

# Café Society

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After years of indifference to cafés and the culture they engender, I have found myself seduced by a small establishment that opened within a minute's walk of my flat.

It started in winter 2004. I was curious about this little place because the situation was unusual and it was close to me. The building had once been a shop-cum-residence, though what kind of shop is hard to tell. Too small to have been a milk bar. Possibly a tobacconist's. It had been vacant since I moved into the area in 1996, apart from a brief spell as a school for artists, with gaudy amateur examples hanging in the window. A few months after that closed, carpenters arrived with their hammers and started renovations.

It's situated on Albion Street. This will mean nothing to those who live outside Melbourne's northern suburbs. To those who live in Brunswick or who have occasion to drive or walk along this street, that name means quite a bit. Albion Street is a narrow thoroughfare that links the north-eastern corner of Brunswick with Essendon in the west, passing through Pascoe Vale on the way. At its root in the east is an old rubbish tip filled in years ago and, plainly clothed in grass, awaits an extreme makeover. In one corner stands a beautiful cream-walled Russian Orthodox church whose golden domes catch the westerling sun and flame to the surprised delight of drivers travelling in that direction. With the serenely radiant exception of the Russian Orthodox church, it is an ugly street. It's lined on both sides by small houses, punctuated here and there by abandoned and decaying shops. On summer afternoons, to the walker, it's a hellishly hot, bleached and sun-beaten stretch of wilderness, devoid of shelter, that one must negotiate in order to gain the busy furnace of Sydney Road. Though many gardens front the street, they seem defeated. Even rose bushes, the pretty, thriving harem girls of the garden world, gaze wide-eyed and worried between sun-faded palings or over grimly enduring brick boundaries. At intervals along the street are islands jammed against the kerb, some planted with native grasses that died soon after instalment, which are designed to slow traffic. Cars pull in behind them to let the opposing cars pass. Several times a day a rangy young bus shoulders its way along, followed by a plume of exhaust.

My local inserted itself into this wasteland and has made itself at home.

Because it was so small, the young proprietors, one of Turkish background, the other Anglo-Australian, erected trestle tables on the footpath and added green milk crates for stools, each with its own striped cushion. When it opened, only the shop part was in use. Since then, with money, they have opened the residence part, making my local a little less cramped – though not much.

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The café is situated on the corner of Albion and Barrow Streets. On Barrow Street is a long window, built in when the place was renovated; and here, anyone using the trestle tables can call in their order. A few minutes later, the waiter or waitress passes it through. On Sunday mornings, when everyone in Brunswick wakes and thinks about where to eat breakfast, it seems they all descend on my local cafe. The tables are full inside and out; people sit on the kerb to drink their lattes; others cluster under the veranda to chat. This, surely, is the sound of inner-city music: traffic, people talking, and, at a bass level, the café's selection of black urban dirges to the ruinous effects of drugs, poverty and sex.

Why do people come to this cafe? Leaving aside the quality of the coffee and food, which is good, one attraction seems to be the retro look. Brunswick has mushroomed with cafés over the last few years, and the prosperous ones aimed at hip customers are of this type. By contrast, a few have opened up on Sydney Road and Lygon Street where, forswearing op-shop chic, they have gone for blond-wood-and-chrome furniture, or for dark, matching tables and mood lighting. They remain cavernously empty. Retro doesn't guarantee success, but new furniture seems to guarantee failure.

I understand the allure of retro. You don't have to dress for it. You go there to meet your friends, relax, talk and eat. You aren't on show as you are in, say, Chapel Street, where one has to put on fashion before stepping out. The aura is more relaxed and communal than, say, Lygon Street Carlton, which preens itself on its Italian style.

At my local, I meet my private writing student for his monthly lesson. While we talk writing, someone at the next table is bound to look as though they want to join in. My local café is swarming with writers and other artistic types. Mention the word "publishing" and five people cautiously raise their heads. This is the only place I know where couples work out the cryptic crossword from *The Age Saturday Extra*.

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When Melburnians think café society, I'm sure most of them think Chapel Street Prahran, or Lygon Street in Carlton, or Brunswick Street Fitzroy. All are worthy in their way. Each has its own character. Intellectual life thrives in all of them, because café society seems to be about the intellectual life, amongst other things. Brunswick, I contend, should also be on that list. Its character is harder to define though, which might be why it hasn't joined the clique. Like Brunswick Street Fitzroy, it attracts an artistic crowd. Like Lygon Street Carlton, it speaks more than one languages, except that, whereas Lygon Street speaks English and Italian, Brunswick's café society speaks English and Arabic, Turkish, Italian and Greek. Also, Brunswick's café society can't be confined to a single street. It occupies the municipality.

Brunswick is one of the most cosmopolitan suburbs in Melbourne. The walker, heading north from the Central Business District, emerges from the tree-lined avenue of Royal Parade, which divides Princes Park's limpid greenness from a row of well-heeled

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residences, into the roar and smog and multilingual car horns of Sydney Road. Swift with traffic most of the day, clogged during peak hour and on Saturday morning, Sydney Road has embraced the fashion for sitting at tables on the sidewalk outside cafes. People of all ages and ethnic backgrounds throng to breathe pollution as they chat over coffee. At the southern end of Sydney Road, these people are students and artistic types. They sit knee to knee in their retro clothing, young men and women talking above the voices at the neighbouring tables and the honking, shouting traffic. These people are more likely to be Anglo than anything, although I am sure plenty of third-generation Greeks and Italians are in there. You don't see Asian faces, you don't see Middle-Eastern faces, though both are well-represented in the local supermarket and greengrocer.

But walk on to the area between Blyth and Albion Streets and the café scene changes dramatically. Gone is the bohemian, downmarket look provided by second-hand furniture. Here, cafés are conventionally decorated and offer respectable seating at Formica-topped tables. Behind the counter are shelves lined with ornate hookahs. Men sit at the sidewalk tables drinking coffee or bubbling away at their hookahs while talking in Arabic. I always know when something incendiary that concerns the Arabic community (Cronulla riots, White Australia policy, detention centres) has burned through the media recently because the voices speak loudly and hotly. Further up the road, without hookahs, they talk in Turkish. The Turks are big, phlegmatic men with bushy black moustaches. The Arabic-speakers are smaller and volatile and beardless. These cafés cater only to men. I had a girlfriend over once from a suburb on the other side of the city. We went out for coffee; she picked one of these men-only cafés. I did warn her, but she dismissed my words. As we walked in, the proprietor came forward, smiling, puzzled, unsure how to repel us. He wasn't hostile. It was just that he served men only. My friend understood and dragged me across the road to a café which, while less atmospheric, was multi-sexual.

And that's another curious thing: in this part of Sydney Road, there are only two cafés on the eastern sidewalk, attracting little business, while the western pavement offers a variety of places to gossip over coffee. I know it's because the western side is sheltered from the afternoon sun. But I like to think there is another, mysterious reason why they like it there.

Presently, the men-only cafés give way to multi-sex establishments where you can see men sitting with their veiled wives and veiled women with their children and bare-headed women chatting to their veiled girlfriends. There isn't a student in sight. It might be another suburb entirely.

Things have changed around here since the 1980s, when I first came to live in the Brunswick-Coburg area. Then, Sydney Road in Brunswick was shabby and depressed. On Sunday, the place was almost deserted. Young men cruised in cars and yelled or spat at young women who walked out alone, going to the shop for a litre of milk.

Still, even in the wild 1980s, Brunswick was a good place to live. Students and bohemians on limited funds could buy cheap, delicious takeaways – dips with Turkish bread, the best

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falafels in Melbourne. Their Greek or Lebanese or Italian neighbours would offer them jars of homemade olives, or invite them over for a cup of coffee and a slice of cake. It was exciting to live in a place where many languages were spoken on the street. It felt like being overseas – to me anyway, born and raised in New Zealand, whose most daring act had been to move to Australia (and still is).

When I moved away, jumping from shared house to shared house and penetrating deeper into the areas of homogeneous culture in Melbourne, where everyone spoke the same language – English – I missed Brunswick. I felt out of place. Everyone dressed in the same way, and that way wasn't my way. They had similar lifestyles to match their uniform clothing.

I moved back to Brunswick in 1995 and found that café culture had begun its campaign.

At first there was only one café catering for English-speaking coffee-drinkers. It was very popular. Then it moved a few blocks south and seemed to lose something in the transition – customers, for one thing. In its old abode, it was artistic: paintings by local artists on the walls, mosaic tables, a strong blue look. When it moved, it went retro. This is one of those cases that proves retro doesn't guarantee outstanding success. Still, it's survived, so something must be going reasonably well there.

Other cafes slowly appeared. The last four or five years has seen a rush of them. They can be found mostly on Sydney Road and Lygon Street. But one or two have made themselves at home off Sydney Road and promote mini-communities. The shops around them, which might have been empty for years, will open and offer goods, such as clothes, that are likely to appeal to the café patrons. Yes, and that's another thing that's sprung up: alternative clothing stores.

These cafés, of which my local is one, have the atmosphere during their busiest times of people getting together for a party. There is a lot of talking. There may not be much chatting between tables and groups, but you feel that there might be, that at any moment, everyone will realise they have gathered to celebrate someone's birthday or the launch of their new book or the opening of their first exhibition, and they will join in one big festivity. Compare that to the food court at Barkly Square, Brunswick's shopping centre. The chairs are made of soulless aluminium. People sit as if they're riding an elevator to the thirteenth floor – they don't look at their neighbours, they speak in subdued voices, and they know something bad awaits them when the elevator stops and the doors open.

There are also different communities for different times of the day and in different parts of Brunswick. At my local and at the CERES café near the Merri Creek, young mothers gather with their preschoolers during the morning to chat about child health and related issues. The youngsters drink babycinos which, as far as I can make out, are mostly froth. They all sit outside, where pushers won't clutter up the place.

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At my local, as well as the young mothers, you can see elderly couples in his and hers tracksuits, paunchy professionals and single, middle-aged women. Over the last months I have also noticed that it's attracted people of Middle-Eastern background. I hear Arabic and see women wearing the hijab. They are young. They remain segregated by sex. But they are at home. Or anyway, they are claiming territory that's as much theirs as anyone else's.

And this is the great thing about my local café, the one thing that places it above the other cafés in Brunswick. It doesn't discriminate on the grounds of age, sex, ethnic background or family status. All you need to qualify for a seat is the price of a cup of coffee.