

ENTERTAINING

E

MILK BARS/MELBOURNE

Sweet spots

Melbourne's mid-century milk bars are being reimagined by a new breed of entrepreneur. Who fancies a shake?

By Will Higginbotham
Photography Jo Duck



1

Cherry-red and canary-yellow seats, vintage 1950s tables, a pressed-tin ceiling and an antique model ice-cream cone are some of the clues that Jerry's Milk Bar in the suburb of Elwood isn't your average modish third-wave Melbourne coffee shop. The city staple opened in 1964, when it – and similar bars all over the Victorian capital – provided the suburbs with milk, bread, newspapers and sweets.

Low-lying, large-windowed icons of 20th-century suburbia, Milk bars are the Australian equivalent of the convenience shops that sprung up in the 1950s and 1960s. Many were run by Greek or Italian immigrants who arrived en masse after the Second World War. The model was strong but then soured as the proliferation of supermarkets, rent hikes and newer corner shops crowded out the market, so to speak. Where once there were many, only a few have survived but now a new crop of entrepreneurs are reimagining these architectural icons as community hubs.

The latest chapter in Jerry's history started with a bang in 2011 when a driver



(1) Breakfast at Rowena Corner Store (2) Andrew Serratore at Jerry's Milk Bar (3) Entrepreneurs are shaking up the milk-bar format (4) Rowena Corner Store manager Nathalie Dumont



3

4

careened into the brick building and virtually destroyed its façade, over which a white-and-red-striped awning now flaps in the breeze. “That was the moment when I decided that we couldn’t just go on selling milk and papers,” says owner Andrew Serratore, who wasn’t alone in seeing potential in such spaces.

Nestled on a leafy street in St Kilda is Cowderoy’s Dairy. “We’re a café for the locals,” says manager Chenchen Liang. At 08.00 on a sunny Thursday the service is steady; younger punters cluster on the outside decking while retirees hide from the sun indoors, sipping their lattes as the Marzocco whirrs in the background. The smiling barista seems to recognise most faces. “Happy Birthday for last Tuesday,” and “I saved the paper for you,” he says to customers in quick succession.



Cowderoy’s Dairy has deftly updated itself but still maintains certain hallmarks that customers of golden-age milk bars may recognise: there are jars chock-full of sweets, tubs of ice cream and fresh loaves, plus milk, juices and yoghurt. According to Liang, whose mother took over the café in the summer of 2018, keeping these staples is a deliberate move. “People come here and want to see their childhoods reflected back,” she says. “We haven’t changed anything inside, just the menu occasionally. The locals wouldn’t want us to.”

Across town the story is similar at Rowena Corner Store, which owner Con Coustas turned into a convivial café in 2003. In what is surely a nod to the Hellenic milk bars of old, the shop specialises in Mediterranean fare, offering sardine antipasto, Kaski (a dish of



(1) Cone-shaped lights are emblematic of milk bars (2) Cowderoy’s Dairy still stocks milk and ice cream (3) Cowderoy’s Dairy (4) Staff at Rowena Corner Store (5) Vinyl seats, a hit at most milk-bar cafés (6) Jerry’s Milk Bar

red pepper, ricotta and feta) and harissa-slathered lamb shoulder. If you missed the owner’s inspiration there’s a giant fresco of the island of Santorini to remind you. “We wanted to honour that heritage and play to our strengths,” says Coustas. “We needed to create a real point of difference to set ourselves apart.”

As well as serving Greek food the space doubles as a larder and shop brimming with Sicilian salt, Greek chocolate and Italian tomatoes, which Coustas insists you won’t find in the supermarket. “Everything is designed around community,” he says, beaming. It’s a mentality that also extends to his recruitment policy. “I only employ staff who will stick around and create a rapport with people,” he says.

Zippering to another area of town we meet James Li, the co-owner of Adeney





1

(1) Colourful fare at Rowena Corner Store (2) Cowderoy's Dairy (3) Egg and soldiers at Good Times Milk Bar (4) Picking up the basics (5) Darling St Espresso (6) Good Times Milk Bar (7) Good Times' co-owner Brent Scales with Ralph (8) Rowena Corner Store

Milk Bar, a quaint spot located between two schools and the eastern reaches of Victoria Park in the area's Kew East neighbourhood. "We get a lot of families and a lot of kids here," he says. This is Lee's second time managing a milk bar. "I'm kind of in love with them because we get to know people and hear about their lives. It's not just about eating a meal, taking an Instagram shot and leaving."

Our last stop brings us to the suburb of Bentleigh, where owners Brent Scales and Brett Louis have reimaged their Good Times Milk Bar for a new generation. Their giant California-style café is framed with ferns and fig trees, serves sparkling water on tap and has a menu bursting with healthy, colourful plates. There's a green burger made of pea, quinoa and kale, a smoked-trout omelette and an assortment of cakes, including one topped with pink chocolate. Aside from the milkshakes and confectionery there's only a faint hint of the milk bar that once stood here.

For the owners it's more about the mood. "We set out to capture that milk

Why are milk bars having a moment?

"Our customers were young when they first came and now they are working, having babies themselves. We've tried to keep that familiarity alive, so they walk in and feel like it's their childhood again."

Chenchen Liang, Cowderoy's Dairy

"Purchasing a milk bar and making it a coffee shop is about creating a point of difference. They're great because you've got a long, rich history of clients but they also appeal to a younger audience."

Andrew Serratore, Jerry's Milk Bar

"Milk bars were the social glue in Australian society – a bit like the pub is to London – so for us, it's about creating a space where everyone is welcome."

Duncan McKenzie, Darling St Espresso

"Being time-poor it's now like, 'OK, let's grab a coffee and a bite to eat.' And that's where you bump into people."

Brent Scales, Good Times Milk Bar

"We Greeks took milk bars to another level. Hospitality plays such a big role in Greek culture so we were perfect for these type of joints. For us it's about keeping that alive, that sense of a village congregation point."

Con Coustas, Rowena Corner Store



2



3



4



8

ADDRESS BOOK

Cowderoy's Dairy
14 Cowderoy Street, St Kilda West

Jerry's Milk Bar
345 Barkly Street, Elwood

Adeney Milk Bar
70 Adeney Avenue, Kew

Fordham's Milk Bar
116 Fordham Avenue, Camberwell

Darling St Espresso
146 Athol Street, Moonee Ponds

Rowena Corner Store
44 Rowena Parade, Richmond

Only in Victoria – on offer in the milk bars we went to:

- Communal libraries where people can borrow or donate books
- Locals can bring in any leftover home-grown produce to be used in various recipes
- Communal noticeboards where customers can advertise services
- 'Get to know your neighbours' events where residents can meet over a coffee
- Mixed bags of sweets for AU\$2
- Dog biscuits for customers' canine companions



5



6



7

on the enduring appeal of Melbourne's milk bars. Looking around the place, he gestures towards a table of three customers, all huddled over their flat whites. "See that group?" he says, leaning in. "I know them all. They are neighbours who bumped into each other here." All of these places are a small expression of a much bigger desire: to stay connected, not just on social media but in real life. "We need to live life together in real time," he says. "That's what milk bars are good at doing." — (M)