

When my mother was five she spent 20 days on a boat coming to Australia from Calabria, in the south of Italy. Once settled in her new school, she was picked on by the Aussie kids who called her a wog and made fun of her salami and provolone panini while they ate tidy Vegemite sandwiches. She used to cut school to avoid their taunts.

Stories like these are common among migrants who came to Australia during and after World War II in search of a better life and, not all that long ago, I too ran into trouble for having olives in my packed lunches in primary school.

Now we see paninis and antipasti in every second cafe, Italian regularly polls as this nation's favourite cuisine, and Mediterranean cultures are celebrated in popular festivals.

Along with the Italians came the Greeks, and while the two cultures shared a past of war and conflict, in Australia they have trod similar paths. Many recall the hardships they left behind in the old country, and have worked tirelessly to achieve success here.

"When the opportunity to go to Australia came I took the chance and left," says Peter Kotis, 66, founder of the hair salon chain Price Cutters.

"In those days, if you were born rich in Greece you died rich and if you were born poor, it didn't matter how clever you were, it didn't matter how hard you worked, you died poor," says Peter, who left his beloved Kalymnos in the Greek Isles in 1963 and now lives in Carina Heights.

"Greece was a Third World country in the '50s and early '60s because after the Second World War Greece had a civil war too.

"I went to school until Grade 6, then I had to go straight to work. The next year, when I was 13, I started my apprenticeship as a barber and when I came to Australia I already had seven years' experience. I worked 20 hours a day at two jobs for seven years and my wife never complained. It must have been difficult for her raising our three kids."

Apart from the long hours, there were other difficulties in finding contentment. "Europeans had a hard time in Australia," says Peter, who has been involved in the Greek Community of St George for seven years and the Paniyiri Greek Festival.

"The Australian Government had brought over a lot of immigrants from Italy and Greece but they didn't educate the people here that we were not a threat [to them]. If you were caught speaking any language other than English you would get into a fight, and I got into a lot of fights."

Peter, who arrived "with only £4 in my pocket", bought his first barber shop in Brisbane for £500 and has since turned it into a statewide business. Now with 13 salons, he is a nominee for the Lord Mayor's 2009 Business Awards.

"Australia is a completely multicultural country now and has given me a lot of opportunities. It's beautiful to share our heritage and culture with the rest of Australia."

Eleftheria Halicos is similarly committed to teaching others about her birthplace. This year, her 33rd since the event began, the Highgate Hill grandmother will again be churning out honey puffs at Paniyiri.

"I want the new generation to know their roots and to share the culture with the community," says Eleftheria, 63,

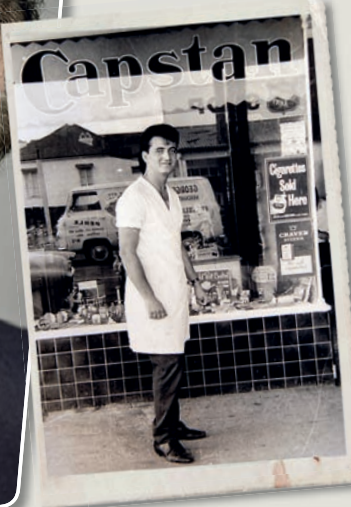
a former religious studies teacher at primary school. "This is my land now but if you are born somewhere [else] it stays with you forever."

Arriving in Australia in 1960 at the age of 14, Eleftheria has spent most of her life here, but memories of her childhood are vivid. "When I was in Greece we had to do everything in the home. My mum became paralysed overnight, and my dad was a barber so we had to take care of the home and do all the cleaning and washing," says Eleftheria, one of six children.

Adjusting to life in Brisbane was not easy. "My first years here I cried a lot. Before I married in 1963 I sent my family in Greece an invitation to the wedding but one week before I married, my father died," says Eleftheria, whose eyes well with tears at the memory. "Three months later my brother



HEIR CUTS ... after arriving with only £4 now Peter Kotis owns a chain of salons



also died – in three months I lost two people in my family. But everything I have experienced has made me strong."

Steve Pellegrino learned early in life how to turn adversity into strength. He saw his Calabrese parents and grandparents do it tough in Australia, and understood the importance of resilience and determination.

"It was hard for the older generation – there was a lot of discrimination," says the 54-year-old property developer who began renovating terrace houses in Melbourne at age 18. "When there are those types of confrontations in life you see the honour in people when they rise above it.

"My father was the last family member to arrive in Australia as he had to stay in Rome to do national service," he says. "He couldn't migrate because the Second World War was starting but my grandmother wrote an amazing letter to the minister of immigration here and addressed it from a mother to a father. She told him how the whole family was in Australia but their hearts were still in Italy because of the one son who was still there. With that letter

they allowed my father to come to Australia and that completed the family."

Steve, of New Farm, returns to Italy often – last year he took a Ferrari road trip across Europe with fellow Ferrari fanatics – and is keen to promote cultural exchange. "We have so much to learn from each other," he says.

To this end, he has created the Pellegrino Scholarship, which offers Queensland residents the chance to experience Italian culture. He is also an integral supporter of Italian Week, which kicks off next Tuesday, May 26.

"Italy has given me so much," he says. "The first time I went I was absolutely captivated. Now people have realised what impact Italians have had on Australia in terms of food, wine and fashion."

Years ago, finding a good coffee in Brisbane was virtually impossible. Now it's fashionable to sip cafe lattes on the pavement, nibble biscotti and people watch.

Phillip Di Bella is partly responsible for this shift in attitude, and sells his Di Bella coffee in more than 1000 outlets nationally in a business worth a reported \$28m.

The 34 year old credits his Italian heritage for his success in both his professional and family life.

"When I started the company [in 2002] I already had the hard-working mentality drilled into me," says Phil, whose wife Gianna De Felice was also born in Australia to migrant parents. The couple has a 13-month-old daughter, Arnika.

"When my parents came out from Sicily in 1967, mum worked for Nanda pasta and dad worked as a labourer. They left a place where they were comfortable, where they had friends and family, and then they were on the other side of the world, dealing with people giving them a hard time."

It was Phil's father Ross and brother Ken, owner of Ashgrove pizzeria Naples, who encouraged him to ditch his job of nine years as a coffee roaster at Cosmopolitan Cafe in Fortitude Valley and become his own boss. "It was very difficult to start Di Bella Coffee because it was an unknown brand," says Phil, who sold his home, bought commercial premises and worked 120-hour weeks to build up a client base. "Every time I would get a customer [the competition] would give away free coffee to them to try to take them from me," he says. "I developed a strategy for people to invest in me rather than in the product and started to treat it as a people business rather than a coffee business."

As chairman of the Queen Street Mall Advisory Committee, Phil is heavily involved with Italian Week. He also supports a range of charities including Mission Australia by donating coffee products to Cafe One in Fortitude Valley, and sponsors children in the Philippines.

"Family and respect are so important," he says. "What I love about Italian culture is, and I think this goes for many migrant cultures, you're brought up with a strong character, head down bum up," he says.

ITALIAN WEEK // Tue-Tue, May 26-Jun 2, various locations. www.italianweek.com.au

PANIYIRI GREEK FESTIVAL // Sat-Sun, May 23-24, 2pm and 10am starts, from \$2, Musgrave Park and The Greek Club & Convention Centre, South Brisbane, www.paniyiri.com

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Director



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