

I got my first job as early as I could, with a covetable item to save for in my sights



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Highlight: At the tender age of 14 and nine months I began working at a freeway roadhouse. But with an hourly rate of \$5.25, buying a CD player was going to take a while.

Body

As a teenager, my ultimate dream in life was to buy a three stack Compact Disc player from Brashs.

This covetable item cost \$400, which was significantly more than my parents would ever agree to spend for a Christmas or birthday present, so I got my first job as soon as it was possible - at the tender age of 14 years and nine months.

[Link to Image](#)

Ben Rushton

I was paid the paltry sum of \$5.25 an hour to work at the **Shell** roadhouse on the freeway at Warrenheip, a small town on the outskirts of Ballarat.

I did the calculations and quickly realised it was going to take quite a few four-hour shifts to get that CD player, and even more to buy some CDs to play on it.

I did get a snazzy uniform- a black skirt, red, yellow and white striped t-shirt with the **Shell** logo, and a bright red apron.

For the most part, my job was to assist in the preparation of food, serving customers at the till and cleaning up afterwards.

Often, it would just be me rostered on with a "chef" (I use that term lightly) in the kitchen. I would take the customer's orders and send them through to said "chef", who cooked up burgers, steaks and toasties while I prepared drinks and any extra snacks.

The best part of the job was making cinnamon doughnuts; dropping the dough into the deep fryer before fishing it out and coating it in a cinnamon and sugar mix.

The aroma of the doughnuts filled the kitchen and the reward for my labours was to eat them hot, straight from the fryer with its crunchy coating encasing a soft, sweet inside.

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The worst part of the job was cleaning the toilets which had to be done at the end of every shift.

I dreaded cleaning the men's toilets with urine staining the floor, but I quickly learned the women's toilets were almost as bad with some customers experiencing a strange desire to shred toilet paper into small pieces and scatter it all over the floor, making it very difficult to mop.

Trade at the roadhouse ebbed and flowed. Sometimes there was only a trickle of customers, an occasional car pulling up for a toilet break and a cup of coffee.

Other days it was a flood, a busload of tourists all trying to order lunch almost simultaneously, with a queue stretching from the cash register to the door.

The busiest days were Easter and Christmas, when it seemed the whole of Victoria wanted to get in their cars and drive to Ballarat.

It was decreed that given it was so busy, all staff, even the lowliest, must work on Christmas Day for a two-hour shift. The pay was the same, with no public holiday rates, but we did all get a box of fancy Ferrero Rocher chocolates as a gift at the end of it.

Despite my dedication to the roadhouse, there were numerous times during my brief career there where I came close to being fired. I was slow on the cash register and ineffectual at mopping floors, but the incident that nearly cost me my job was when I almost caused a serious dental injury.

Next to the cash register, there was a basket of fruit for customers to purchase. One day, a woman came in and requested a shiny green apple - but one that was on display inside the salad fridge rather than from the fruit bowl. I agreed with the woman that these apples looked superior and retrieved it, charged her, and waved as she drove off with her delicious-looking apple.

A few minutes later, the woman returned brandishing the apple with some teeth marks in it after executing a hasty U-turn on the freeway.

"You've sold me a fake wax apple," she said. "I tried to bite into it, and it nearly broke my teeth off."

It dawned on me then that the apple had felt a little strange, and it was perhaps unusual that the apples in the fridge were never replaced and just sat in perpetual shiny perfection in a pyramid display next to the salads. Luckily, the woman did not require any orthodontic work.

I refrained from selling any more of the fake display apples, and so I retained my job for another year - just enough time to save up for that highly prized triple stacker CD player.

Cara Waters is the city editor for The Age.

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Graphic

A **Shell** Roadhouse similar to the one I worked at for my first job. **Petrol** prices were significantly cheaper then.

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