave the tray of cornflour with regular depressions. Into these depressions would be poured liquid fondant. On cooling the fondant would become solid but in the shape of the depression. The trays would be tipped into a sieve, and the hardened shapes would pass to the enrobing room where two women sat side by side with a tub of liquid chocolate between them. They would dip the fondant shapes into the chocolate then place them on a tray using the chocolate running down their fingers to make a signature squiggle on the top of the chocolate.

Spy System

One of the more curious mentions in newspapers about Cahills was in 1947. It was the reported site where 'papers' had been passed.

Mr. Dovey asked Mr. Lush whether he and Mr. W. Pooley, secretary of the N.S.W. Co-operative Building and Investment Society Ltd., had exchanged documents in Cahill's restaurant. Lush said he would not deny handing documents dealing with land subdivisions to Pooley. Judge Kirby (Royal Commissioner) has been asked to report on the handling of certain land transactions by the Sydney Land Sales Control Office.²⁵

The demise of Cahill's restaurants

By 1971 Nestlé had acquired a 51 per cent shareholding but profits began to slide. By 1973 small restaurants were competing with Cahills. In 1981, Nestlé sold Cahills Restaurants to Nationwide, a company that ran school canteens and catering operations for mining companies. By this time, only four restaurants remained: the Island Trader, the London Tavern, the Light Horse and the Dutch Village. The new owners intended to refurbish the remaining restaurants, but they have long since disappeared.²⁶

²⁴ Creche at city cafe for staff children, The Sun 24 August 1950 p.17

²⁵ "Spy System" Mention At Land Inquiry: Papers In Restaurant, The Sun News-Pictorial 56 June 1947 p.10

²⁶ Australian food timeline

Appendix 1.

By c1966 (dated from the introduction of decimal currency to Australia in 1966) its brochure listed:

Restaurants

Traditional Table Service

The Original. Castlereagh Street, Sydney. Speciality Mild Chicken Curry \$1.25 and Waffles Galore

The Tudor Room featuring the Thistle Bar. Martin Place, Sydney. Speciality Aberdeen Roast Beef \$1.65

The Brasserie featuring the Lautrec Winebar. Elizabeth Street, Sydney. Speciality Coquilles St Jacques \$1.35

The Cosmopolitan. Pitt Street Sydney. Speciality Chinese Chicken and Almonds \$1.25, Individually prepared.

The Camellia. George Street, Sydney. Speciality Lamb's Fry 95c

The Clipper. Park Street, Sydney. Speciality Fish Specials from 85c; and the Captain's Plate \$1.45

The Terrace. New South Head Road, Double Bay. Speciality Veal Steak Cordon d'Or \$1.85

Taverns Brass

Rail Self-Service

South Seas Trader with Polynesian Shell Bar. Oxford Street, Darlinghurst. Speciality Polynesian Pig Roast \$1.30

The Vienna Woods (Wienerwald) with Edelweiss Wine Bar. King Street, Sydney. Speciality Wiener Rostbraten \$1.25; Schnitzel of course

The Hungarian Csarda with the Gypsy Winebar. Clarence Street, Sydney. Speciality Paprika Chicken \$1.10

The Dutch Village with the Clogmaker's Winebar. Clarence Street, Sydney. Speciality Nasi Goreng \$1.45; Rookwurst 95c

The Island Trader with the Aloha Bar. Alfred Street, Circular Street, Circular Quay. Speciality Lobster Menuehue \$2.50

The London with the Gunsmith Winebar. Angel Arcade, Sydney. Speciality Kidney Saute 75c

The Colonial Buffet. King Street, Sydney. Speciality Rump Steak and Onions \$1.35

The Mexican with the Malador Winnebar. Imperial Arcade, Sydney. Speciality Chile Con Carne 75c

The Swiss Village with the William Tell Winebar. York Street, Sydney. Speciality Bratwurst 95c; Swiss Schnitzel \$1.25

The Vintage Bistro with Ye Bull and Auto Winebar. Castlereagh Stret, Sydney. Speciality Smoked Ham Steak \$1.35

The Coolabah Tree with the Squatters Winebar. Ampol Building, North Sydney. Speciality Swagman's Rabbit Hot Pot \$1.00

Coming Soon

African Safariland with the Zulukraal Winebar

Asian Trader with the Lotus Blossom Winebar

Carrousel with the Riviera Winebar