

When Italy moved to New Farm

Brendan O'Malley

ITALIAN migrants have settled in Queensland since the 1870s when Brisbane's Roman Catholic Archbishop James Quinn sponsored the passage of artists and artisans.

In 1891, the first Italian cane cutters began working in the far north, and by the 1920s they owned half of all the cane farms in the state.

A great wave of Italians arrived following World War I, many of them settling on the Atherton Tableland where they grew tobacco. Others helped establish the apple industry in Stanthorpe.

World War II was a bleak time for these migrants. One-third of all the nation's Italians lived in Queensland but hundreds of the men were sent interstate to internment camps, leaving their wives and children to run farms.

After the war Queensland turned more and more to continental European migrants, although unlike the so-called 10-pound Poms they had

to pay their own way here.

A common strategy was to send out a young male, who then arranged for wives, children and eventually paesani (people from the same district) to come over.

However, it was not unheard of for children to be shipped off alone. They had to wait for their parents to arrive, sometimes years later.

More and more decided to make a new life in Brisbane, usually picking (then) poor inner-city suburbs like Paddington and New Farm to put down roots.

New Farm suddenly acquired a distinctively continental feel.

Backyards were turned into veggie patches, inner-city parks came to life again after a long hiatus, and delicatessens serving exotic foods started to appear.

An ethnic radio station, 4EB, took to the airwaves in 1979, although as far back as the early '60s Carmelo Caruso had a program on 4KQ called Italian Melodies.

By 1980, 4 per cent of Australians

were from Italy or had parents from there. These days in Queensland 7.5 per cent of people who speak a language other than English at home speak Italian.

Over the years many of those migrants have raised themselves from abject poverty to wealth and influence.

Some well-known Italian migrants or their children include businesswoman Sarina Russo, former politician Michael Caltabiano, former union leader Grace Grace (she was born Ignazia Farfaglia), and pioneering restaurateur Gino Merlo.

Merlo almost single-handedly changed the face of dining in Brisbane at a time when the only places to go out to eat were hotels.

His restaurant Milano, one of only a handful of licensed restaurants, introduced the city to fine dining.