

Bondi Beach goes international: the power of the ‘Aussie’ beach as global culinary brand

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Abstract:

International – including Irish – chefs have long sought to advance their professional practice in Australia, in the process contributing considerably to developments in local cuisine and gastronomy as well as to culinary education. Conversely, the number of Australian chefs, restaurateurs, baristas and mixologists recently moving to Ireland, the UK, USA and elsewhere has been so marked as to be termed an ‘invasion’. While the outback has been the theme for many past food-based ventures outside Australia, the latest influx of Australian culinary professionals instead draws on the compelling symbolism of Australian surf and beach culture to market the foods and drinks supposedly enjoyed along the Australian east coast. This presentation will analyse the components of this culinary Australiana, in order to discuss how the Australian beach has been co-opted as powerful global brand in the northern hemisphere. Dublin’s Bondi Beach Club nightclub will be discussed alongside other Irish examples, as well as the global Bondi Harvest venture. At the heart of this analysis is the power of the Australian beach as not only setting and backdrop for dining, but its more recent imaging as the actual site of culinary production, and what this reveals about contemporary attitudes to both culinary labour and the beach.

International – including Irish – chefs have long sought to advance their professional practice in Australia (Allen and Mac Con Iomaire 2016, p.115), in the process contributing considerably to developments in local cuisine and gastronomy as well as to culinary education in the Antipodes (Hutton 2012). Conversely, the number of Australian chefs, restaurateurs, baristas and mixologists recently working in Ireland, the UK, the USA and elsewhere has been so marked as to be termed an ‘invasion’ (Strand 2014; Allen and Mac Con Iomaire 2017, p.202). While some of these Australian exports take up positions where they reproduce the meals and drinks of the locations to which they have moved and others become transnational in their approach (Scarpato and Daniele 2003, p.306), an increasing number are currently seeking to leverage the positive reputation of their own culinary culture and make a contribution that can be identified as more recognisably Australian (Adams 2012; Bannerman 2008; Brien and Vincent 2016; Newling 2016; Ripe 1996; Santich 2012; Simpson 1990; Symons 2007).

The vast and sparsely inhabited interior of Australia – known as ‘the Outback’ – has been the theme for many past food-based ventures outside Australia, including an American owned, Florida-based series of steakhouses. A number of the latest influx of Australian culinary professionals working overseas are instead drawing on the compelling symbolism of Australian surf and beach culture to market the foods and drinks supposedly produced and enjoyed along the Australian east coast. This paper will analyse the components of this culinary Australiana, in order to discuss how the Australian beach has been co-opted as a powerful global brand in

the northern hemisphere. At the heart of this analysis is a discussion of the power of the Australian beach as not only setting and backdrop for dining, but its more recent imaging – and imagining – as the inspiration for, and actual site of, culinary production, and what this reveals about contemporary attitudes to both culinary labour and the beach.

The Australian beach as symbol

Not only has the beach long been used to symbolise Australia more generally in a range of iconic images, these portrayals have consistently depicted the beach as a site of leisure. John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner's landmark study of Australian popular culture (1987) confirmed the beach as an immediately recognisable site of outdoor leisure in Australia, and this has been confirmed in later investigations (Booth 2001; Ellison 2014; Hosking et al. 2009; Huntsman 2001). In 1993, for instance, prominent author Robert Drewe described how at least three generations of Australians have understood the beach as a place of pleasure and relaxation for people of all ages (pp.6-7). This image of seaside leisure is currently regularly reinforced in a wide range of promotional material targeted at both seaside holiday-makers and potential coastal property investors.

As eating and drinking are, in themselves, leisure activities, it is not surprising to find a history of representations that image the Australian beach as a site of culinary consumption. Nineteenth century Australian coastal photographs portray a series of modest refreshment tents and huts offering the ubiquitous cup of tea and other simple culinary offerings as well as some more salubrious establishments. Throughout the twentieth century, the most common form of eating at the beach was the picnic, and these have long been represented in fiction and advertising as well as being common in practice. Australian advertisements from the 1950s through to the end of the century show simple picnic meals, comprising sandwiches, pieces of whole fruit (commonly apples, oranges and bananas) and flasks of drinks usually consumed sitting on a towel or rug spread on the sand. In popular memory as well as in many memoirs and oral histories, dining at the Australian beach was characterised as comprising soggy sandwiches, warm sweet cordial and rapidly melting ice-creams (Irwin 2013, p.263; Peckett 1976, p.9). Dierdre Macken describes, however, how, at the close of the twentieth century, 'beach culture changed' (1997). The usual day at the beach – which she described as revolving around sunbaking, swimming and then returning home sunburnt – had fractured instead into a myriad of different activities involving much more sophisticated dining options, 'from yoga poses on seaside verges to chardonnay picnics under pines, from an endless café crawl to roller

blading' (Macken 1997). This encapsulates how eating and drinking at the beach have changed from simple repast to gourmet picnic, speciality coffees or a meal at a café or restaurant.

The beach as site of culinary labour

In line with this change, the Australian beach is now repeatedly imaged in contemporary popular culture not only as a leisure space, but also as a workplace. Some of the more vivid images of work on – and at – the beach have been provided by television. The enduring soap opera *Home and Away* (1988-current), for instance, features a range of work happening at, and servicing, the beach, while other popular and long-running programs such as *Bondi Rescue* (2006-current), and *Bondi Vet* (2009-current) focus on various kinds of work at seaside labour.

As Joanne Hollows and Steve Jones have described, the advent of the celebrity chef has transformed the image of the blue-collar labour of cookery into a more civilised and desirable profession (2010) – although there is an acknowledged gap between this image and the reality of work in a commercial kitchen (Steno and Friche 2015). Linking the act of cooking to the site of the beach furthers recent imaging of the cook/chef as an artisanal and environmentally responsible 'creative' who feeds others (customers or family and friends) meals based on quality, seasonal and often local ingredients, in line with concerns for these consumers, and the planet's, health. This identity promotes a culinary culture and philosophy based on seasonality and locality (Cardwell 2017). Health, ethical behavior, sustainability and personal satisfaction are identified as the driving forces behind such work, even though there are many contradictions, such as some of the same chefs who identify as being so motivated, also prominently promoting major supermarkets.

Gary Alan Fine posits that occupational identity is not only socially and temporarily but also 'spatially situated' (1996, p.90) and, in the context of this discussion, I suggest that the Australian beach has been a very visible site co-opted to support this construction of culinary occupational identity. In terms of gastronomic work, cooking at the beach has evolved from the simple (picnic-like) barbeque mid-century to sophisticated culinary labour. It is notable that many recent cookery programs – whether informational or competitive – have featured episodes where chefs, contestants and others cook on the sandy areas of a beach. These representations range from using makeshift 'pop-up'-style kitchens of various elaborateness to cooking over a driftwood fire constructed for the purpose. In this, the physically demanding task of cookery, which has historically been of low status except for a very few famed high-status chefs, is transformed into an activity which gleams a significant measure of glamour, elegance and environmental credibility from the beauty of the setting.

This co-option of the beach to enhance the image of culinary labour is exemplified in a recent cookbook which features Sydney beaches as the locale for some very on-trend culinary labour, *Our Tamarama Kitchen* (2016) by Joanna Cooper and Vanessa Rowe. Tamarama is a small and exclusive Sydney beach and beachside suburb that is popularly known as ‘Glamorama’ (Llewellyn 2008, p.99). In this volume, the beach is used to underscore the main message of the book which is that the recipes are for attractive, clean and health-giving dishes. The predominantly blue, green and white colour scheme of the book’s design, and the prominence of green and white in the dishes photographed, clearly echo the beach landscape, and all its relevant associations as a site of wellness and wellbeing.

Bondi Beach

The most iconic of Australian beachside locales is Bondi Beach. Although well-known across Australia, the world most widely heard the word Bondi in association with the colour of the first iMac computers in 1998 which were inspired, Steve Jobs stated, by the green-blue color of the Pacific Ocean at Bondi Beach (Isaacson 2011, p.349). Located seven kilometres east of the Sydney central business district, the beach was originally included in a private land grant made in 1809 (Dowd and Foster 1959, p.2). Later opened up to use by the public as an amusement park and picnic ground, Bondi was finally regazetteted as Crown Land and a government reserve opened to the public in the early 1880s (Dowd and Foster 1959, p.6). In the late nineteenth century, Australian seaside amenities and activities were modelled on English seaside resorts (Huntsman 2001, p.43), and thus promenading, donkey rides and partaking of other amusements including drinking tea were popular Sydney beachside activities, in addition to those less often practiced in England including surf swimming (White 2009, pp.3-4). Alongside the some 11,600 residents living in the densely populated area today (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017), the beach attracts almost 3 million visitors annually (Destination NSW 2016). These people visit both the beach proper as well as the surrounding commercial areas which contain many popular eateries – cafés, restaurants and hotels – and a weekly farmer’s market.

The attributes of Bondi Beach have long been used to market culinary and entertainment venues. Despite being located 5 kilometres from the beach in a shopping mall in a busy, built up retail precinct in Bondi Junction, the Bondi Harvest café (opened 2014) was, in this way, marketed as epitomising the beach-side lifestyle. The spatial disjunction was addressed openly in the café’s promotional material: ‘The cafe is located on the first floor of the Bondi Junction Westfield shopping centre but Bondi Harvest’s food will transport you straight to Bondi Beach’

(Sharp 2015). This is achieved through explicitly harnessing the food served in the café to the powerful associations generated in the minds of readers by the mention of Bondi:

Bondi Harvest is a *food reflection* of the Bondi lifestyle – a nice paradox of soft sand running and green smoothies in the morning, followed by dinner and cocktails with good mates that evening (Sharp 2015, my italics).

At the centre of the café and its marketing are Guy Turland and Mark Alston. Turland is a chef who trained at a number of Sydney's high profile restaurants, including the iconic Icebergs Dining Room and Bar that looks down on to Bondi Beach. Alston, his business partner, is a filmmaker with a background in photography, design and music video production. The café concept was developed from the duo's popular online cooking series, and was followed by an eponymous cookbook (Turland and Alston 2015).

Bondi Beach in Dublin

The image of Bondi has, however, moved much further afield from its actual beach location than this five kilometers along Bondi Road. Dublin, capital of the Republic of Ireland, was host to the well-known Bondi Beach Club nightspot on Ormond Quay Lower, near the iconic Ha'penny Bridge. The nightclub was located in a heritage-listed Georgian building, constructed c.1840 (Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht 2018). The nightclub closed in 2011, but is fondly memorialized in a number of online sites (see, for instance Irish Sun Staff 2015, Daily Edge 2017). Commentary includes mention of its interior decoration of palm trees silhouettes and real sand, which were used to emulate a tropical theme in central Dublin (see, Daily Edge 2017). The beach theme extended to the bar and seating areas, as well as some components of the exterior decoration, including the blue and yellow signage.

In July 2017, it was announced that planning permission had been applied for a new seven storey, 165-room apartment hotel complex on the site (O'Connor 2017), in order to meet a shortage of hotel rooms in the city (Fitzpatrick Associates Economic Consultants 2016). Apart from the apartment/hotel rooms, the development was planned to include hospitality outlets in terms of a café, bar and restaurant, as well as a coffee kiosk on Ormond Quay (O'Connor 2017). In September that year, it was announced that planning permission had been granted (Woods 2017). A number of complaints about the development were lodged due to the size and height of the development in terms of overshadowing nearby buildings, including by the Department of Culture and Heritage, which welcomed the decision to develop the site, but wanted the size of the aparthotel to be scaled down (Woods 2017).

There was another Bondi Beach Club nightclub in Dublin, this time in Stillorgan Village, a suburb of Dublin approximately 10 kilometers from the city centre, located opposite the Stillorgan shopping centre. This operated approximately from 2000 to 2005 (Moloney 2005, Independent.ie 2008), when planning permission was given to redevelop the nightclub site into an apartment complex with restaurants, shops and a public house (Irish Times 2005), but which was not built. This Bondi Beach Club was marketed as a tropically-themed site for hedonism, but had its Pacific locales somewhat confused: ‘Bondi Beach is all about fun, relaxation and decadences, from its bespoke cocktail list to the staff’s authentic Hawaiian uniforms, from the music policy to the bright, surf-themed décor. ... The three bars are styled like little huts, their bamboo roofs jutting out of each corner’ (Jobs IE 2018). The bright colours of the southern light were also evoked in the design, ‘The walls are painted in a variety of acid colours, each one bleeding into the next for a bright, rainbow effect’ (Jobs IE 2018). Like the club in Dublin, there have been numerous planning proposals for this and adjacent sites (Irish Times 2005; Independent.ie 2008; Doyle 2018) lodged and contested since that time. In September 2015, there was a major fire on the site (Journal.ie 2015) and, a year later, it was featured in a report about the large number of empty and boarded up buildings across Ireland when the numbers of homeless were at an all-time high (Ireland Today 2016).

These two venues represent the most basic use of the Bondi brand – attempting to evoke the idea of a site of tropical pleasure. There was no attempt, either in the decoration or range of foods and drinks served, to accurately represent Australia and no recognition of the long standing multi-cultural, East Asian and Asian-inspired and fusion cuisine which has been popular in Australia since at least the 1970s (see, for example, Bannerman 2008; Ripe 1996; Santich 2012). No Australians appear to have been involved in the development or running of these venues, which were apparently much loved, but relatively short-lived ventures in the long history of use of each of these sites, which included other exotically-themed nightclubs including the Zanzibar in Dublin (Murphy 2017), and the Oasis in Stillorgan (Moloney 2005).

Australian hospitality in New York

A range of Australian-led hospitality ventures in America represent a more sophisticated use of the Bondi Beach brand. Two Hands café in New York, run by Australian Giles Russell, for example, is recognised to have ‘transplanted a version of his local Bondi coastal cafe into urban New York’ (Daniel 2016). Russell states that his idea was to ‘tell the rest of New York, “hey, this is a different style of coffee, a different style of food and a different style of culture”’. This was due, in part, Russell acknowledges, to the relationship between the staff and clients in

many cafés in Australia where ‘the barista will know me, the owner will know me ... I’ll feel comfortable in here. I felt that was really missing in New York’ (qtd. in Daniel 2016). The general manager of the café, Tim Burnett, acknowledged that while it was the barista coffee that was the initial point of difference from the local American-style cafés, it was the friendly, personalised service culture that impressed his New York customers. Food critic Oliver Strand – who wrote one of the early articles on the wave of Australian cafés in New York in the *New York Times* (2014) – noted that, in these Australian-run cafés, the proprietors and staff brought ‘what they know from home’ into their new locations, and this ‘freed them to open Australian-style coffee shops’. In this, these cafés and their staff were not bound to reproduce American-style food or hospitality; in Strand’s terms, they did not have to adhere to ‘a US model ... you could put an avocado toast on the menu and it will fly out the door’ (qtd. in Daniel 2016).

Australians in Los Angeles

Los Angeles also has a number of Australian-run cafés and other hospitality ventures, but these differ notably from those in New York, which host a number of noticeably urban-styled transplants from Melbourne and Sydney, while the Los Angeles’ venues draw more closely on the idea of the Australian beach. Some Los Angeles’ venues are explicitly styled to emulate the beach. Recently, for instance, Melbourne DJ and restaurateur Grant Smillie set up the E.P. Asian eating house and L.P. restaurant and rooftop bar in West Hollywood, not only importing award-winning chef Louis Tikaram from Sydney to serve as executive chef for the venture, but also hiring a Melbourne-based architectural and interior design firm to give the place what Smillie described as ‘an Australian beach aesthetic’ (Sunday Telegraph 2016).

Others draw closely on the beach in their branding. The ‘Bronzed Aussie’ in Los Angeles’s currently revitalizing downtown is just one of several gourmet meat pie shops in Los Angeles, set up, its Australian owner Samantha Bryan states, to cater to both Australians (who wanted a taste of home) and Americans who were curious to try something different (Whitelaw 2014). Bryan originally moved to Los Angeles as a shoe designer in 2009 but has described how, when she started craving a meat pie, she decided to open her own shop baking them. This now sells a range of ubiquitous Australian bakery/cake shop favourites with, alongside pies, sausage rolls (logs of minced meat wrapped in flaky pastry), lamingtons (sponge cake squares dipped in chocolate icing and desiccated coconut, caramel slices (called millionaire’s shortbread in other places in the world, shortbread spread with caramel and topped with chocolate) and Anzac biscuits which are based on rolled oats and golden syrup. Although there is nothing at all related to the beach about the location of this shop, its décor, the food or its advertising, the name of the

store ‘Bronzed Aussie’ clearly draws on Australian beach culture. This term is well-known slang for a beach-suntanned Australian male (Gard and Wright 2005 p.30). On Sunset Strip, a Sydney couple recently opened the Vacluse Lounge, marketing this inner urban cocktail bar by drawing on the beach imagery of its Sydney beach namesake. The beach is not, however, any key to success. Many small businesses fail, and hospitality ventures are no exceptions (Parsa et al. 2005; Healy and Mac Con Iomaire 2018). The Vacluse Lounge is one such business which opened, but soon closed, its doors.

Bondi Harvest in Los Angeles

The Bondi Harvest café discussed above closed in Sydney and re-located to Santa Monica in Los Angeles in 2016, some 35 streets inland from the seaside. Having discovered that the most significant internet audience for their cookery videos outside of Australia was in California, Turland and Alston travelled to Los Angeles to work with video network Tastemade to produce a series of food and travel videos there (Taylor 2016). The industrial complex in Santa Monica where Tastemade was based had a café and, when the building’s lease became available, Turland and Alston took it over, filming the renovation of the premises for the reality series Grand Opening (Taylor 2016). Official tourism marketing describes the area as quite like Bondi ‘a coastal town that maintains a balance as a tourist destination and as an area with a thriving local culture ... a laid-back beach town and a major commercial hub’ (Santa Monica Travel and Tourism 2018). Like Bondi’s beachside promenade, there is a well-used cycle path that is patronised by cyclists, roller-bladers, runners and walkers, and inland from the beach, popular shopping and dining precincts.

Although located some 12,000 kilometers from the Sydney beach that inspired its name, the café is decorated with Sydney surfboards, Australian-style sun-bleached wooden picnic tables and photographs of Bondi Beach. The café is marketed as possessing ‘Aussie beach vibes’ as well as the ‘healthy café dining and great coffee’ (Bondi Harvest 2018) that are seen as being characteristic of Australian east coast dining. Many of the dishes that made the Bondi café so popular appear on this American menu. There is, for instance, the Bondi Breakfast which consists of two eggs (fried, scrambled or poached), bacon, roast tomato, kale, mushrooms and avocado served with multigrain toast’ and well as the Açaí Breakfast Bowl with house-made granola, raw wild flower honey, mint and berries and the Paleo(lithic) diet-inspired (Cordain 2002) Caveman Bowl of chimichurri-dressed cauliflower rice with kale, turmeric quinoa, fermented vegetables, fried egg, bacon, and house-made hummus (Bondi

Harvest 2018). The coffee served is made from beans from roaster Vittoria, which has been a family-owned business in Australia since 1958 (Cantarella Bros Pty Ltd 2018).

Guy Turland and Mark Alston remain at the centre of the café imaging and marketing, which is now a component, rather than the goal, of the seemingly fully-transportable Bondi Harvest brand. Bondi Harvest is now a global multi-platform media brand that largely focuses on both digital and print media. This includes the eponymous social media sites (including a YouTube channel and FaceBook site), media content on the Tastemade site, and two beautiful print cookbooks (Turland and Alston 2015, 2017). Marketing for the Santa Monica café indicates that the partners see Santa Monica as their first American location, so there are possibly plans for business expansion in terms of additional locales.

Writing in the *L.A. Weekly*, Garrett Snyder described the Santa Monica Bondi Harvest as aiming to offer ‘a healthier beach-ier side of Australian food’ (2016). In this review, Snyder clearly drew the connection between the two locales, remarking that Bondi Beach was ‘a stylish and touristy section of Sydney that’s not unlike Santa Monica’ (Snyder 2016), and stating that Bondi café culture stood for ‘locally sourced produce, cooking seasonally and eating healthy, along with an exceptional coffee offering’ (Snyder 2016), which was in line with the ethos of Santa Monica café culture. Other writers and reviewers also drew this connection and conclusion. Leena Taylor described the café as ‘a piece of Bondi Beach ... in Santa Monica’ (2016), while Caroline Juen noted that the café’s offering was in line with local ideas on how to ‘prepare and enjoy food’ (2016) – especially breakfast, which a *New York Times* food writer had noted was a Los Angeles speciality (Koren 2016).

The venture was supported by other Australians in Los Angeles with actors and the locally-based Australian Consul-General attending the launch (Taylor 2016). While Australian actors, musicians and filmmakers have been moving from Australia to the USA for decades to pursue their careers in Hollywood, the culinary businesses discussed herein – alongside many others – reflect a new wave of Australians beginning to see Los Angeles as offering opportunities beyond show business. In 2014, The Australian Consulate-General in Los Angeles estimated that there were about 60,000 Australians in California, with about 44,000 of them in the greater Los Angeles area (Whitelaw 2014). While a large number of these are identified by the general descriptor of ‘entrepreneur’ (Whitelaw 2014), many are moving into the hospitality industry. The recent increase in Australians moving to Los Angeles and further afield has been driven, in part, by the introduction of the E3 visa, a two-year renewable working visa available only to Australians with professional-level jobs, which has made it

easier for Australians to work in the USA without sponsorship. 10,500 of these visas are available each year.

There are other factors. Los Angeles is one direct flight across the Pacific Ocean from a number of major cities in Australia and provides a ‘foot in the door’ into the American market of 300 million people. Los Angeles is a city with a population of almost 4 million, its greater metropolitan area has almost 14 million and California has a total of almost 40 million (*US Census Bureau 2016*), while the whole of Australia has a population of only some 25 million individuals (*Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018*). Los Angeles also has urban areas with much more affordable rents than those in the major Australian cities, and the city is regularly ranked in the top cities in America in terms of supporting, and rewarding, creativity. Los Angeles has, moreover, been experiencing a cultural renaissance in recent years which has seen much of once run-down neighbourhoods like downtown Los Angeles converted into artist studios, tech hubs and fashion districts. The attractive climate and lifestyle are also definitely factors influencing Australian migration to California. As ex-band member-turned-restaurateur Benjamin Plant stated, ‘Moving to LA wasn’t to get away from Australia. It wasn’t to make it in America. It was to be inspired ... Once we got there we found the weather was better, the lifestyle was easier, and everything was cheaper’ (qtd. in Whitelaw 2014). The beach plays a part in this attraction for Australians.

Conclusion

In Fine’s terms, culinary-based occupational identities can be seen to be ‘spatially situated’ (1996, p.90) and, in the context of this discussion, the Australian beach can be seen to be a very visible site co-opted to support the construction of a marketable professional identity as well as a style of dining. In this construction, the image and various ascribed meanings of the Australian beach are used to underscore the supposedly national Australian style of the décor, food, beverages and/or service in a number of recent hospitality ventures. To various degrees, these nightclubs, cafés, restaurants and bars have sought to harness the powerful symbolism of the Australian beach, reflecting not just the enduring associations of seaside pleasure, but also the new millennium interest in healthy and ecologically sound eating. The more sophisticated use of the Bondi Beach brand can be identified in the marketing of a number of culinary products including Australian-made vodka (Bondi Blue) and a UK-owned Belgian-brewed beer (Bondi Beer). All of the marketing for these products clearly draws on Bondi Beach as image and metaphor as well as actual locale. Bondi Beer, for example, does not shy

away from acknowledging the distance between Belgium/Great Britain to Sydney, and how – due to this distance – the Sydney beach is a fantasy for its drinkers:

Bondi is for those of us who dream of standing on distant shores amidst the surf, sand and sea – letting our imaginations win through. ... With it comes the spray and boom of the morning surf, the smell of sea salt on a lazy weekend, and that feeling of sunshine on your shoulders as you enjoy your first cold beer after a long hot day. ... To open a bottle of Bondi is to transport yourself to the most famous kilometre of sand in Australia (Bondi Brands Ltd. 2015).

This study has sought to reveal something of the complexities of how Bondi Beach as both specific locale and generalizable image is influencing how culinary product and work might be marketed, consumed and understood in the new millennium.

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