

An Icon above the Others – the Paragon

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In 2016, Blue Mountains icon, the Paragon Restaurant, celebrates 100 years of continuous service to Katoomba and the world. Like its registered trademark, the Orphan Rock, the Paragon stands alone.

Zacharias Simos migrated from Kythera in 1912. In Sydney and Tenterfield, he worked in Greek fish-restaurants and cafes and owned his own business in Windsor. In September 1916, he leased a shop in Katoomba owned by the former rector of St Hilda's, John Russell, and opened the Paragon Café and Oyster Bar. His speciality was 'late suppers', attracting patrons of the various shows and dances in Katoomba. However, he would also deliver fresh lobsters and oysters anywhere in the Mountains. An entrepreneur with an eye to the future had arrived in the mountains.

Zac Simos developed American-style soda drinks with fancy flavours. In 1918 and 1919, he described the Paragon as a soda fountain in his advertisement for shop assistants. By 1921 it was a Sundae and Candy Shop. Although he was still only the lessee, Simos extended the size of the main front room and opened a private room behind for private suppers and other functions.

Zac Simos effectively used local newspapers for publicity. On 22 December, 1922, a long article in one local paper described the Paragon as "... the acme of good taste and modern ideas presented by an enterprising proprietary that believes in nothing but the best".

In 1921 Simos bought the refreshment rooms owned by Miss Kelly and previously run by Mrs Banning at 110 Katoomba Street. At the same time he also bought Miss Kelly's adjacent premises at nos. 112-114, then leased by the estate agents, Soper Brothers.

On Friday 29 December, 1922, The Blue Mountains Echo noted that "Jack Simos is snugly ensconced in his new tea rooms adjoining the Palais de Danse, and he wants Katoomba and its wife and family to know that he is there, ready and willing, as of yore, to supply the best of refreshments and confectionery. Opening for Christmas week, he catered for capacity houses all the time and did it well. Money has not been spared in the venture, and the enterprising young townsman is deserving of every ounce of success that comes his way. His café adjoining Goldstein's jewellery shop continues as usual, the Palais room being an extension of his ever-increasing business."

In fact, The Paragon was so popular that, in 1924, one unfortunate Blackheath citizen achieved fame when his motor car ran amok and, unannounced, crashed into the northern window of the Paragon, causing consternation among the 40 persons quietly enjoying their coffee and cakes. It was one way to ensure a seat at the café.

Not only was Simos able to earn and save enough to retain nos. 110 to 114 Katoomba Street while paying 9250 pounds in 1924 for the freehold of numbers 65 and 67, he was also able to ensure the Art Deco restyling of the Paragon in 1925. For the main public room, Zac Simos ordered wall panels, 'artistic plaques' in white or cream, framed in gold. The Paragon was indeed elegance personified.

In 1926, the area just behind the Paragon bar was developed into a stylish private supper- room. Behind the supper room, Simos ensured there were adequate change rooms for the girls who worked for him and an extended kitchen. The Oyster bar and Candy Bar was now an outstanding restaurant.

In 1929, Zac Simos returned to Europe where he met and became engaged to Maria Panaretos, the American-born daughter of café proprietors who were holidaying in Kythera. They married in the USA in June 1930 when Simos returned to the Paragon with Mary (as she became in Australia).

Mary was an indispensable contributor to the Paragon's continuing success. Her American upbringing and European experiences underwrote the way in which both America and Europe contributed to this Australian Greek café in Katoomba.

She ensured that Katoomba scenery was deftly worked into the packaging of Paragon products and in the magnificence of its displays. Orphan Rock became their trademark because both it and the Paragon "stood alone", above all others.

Mary encouraged the development of the two function rooms, the 'Banquet Hall' in 1934 and the 'Blue Room' in 1936. "Dancers are lured by the ballroom which has a spring floor of the latest type." (Farmer and Settler, 1939). These two rooms, remarkable today for both their décor and their iconic lighting, are also remarkable when you realise that they are both large caverns, dug into the rock behind the original shops. Perhaps this is where the legend of the tunnel, rumoured to link the Paragon to the Carrington Hotel, began?

Before World War 2, the Paragon became THE place to hold your function. Whether you were fund raising for an orphanage, trying to establish yourself as the Queen of Katoomba, celebrating an engagement or wedding, you did so at the Paragon. Zac Simos was renowned, too, for donating the costs of an evening to the organisation behind the fund-raising.

In November 1939, the Paragon was described, in *Farmer and Settler*, as "one of the most famous cafes in Australia, renowned for light luncheons, dinners, grills, afternoon tea and dainty suppers."

The reader was told that "to visit the mountains without making a call at the Paragon is to rob one's self of what can be a real pleasure."

During World War 2, the Paragon allowed people to feel a sense of normalcy and continuation. Nothing changed about the Paragon, when all else was turmoil. Standards of excellence in food, service and chocolate making continued. Engagements and weddings were still celebrated in dining room and ballroom and even in the Paragon's "Breakfast Room". Organisations such as Rotary and the newly-formed Quota club met regularly in the Paragon's rooms. All continued as it had done before the War.

However, money was needed for the War effort and Zac Simos was ever ready to support fund raising. He donated his rooms and services for fund-raisers, chocolates as prizes and "dainty morning teas" for those meeting to knit for the soldiers.

His support of the Greek War Relief Fund in 1941 saw him looking beyond the Mountains, too, to his former home, although he had been naturalised in 1921.

At the end of World War 2, the Danish sculptor, Otto Steen, was commissioned to carve a series of classical figures in alabaster to be attached to the maple-wood walls of the main café. This would be the final phase in the development of the Paragon that we know today.

In the fifties, sixties and seventies, the Paragon's fortunes fluctuated with the fortunes of Katoomba and the rest of the Mountains. Decline in tourism means a decline in the numbers of people who frequent the restaurants and cafes which mountain people enjoy today.

As a widow after Zac's death in 1976, when she was 64, Mary Simos managed the Paragon until 1987. Many people today have memories of "the old lady in the black cardigan" who was kind, especially to the little children among her customers; boarders from nearby St Mary's often enjoyed a sneakily given chocolate.

In 2000, the café was sold, with Mary dying in 2001. The years since have not been kind to the Paragon. The chocolaterie and bakery in the upper rooms were closed, the American ice-cream making machine destroyed and dust settled over everything. It was simply too costly to maintain.

However, the old lady is being rejuvenated. Manager of The Paragon since 2011, Robyn Parker is working with Heritage councils and the group, Friends of the Paragon, to ensure that the Art Deco treasure will be with us for another hundred years.

So, next time you visit Katoomba, drop in to The Paragon for a coffee or tea and a slice of living History.

Bibliography: *Blue Mountains Echo*, *Blue Mountains Advertiser*, *Farmer and Settler* (via Trove); Australian Dictionary of Biography (John Low, Simos, Zacharias Theodore); <http://www.pittwateronlinenews.com/the-paragon-at-katoomba-by-george-repin.php>; <http://theparagonhistory.com.au/>; <http://www.bluemountainsgazette.com.au/story/3024974/heritage-recognition-for-paragon-cafe/>; *The Paragon, Katoomba* by Ian Jack, http://www.bluemountainsheritage.com.au/imagesDB/wysiwyg/Heritagenletter29Sep-Oct2013_1.pdf; <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/heritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=1170394>; <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/heritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=5051727>; *Iconic Paragon at Katoomba under threat*, http://www.bluemountainsheritage.com.au/imagesDB/wysiwyg/Heritagenletter25Jan-Feb2013_2.pdf; *The Paragon Café, Katoomba*. R. Ian Jack, <http://www.bluemountainsheritage.com.au/imagesDB/wysiwyg/BMHJournal5Jan2015.pdf>.