

# The Advertiser

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**SE** News  
**HD** Lunch with ... Vili Milisits SA pie man has a recipe for life  
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**LP**

His long history of making some of South Australia's best bakery goods has been overshadowed recently by a run-in with a motor vehicle outside his famous bakery. KURTIS EICHLER enjoys a pie with Vili.

KURTIS EICHLER: You are having a bad run lately. How are you feeling? VILI MILISITS: I must say now it's not bones and headaches, it's more muscular. Every part of the muscles in my body has been affected. I landed a bit harder than I normally would if I was younger.

**TD**

It must have happened really quickly.

It happened so quick, you're talking split seconds. I was just talking to people out on the footpath, having a break from work, having a soft drink out there and getting some Vitamin D and getting some colour. I'm low on Vitamin D so I go out for 10 minutes a day and get my Vitamin D.

I was standing on the driveway there and all of a sudden I heard this screeching and when I turned around this car was almost on top of me.

When I hit the ground, I hit with my right hip first and then my head went bang and how I wasn't unconscious got me.

Did you come back to work?

I tried to come to work on the public holiday and give the girls a hand just doing chips. It's not hard doing chips, but I went home after 90 minutes.

I hear you bought a lottery ticket after the close shave.

I told my son to get a lottery ticket. I actually won \$14.05 cents. It was a win. This was my second, I don't want to try a third. How old were you when you came to Australia in 1956?

10, maybe 11 years of age. We left Hungary during the Hungarian Revolution. My family lost everything at the time. My parents lost everything but my greatest loss was my dog.

Your dog?

I was five years with that dog. He followed me everywhere, right, it was an Alsatian, but I had to tie him up and leave him when we left.

He howled because he couldn't come with me. We lived half a mile from the Austrian border. They would have shot him; they wouldn't have let the dog in. They might let us in but not the dog.

I don't know what happened to him but ever since I left home and got married I have always had dogs. I have a schnauzer now, a very intelligent dog.

Australia must have been a culture shock?

I was 18 months in refugee camps for a starter and we spent 28 days on a ship to get here. What a difference it is today. The world has changed. The world has become smaller, cosmopolitan.

It (Australia) is a magnificent country and anybody that doesn't like this country, I'll send them anywhere they want and I might even pay to get them there.

If you come back you have to pay me double.

You certainly made the right choice. And I hear your love for fish started early on?

My first job was in a fish and chip shop and so I am Mr Fish and Chips. When I'm cooking chips at lunch time here, they think I'm an idiot but that gives me an insight to the counter.

So you listen in?

I hear people ordering and I know what is selling. This café was really set up for a guinea pig country. What sells here will sell anywhere because of the diverse range of people that come here.

What are people buying? Traditional pies or something a bit fancy? You see the traditional Aussie pie but then also the gourmet ranges here. If I can lay claim to anything in SA, when I started in 1967 I made cakes for the first 10 years.

So you switched from sweet to savoury after that?

I realised immigration was not coming from Europe any more; they were coming from Asia and the Middle East. So I had to change and went to savoury. It was the greatest move I ever made.

I didn't like what was out there and so I just made my version of a pie, pasty or a sausage role and then wáng-dang Hungarian goulash, steak and mushroom, satay. People thought I was mad.

People thought you were equally as mad for setting up here later on in 1993. My friends all used to say "who would open a café in Manchester St in an industrial area" and my joke was "only an idiot like me". The greater the risk, the greater the prize.

I've laid my business money on the line a few times but my wife Rosemary says, "why risk anything?" Well, I'll only risk half – it's a calculated risk.

I was young, hungry and poor when I started, I was a refugee. But I now have one thing guaranteed.

What?

I've got one million pies in the freezer so I shan't go hungry should I? I've seen people happy in poverty but I've never seen them happy when they are hungry. It is the greatest enemy to mankind.

When you started, were you expecting business to be big?

Never beyond my wildest dreams, all I wanted was a boat, a house, a car and a family. I've been blessed. I've been successful but it's been hard yakka. Especially initially. I was working 80, 90 hours a week. I was young and there was nothing that was impossible. Today some things are impossible physically, but not mentally. I have to use my brain a lot more than my brawn.

And you have some famous customers?

We've had KISS here. Where would you go at three in the morning after the concert? The chauffeurs and the taxi drivers know where to take people – you can go to McDonald's or you can go and possibly get a pizza at that time but we are a full-on café. You can have goulash, you can have schnitzel, steak, fish – it's not just pies and pasties.

What was the hardest thing you found in business?

Being able to delegate. Why would someone want to do it better than me or as good as me when they don't own the business?

I'm privileged in a sense that I started my business young, I got married young, started a family young.

A few of your kids work here.

I have a 44-year-old son and a 37-year-old daughter. They are both here. I have a 21-year-old grandson who's at university doing a quality assurance program.

I have an 18-year-old grandson who I am sending overseas for a couple of months to get all of that stupidity out of his mind and ... when he comes back he'll have to get a job.

No one in my family goes on the dole.

You have a pie floater here today; I have a Hungarian goulash pie. What is your favourite pie?

Green Peppercorn. It has chunky meat and Green Peppercorn is more aromatic, more than spicy.

How do you come up with a pie like that?

Both my parents are chefs so I was born in a house with real food. Ethnic version of everything. When we came to Australia we were called "bloody wogs" and told to come back where we came from. I took it on the chin because I was in refugee camps for 18 months and I went to school in a different country.

So you were subject to racism?

No it wasn't racist. Racist is very strong terminology. I reckon that's stupidity in a sense. Whenever you are the minority, you have to have a little bit against you, don't you? You've got to take a bit of flack. I would say it was prejudice.

(The photographer leaves, wishing him well in his recovery. Vili starts telling me about the pie floater.) Most pie floaters get eaten when you are feeling a bit under the weather. These you can eat while you are sober because they are good enough to eat. We've still got a few vans outside Norwood Oval where you can buy a pie floater on game day or game night.

One could be going a little bit on the outer side of Adelaide Oval but I can't say much now, that's still in progress. I'd say by the end of May, we would have one on the other side so people going into North Adelaide – on the way in or the way out – can buy Vili's.

Did you go for the Adelaide Oval tender?

I didn't get the tender for Adelaide Oval. That's fine. You can't win them all. If we could win everything that would be great. I have about 14 stadiums interstate you know but Footy Park eluded me.

(Vili stops the lunch and says hello to two men sitting nearby he says he has known for years. Their conversation sparks a talk on fishing.) I love this place for fishing.

So where are the good catches?

Port Victoria is a nice spot. I used to go river fishing when my kids were small, it was fantastic. That's another reason I bought a boat, to go 30 miles out to sea.

Jet skis then came to the river. Noise, racket, idiots. I reckon in the Murray where you can only do 6km an hour. Then they can have 20km where they can jet ski all they want.

Where do get your fish for the café?

A fishmonger comes in every week. I prefer to get my fish fresh. Once we would leave garfish in the water and we would move. Now I see garfish when I'm fishing and it's become one of my favourite fish – 25 years ago I wouldn't have eaten it.

Why?

I must have missed the boat somehow. Some of it was in the mind that I knew whiting was the best and then snapper.

I've got two snapper today somebody sent me. I've got some Asian girls who know how to cook fish cooking them up. I've got different chefs here. I've got Italians, Greeks, Thai chefs, Aussies.

Have you ever been back to Hungary?

You know I have travelled the world but I have not been back to Hungary. My father's never been back. We have very bad memories as a kid in the revolution so I try to stay away. There are better places in the world.

My wife said she'd like to see Budapest before I die but I said "I am not ready to die".

VILI'S DREAM LUNCH GUESTS George Rokicinfki: "He's my fishing mate, my fishing mate on the boat." Noel Mendes: "He's our crowd controller." Johnny Mac and Victor Dombrowski: Johnny used to be a singer and they both come down to Café De Vili's for **wine**-downs and sing-a-longs.

Assistant Treasurer Mathias Cormann: He's switched on. We'd all eat a home-cooked meal, made by my wife Rosemary.

#### THE BILL

CAFE DE VILI'S It was Vili's shout, so Kurtis Eichler saved his lunch money for another day. Vili enjoys a laugh at his famous SA diner and, far left, in hospital last month. Main picture:KERYN STEVENS

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