

## **A PIE CART STORY**

### **The longevity of a vernacular fast food eatery**

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#### *Abstract*

Roadside caravans selling hot meals—‘pie carts’—originated in New Zealand during the Depression era of the early 1930s. They were popular providers of fast food in small towns between the 1950s and 1970s. Auckland pie cart the White Lady still operates, and has been continuously in business since 1948. It may now be regarded as a culinary institution. This ethnographic study examines the endurance of the White Lady pie cart against intermittent opposition by city authorities, and vigorous competition by American-style fast-food chains. It survives as a successful business, as well a focal point for citizens’ affectionate nostalgia. In a city where the average timeframe of a hospitality operation is just 18 months, to many residents the White Lady has achieved the status of city icon. Its longevity is attributed to its

location, convenience, reliability, authenticity, quirky charm, and its operation as a family business. The proprietors take pride in their long-standing and dogged tenacity against the dynamics of a changing city.

*Keywords*

Fast food, longevity, hospitality, pie cart, streetscape



Figure 1 – *The White Lady* (source: Claudia Bell).

## Introduction

When Auckland's White Lady, a mobile street-side eatery, was established in 1948, it was a modest enterprise within a global lineage of fast food. Mobile food vendors can be traced back to the early histories of China, Europe and the United Kingdom, with diverse variations in the fare offered (Fernandez-Armesto, 2002; Spencer, 2003; Civitello, 2004; Mason, 2004). Cooked food hawking is a long standing practice. This type of meal provision "contributes to local lives and economies in the cities where activity is concentrated" (Henderson, 2011: 201). They provide a convenient service, and also create street character. The *loncheras* operated by Latina families in Los Angeles are in many ways similar to the pie carts. These stationary food vehicles,

often called 'taco trucks' (though they serve more than this), usually originate as small family operated businesses, and serve modest, low-cost hot food to a predominantly urban working class clientele (Hermosillo, 2012).

In New Zealand and Australia pie carts gained popularity during the Depression years of the early 1930s when there were very few affordable options for eating out. They reached their trading peak in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s (Neill et al., 2008). The night-time city population (shift workers, after-dance groups and such) could rely on pie carts for quick and cheap hot food. These remained popular until Americanised fast food competitors began to dominate the market. A surviving pie cart in Sydney (Australia), Harry's Café de Wheels, has found a place in pictorial history books (e.g. Whitaker, 2002), and in accounts of that city's colourful street life (Parish, 2008). Meanwhile, Auckland's White Lady is one of only ten pie carts still trading throughout New Zealand. Just one family has owned it, and it has remained in business since 1948, a remarkable achievement in the hospitality sector. In over six decades it has been closed for only one night: during the power outage that afflicted Auckland in February 1998.

According to Orsman (1999), New Zealand's pie carts were usually converted caravans with a hinged side that served as an awning. This sheltered customers as they placed their orders, usually for "mince pie(s) with mashed potato and peas sloshed over with gravy" (McGill, 1989: 101). This 'classic' dish was known as 'pea, pie and pud'. The 'pud' refers to the mashed potato ('spud'). Today 'pie carts' still operating in New Zealand don't sell pies and instead concentrate on burgers, toasted sandwiches, steaks and chips. Still, the name 'pie cart' has stuck. Even where the carts are at remote coastal locations (such as Stewart Island and Jackson Bay, both in southern New Zealand) and specialise in takeaway seafood meals, they are still generically referred to as 'pie carts.'

Until 1968 hotel bars in New Zealand closed at 6 pm, and did not sell food. That is just one explanation for the preponderance of pie carts like the White Lady in the 1950s and 1960s: a place to buy a quick and fuss-free hot meal to soak up the alcohol.

In the days of the 'six o'clock swill' (6 pm hotel closing) (King, 2003: 455) and long before the advent of upmarket café culture, pie carts offered a hot meal and a warm welcome in any New Zealand town or city (Neill et al., 2008: 11).

In the 1940s and 1950s casual food could be obtained at the popular American-style milk bars (Rowland, 2010). During the 1950s and 1960s, fast-food in New Zealand was characterised by 'greasy joints' filled with young people, with few alternatives for entertainment (Ray, 1976). Eateries differed significantly from the cosmopolitan choices available in later decades:

*the only eating out venues, apart from fish and chip shops and pie carts were the expensive hotel dining rooms serving the inevitable steaks and roast dinners, and exclusive clubs with a similarly predictable menu. Even at the flashiest hotels, guests who might want a meal after 8pm would be told, 'Sorry, the kitchen is closed'. (Neill et al., 2008: 11)*

This limitation was compounded by a shortage of skilled labour, limited product availability, and suspicion of ingredients from conservative diners. The most likely venue for a special meal was at a hotel dining room (King, 2003; Rowland, 2010). Meanwhile, such was the success of the White Lady that in 1962 another pie cart opened in Broadway, Newmarket, a couple of kilometres away.

Bailey and Earle (1999) offer a statistical insight into Auckland's hospitality environment. They note that in 1960–1961 Auckland had 94 unlicensed restaurants, no licensed restaurants and only two 'ethnic' restaurants. This is in contrast with later findings for 1975, when Auckland boasted 160 unlicensed restaurants, 57 licensed restaurants, and 38 'ethnic' restaurants (ibid: 1999). By 1986, this increased to 168 unlicensed restaurants, 203 licensed restaurants and 113 (unlicensed) 'ethnic' restaurants. Today, Auckland's City Council advises that the number of restaurants in Auckland fluctuates, and for many operators hospitality is a transient business. The turnover of small ethnic eateries in particular is fast, with many in business for just a few months. Goodsir (2008) explains that commercial hospitality in New Zealand is now a multi-faceted industry offering a diverse range of products and

services in multi-dimensional locations. The Restaurant Association of New Zealand noted an astonishing 32% growth rate in the fast food pizza market from 2004 to 2007 (Restaurant Association of New Zealand, 2008). This is compared with an average growth rate in all other fast-food sectors of just 12%. By 2012 Restaurant Brands, owner of Kentucky Fried Chicken and Pizza Hut, operated 97 Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets and 96 Pizza Hut outlets nationwide, as well as 44 Starbucks Coffee outlets.

Branded fast food business also had modest beginnings. In August 1971, Kentucky Fried Chicken opened its first New Zealand outlet in Auckland. In September 1974, Pizza Hut was launched in New Lynn, Auckland, and McDonald's opened their first fast-food outlet in Porirua, near Wellington (Brailsford, 2003). As other branches of these 'big three' appeared in Auckland (ibid: 11) they heralded the first major competitive threats to the White Lady. This growth of fast-food outlets has compounded over time, presenting ongoing competition to the White Lady and to other independent operators providing quick meals. Over the years the White Lady has upgraded its van, and modified its menu—but remains a tiny player in a ferocious struggle. As Williams explains, global fast food corporations invest heavily in converting customers to fast food. They "often irrevocably break traditional eating cultures at the same time" (Williams, 2002: 10-11).

### **The White Lady: a family's stories**

The 'eureka' moment that led to the origin of the White Lady took place in the 1940s. Brian Alfred 'Pop' Washer (1913-1986) had seen one of the earliest pie carts in New Zealand's southernmost city, Invercargill. Some years later at an Auckland race meeting, Pop, a recovering alcoholic looking for a non-alcoholic drink, spotted a hospitality niche. He purchased a caravan and converted it to sell beverages at various race track meetings. Pop's wife Joyce recalled him saying "if I can't get a drink, I'll open a pie cart" (Neill et al., 2008: 37). In 1948 he applied to the Auckland City Council to operate a pie cart in the Central Business District. With his application approved Pop commissioned a Christchurch coach company to custom-build a cart, and thus began the casual eatery that became a city institution. Pop's

first pie cart operated in downtown Auckland on Fort Street before the council relocated it to the corner of Shortland and Queen Streets, a position it occupied from 1950 to 2006 (Neill et al., 2008). This is very close to New Zealand's major port which employs shift workers, and to pubs where the food costs more than what the White Lady offers. Joyce Washer tells how the White Lady was named:

*somehow we began to refer to our business in the feminine – “she was busy last night”, that sort of thing. Everyone talked like that, expressions like “she’s a darn good car” and “I gave her the gun” were common. I named her the White Lady because she was painted white. There were no racial overtones in those days. Children were still allowed their golliwogs. (ibid: 37)*

Like the famous Los Angeles *loncheras*, the business was a family enterprise, with a clearly gendered division of labour (Hermillos, 2012). Mrs Washer recalled preparing the food offsite, then delivering it to the cart.

*after the war there were still gas and electricity restrictions. I’d preserve eggs, for the curry, and cook the potatoes that Callie, a neighbour’s daughter, had peeled before she set off for school. (Neill et al., 2008: 39)*

In the early days the White Lady's clientele was almost exclusively male. A customer recalled that:

*respectable women did not hang out on the streets at night. Then, in the 1960s, with the advent of the chic coffee bars and folk music clubs, this changed: there was somewhere to go that was safe and seductively bohemian. (ibid: 14)*

Despite tough conditions (viewed against the higher standard of living in New Zealand today), the post-war era is generally assessed as one of opportunity and growth (King, 2003). Joyce Washer noticed what the White Lady's competitors were doing, and was particularly impressed with the arrival and popularity of hamburgers, and the *à la carte* production method. She explained that another local businessperson opened a hamburger shop opposite the Chief Post Office in Queen Street (a location within 300 metres of the White Lady). She said “I will never forget

my first hamburger there” (Neill et al., 2008: 39), and managed to persuade Pop to incorporate hamburgers into the White Lady’s menu. This prompted an *à la carte* style, with the food cooked to order. This change facilitated higher profits because of reduced waste and increased turnover due to the revised menu’s popularity.

At that time the White Lady also offered the great novelty of percolated coffee. Joyce recalls:

*We made this in a Dutch Convection Goldie Tripolator, and our coffee was a hit. Americans staying at Auckland’s top hotel of the day, the Trans-Tasman in Shortland Street, regularly visited the cart just for our coffee. They’d often remark it was the only place where you could get a decent cup of coffee in all of Auckland.* (Neill, 2009: 24)

With increased turnover Pop was able to employ staff and diversify his business interests. It was not uncommon to see customers four to five deep at the counter during peak times, late at night, after dances and the movies. One long-term staff member recalled that:

*for some Americans, once they had eaten a pie from there, I know, on several occasions they would avoid going out for dinner to a flash restaurant so they could come and have a pie and they would want a few slices of bread with it.* (ibid: 32)

White Lady workers were keen to boast about the famous people who frequented the cart. A former long-term staff member recounted such experiences:

*I got to meet sort of celebrity type people around town who were regular... it would be one of the most widest cross sections of people you’d ever run across in one place. Politicians and rock stars and film stars and All Blacks came down there, sometimes when they were not even playing in Auckland. Lomu, Sean Fitzpatrick and all those people... they tell us they can always rely on getting really good food.* (ibid: 2009)

Not all of the comments by pie cart staff and patrons then are about food. Rather, their commentaries reiterate the power of food, and of a food venue, to stimulate imagination, memories and nostalgia (Germov and Williams, 2010: 4). The pleasure of actually eating food, or of serving it, is just part of the experience.

### **Surviving a changing city**

The White Lady's boom years were not to last. Changes in transport legislation by the Land Transport Safety Authority (LTSA), combined with hygiene requirement amendments within the Food Hygiene Regulations (1974), and the Food Act (1981), with its HACCP requirements (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point), overtly challenged these kinds of food outlets. Pie carts had always been subject to a series of local bylaws, encompassing food, health and vehicle licensing. They were inspected for hygiene and sanitation compliance. As businesses, their operators paid legal wages and taxes. Official disputes about their road-use legality and food safety reflected "larger cultural contests about local and neighbourhood identity, local economics, and public space" (Hernández-López, 2010: 4). Such disputes highlight how decision-makers view downtown precincts. Citizens' use of public space—as pie cart vendors and customers—was called into question by authoritarian city officials. In 2007 the Council reviewed all street trading and traders. Council rhetoric about embracing the city's growing cultural diversity was contradicted by efforts to get rid of the White Lady and her customers. This was an instance of "political debate about the urban future... taken away from urban inhabitants" (Collins and Freisan, 2011: 76). Official views were couched in subtexts of respectability, conservatism, property prices and prejudices concerning the night-time working class. In this context, the call was for pie carts to be consigned to history. These issues, plus rapidly increasing competition in the fast food marketplace, undermined the White Lady's long-term viability.

In Auckland's "boomtime rap" of the 1980s (Bedggood, 2004: 37), many Victorian and Edwardian buildings were replaced by glass towers. The city became the business capital of New Zealand. The new, self-conscious corporatism was celebrated in upmarket bars and elegant restaurants, and by glossy magazines such

as *Auckland METRO*. The 1980s thus saw the start of Auckland's urban regeneration through energetic gentrification (Collins and Freisan, 2011). The White Lady remained stationed in the same street space, literally in the shadows of the glittering glass towers. Its sister cart in nearby Newmarket gradually became similarly surrounded by new, upmarket shops and apartments.

In 2000 both pie carts were again threatened. A 1999 *New Zealand Herald* article, 'A snack in the eye for snooty neighbours', recorded an interview with the then-chairperson of the Newmarket Business Association. "We've pitched ourselves as the premier shopping street in New Zealand. We're like Covent Garden in London, if you like, and this does not fit. It's past its use-by date" (quoted in Austen, 1999: n.p.). But the White Lady's owner, Mr Washer, recalls that rather than fuelling the demise of the White Lady, this controversy consolidated support for both carts. The City compliance licensing officer supported these long-time elements of the streetscape, recognising the goodwill the owner had generated over the decades. As the *Herald* noted, "far from scrapping it as a relic from a 'pie-gone' era, the Auckland City Council supported the cart and issued a new licence" (ibid). Patrons subsequently rewarded White Lady's resilience with increased sales.

At the start of the 21st century Auckland is proudly cosmopolitan. Numerous modern apartment high-rises accommodate both international students and low income residents, and many participate in night time street life. The White Lady's parking spot is in a precinct where there are now several backpacker hostels, providing a steady client base. A positive mention in the 2010 *Lonely Planet* travel guide has further enhanced sales in recent years. The White Lady's customer base thus reflects Auckland's changing demographics. One customer described taking his teenagers there on something of a nostalgia journey in 2010:

*They had to have a hamburger at the White Lady! It's a cultural experience'... it's part of the city's history, and while it's changed, it's still there! Just the fact that the staff that night were all Asian – the pie cart over the years has reflected the changing demographic of downtown. (Neill et al., 2008: 17)*

White Lady's current owner Peter Washer, son of Pop, also reflected on this:

*the people who end up working at the White Lady tend to replicate the latest migrant trends to New Zealand. Early on it was Kiwi workers at the cart, but over time this has changed. We've had Islanders, locals and recently lots of Asians. Our workers are generally new immigrants. (Neill, 2009: 27)*

### **Iconic status and longevity**

Customers perceive White Lady as more than just a fast food outlet. A regular patron explained that "it's partly sort of iconic and it's definitely not mainstream; it's a little bit marginalised" (Neill, 2009: 139). Neill's (2009) research reveals seven domains that stakeholders (owner, staff, customers, and compliance officials of Auckland City Council) believe attribute iconic status to the White Lady. These are: its business as a 'life marker'; its 'good Samaritan' engagement; its demographic gauge; its celebrity status; its long-term consistency and quality; its cosmopolitanism; and its status as an iconic business. Of particular interest here is the conviction that the White Lady provides a 'life marker', a social barometer for the significant life events of its staff, customers and owner. One customer recalled his youth in the 1970s:

*we were all stoned and hungry, you know, the munchies... but pretty harmless. We just needed food! The cart was always there [and] always open, and we could find our way there and back, pretty much... back then people would head there after protest marches and parties. It was a bit of a ritual. (Neill, 2009: 40)*

Staff at White Lady have long engaged in ad hoc 'Good Samaritan' hospitality, something that Lashley links to the building of social cohesion (2004: 7). As one former staff notes:

*I remember one New Year's Eve in the 1960s. They came down [the street people], and Peter brought us a few drinks, and he [the street person] was telling Peter how they used to bring fish heads there and I used to cook them for them. Over the decades when street kids came along, if we made a mistake [cooked more items than ordered] we keep it underneath the warmer and if*

*anybody comes up off the street then Peter said 'just give it to them'. (Neill, 2009: 141)*

These comments illustrate how food and food service are part of “communal identity”, whereby the “activity of eating is embedded with specific associations, with deeply shared value for consumers and producers” (Hernández-López, 2010: 3). Across time, the remembered experiences fuel nostalgia: a powerful emotion that contributes to an iconic status. The attribution of iconic status to the White Lady reflects a blend of contemporary participants’ narratives and nostalgic memory. This potent mixture depends on the perceived qualities of authenticity that a longterm business can evoke. One city resident observed:

*It is classed as an icon because we have heard that they have been around for over 60 years and I think even New Zealanders, if you said it would be gone tomorrow, even if you had never been to it, I think in my opinion, most New Zealanders would say no! don't let it go! (Neill, 2009: 3)*

Moreover, these associations extend beyond Auckland:

*People... go there because it's one of the things you promise yourself you are going to do to top off a visit to Auckland, not necessarily because you are looking forward to eating a burger out of there, but just to say you have been there. (ibid: 139)*

Much of the recent international literature on iconic food tourism has focussed upon the production of distinctive regional food as a response to the impacts of globalisation (Watson and Caldwell, 2005; Sims, 2009; Blakey, 2012; Mak, Lumbers and Eves, 2012). For all of these writers the emphasis is on satisfying the tourists’ quest for authenticity, which may entail diligent research and marketing to (re)establish and sell identifiably local cuisine. Tourists need food not just for sustenance; it must also supply symbolic significance, and perform as a marker of distinction. The notion of “cosmopolitan mobilities” implies that trying new food and food venues is part of the adventure and adaptability of travel (Mak et al., 2012: 184). The White Lady’s achievement of iconic status is not a consequence of slick

marketing. Rather, it is closer to the opposite: a rare remnant of 1950s vernacular culture which has never advertised, and quietly persists in the heart of a downtown precinct. Icon status is conferred by the loyal and repeat White Lady stakeholder group: staff, local customers and other city users, who enjoy the familiarity of this feature of the streetscape (Neill et al., 2008).

“Food practices are intimately related to cultural identity”, observes Hernández-López (2011: 244). For visitors responding to the White Lady as a tourist attraction, this is a taste of Big City “alternative hedonism” (Sims, 2009: 325). Sims explains the need to comprehend authentic experiences as the tourists themselves perceive them: their quest is for the quintessentially local, intrinsic to the pleasure of travel, whilst accruing their own “embodied cultural capital” (Mak et al., 2012: 184). The White Lady offers that authenticity, and, because of its longevity, a continuum that has endured the move through modernism and conformity (of the 1950s) into the post-modern era of individual, experiential consumption of everything. Tourists perform cosmopolitanism at the pie cart, enjoying the experiences that connect them, however temporarily, to place. They seek “novelty in the culinary sphere” (ibid: 185), and take pleasure in the (distinctive, local) story that food tells them (Blakey, 2011). “The homogenising force of globalisation is commonly seen as a threat to the close connection between food and place” we are reminded; “hence, globalisation can significantly affect local gastronomic identity and image” (Mak et al., 2012: 172). Ironically, for the White Lady today, the pervasiveness of the globalised fast food companies may be having a positive impact on this small business, as diners reject the seemingly inevitable and familiar fast food enterprises, and seek a genuine and essentially local food experience.

## **Conclusion**

Food studies begin with the premise that “food practices are implicated in a complex field of relationships, expectations, and choices that are contested, negotiated, and often unequal” (Watson and Caldwell, 2005: 1). Economic, historical, and political conditions shape these discourses. The White Lady has survived on Auckland streets for more than sixty years. It was always a place to buy cheap hot food, but now it

may be acknowledged for its unusual perseverance as object and symbol of vernacular food culture.

Its genesis and longevity reflect the post-war spirit of opportunity and entrepreneurship, and, over decades, an ability to adjust to changing food demands. The family owners have consistently believed that this business is unique, and because of that uniqueness it will continue to attract custom, despite the threat of competition. This belief has been well founded: its survival attests to this. Further, our research has revealed that the White Lady enjoys iconic status with its staff and customers as well as city residents and officials. For those who engage with this institution, it is an integral part of a life-narrative, adding a dimension more significant than a mere food and beverage service. It provides authenticity and distinction, and evokes feelings of nostalgia and belonging. It is now entering the realm of tourist attraction: a highly localised food venue with global travellers as patrons, seeking this experience of a national food culture. This last classification may prove an important one, to ensure the longevity of the White Lady.

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