



The Raw Prawn

Bernice Cook

2013 photo turned into pop art by a Raw Prawn customer.

The Raw Prawn opened just in time for Christmas, December 1990. Since "Day 1" The business has always occupied the shop on the Corner of Pitt Street & Garfield Road at Riverstone (opposite the P.O.). It was a record shop prior to that, however Dad thought it was prime digs for setting up a family run Seafood/Fish'n'Chip shop.

Mum and Dad, (Rex & Ellen Thompson), opened the family business and ran it for 12 years. They moved from Winston Hills (family home where we grew up) out to Box Hill looking to "open spaces" and a few acres to breed Quarter Horses. Dad was self employed in the Aircon/Refrigeration trade and Mum had opened up the Laundromat in Pitt Street. When the shop on the corner became available Dad decided to hang up his Aircon tools and set up an "old style" Fish'n'Chip shop. They soon realised it was too hard to run both businesses so Mum sold the Laundromat and they focused on making the Raw Prawn a standout seafood business, no hamburgers or milk bar set up, just traditional Fish'n'Chips with a sideline to sell fresh fish, prawns and oysters.

They had no prior experience with fish'n'chips, however they both had experience in self run businesses. Dad had seen a few "speciality" fish'n'chip shops around Sydney (Manly, Bondi, Cronulla) as part of his Refrigeration work and was keen to set something along those lines here in Riverstone, because there was nothing like it out this way, where you can choose a fish from the display and have it cooked while you wait. It was a different concept to your average take away where everything is pre cooked or comes pre made.



Ad from *Blacktown Advocate* dated 17 May 2000.

Mum and Dad retired in February 2003 and Garry and I took over the business. Dad stayed on with us for a further 12 months, but he was tired, and more than ready to retire to look after Mum who has been successfully battling cancer for 20+ years, but was at a point where she required assistance at home full time.

Why did we decided to take over the business? Mum and Dad had tried to sell the business for some time, however, the market wasn't there and they really wanted to see it pass on in the family. We were at a point in our life where we were looking for a "sea change".... We had been living in Melbourne for 10 years with Garry's last posting in the Army. We were wanting to come back to Sydney once he retired from the Services and for family reasons and thought why not take over the family fish shop!!! I was with Telstra and negotiated a transfer to Sydney and Garry had always wanted to try his hand as a cook, it just kind of fell into place.

I hadn't really helped out in the shop in earnest before that because we were always posted interstate or far away, however, when we visited we always would end up down there at the shop.

Over the years some of the things we have sold has changed. As with all businesses you have to reinvent and renew a little along the way or you don't grow and keep up with current demands and expectations of your customer market. The business was hit by a few major changes over our history.

1) Direct impact when the Meat Works closed and the Air Force pulled out of Riverstone. We had to review and down size a great deal because the customer base diminished drastically. Basically Mum and Dad reduced the staff by three and cut back on the product offering, no longer supporting the fresh seafood market side of the business and just featuring cooked fish'n'chips but continued to stock prawns and oysters.

2) The new "healthy lifestyle" boom hit where customers became more health conscience and fish became popular again. Fresh produce was in demand and the market for Grilled food vs. Fried food was on the rise.

We changed to once again stock a wide range of fresh seafood sourced from Pymont Fish Market and incorporated a line of Grilled fish and Salad options on the menu as well as premium lines such as Salmon, Swordfish, Lobster etc . Due to the growth in Riverstone and a direct change in operating processes and new product lines our staff numbers have increased by three again.

As we are a small business it is impossible to stock everything that say DeCosti would stock. However, we do offer customers the service of sourcing whatever they may require as per special request. We do a produce run to the fish market every Tuesday and Friday morning armed with a list of special requests from customers and do our best to accommodate their desires be it whole Kingfish/Snapper/Red Emperor, Live Mud Crabs, Alaskan King Crab, Sea Urchins, Jumbo Pacific Oysters... We have had many wonderful requests and can usually hunt them down.

We have stayed true to our original core product and will continue to only offer fresh and cooked seafood produce. We believe this is our strength and as the saying goes, "if it's not broke don't fix it"

On average we are out of bed by 4:30 am on market days (Tuesday and Friday) travel into the city to be at the markets by 6:30am. We hand pick our fresh fish fillets, Prawns, Oysters and other required seafood products from varied wholesalers and retailers at Pymont. We arrive back at the Raw Prawn around 9am and begin to set up for the day, setting the window and prepare fillets etc. Open at 11am each day close at 7:30/8pm each nite. Clean up after closing and home by 9pm at night. Tuesday,

Wednesday are by most the busiest weekdays and of course Friday being the traditional take away night in town.

The highest trading periods are always Christmas and Easter for obvious reasons and we are 24 hour busy preparing and servicing customers at these periods. On average at Christmas we usually turnaround approx. 300 kg of prawns and around 150 doz. Oysters, 100 lobsters & approx 15kg of crabs. We manage this mainly through customer pre orders but we are at full capacity at this time. Easter time the queue's are primarily for cooked fish n chips as we are under the pump, we basically do a two weeks trade volume in the space of eight hours. But it's very rewarding because our customers are happy and truly appreciate the effort we put in to the day and don't mind the 45-60min wait for dinner!!

Contrary to popular belief winter is not our strongest trading season. Seafood is a summer food and no one likes cooking after being on a train or in traffic on a hot summer day, hence the fish'n'chips fall back. We close early at 2pm on Sundays because you just have to maintain some sort of life balance and we normally eat out somewhere to keep a finger on the pulse.

We are pretty much running to capacity 80% of the time so I don't have plans to "grow" the business so to speak. However, there is always room for change so I am open to whatever tomorrow may bring. If we were to make any change it would be to improve the outdoor dining experience and provide an established seating area. This would cause some operational changes and also impact on staffing which comes at a cost. We are very sensitive in the current economical environment so when/if the demand occurs we will review the need for change.



Bernice and Garry at work at the Raw Prawn in 2013.