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in the fast lane

MELBOURNE'S

labyrinthine streets are home to **AUSTRALIA'S** most developed food scene. Solve the cobbled maze and be rewarded with international

FOOD UTOPIA, says Michael Harden

PHOTOGRAPHY BY EWEN BELL





Left to right: café on the Southbank; taking a stroll down by the river; dumplings. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Japanese at Kappo; the team; laneway; sunshine above the spires; Flower Drum; its Peking duck

It's mid morning in Melbourne's busy centre and Hosier Lane is a hive of activity. Slathered exuberantly in graffiti and street art, this bluestone-cobbled lane just a block from the grand domed Edwardian baroque of Flinders Street Station has in recent years become an unofficial (though now council sanctioned) outdoor urban gallery. Much of the throng is here to Instagram, Flickr and Tweet the art, but there's also a bride in full meringue regalia posing for wedding photos, schoolchildren in striped blazers sketching the stencilling, someone photographing photographers for an art project and, inevitably – this being a Melbourne 'laneway' – a little hole in the wall café serving meticulously sourced and crafted

espresso and divine French- and Greek-influenced pastries to a steady stream of java worshippers.

Melbourne has no shortage of laneways like this one. They are a by-product of the 1837 grid that mapped out the city with main streets wide enough to accommodate bullock carts set at right angles to each other. Evolving haphazardly to service the businesses on the grid's main streets, they developed their own unpredictable logic. Some play it straight but there are also twists and turns, dead ends and double backs in play. Even seasoned Melburnians are known to lose their bearings and get disorientated.

For most of the last century, the laneways were (not unreasonably) considered dark, dangerous passages of ill repute. But in the past decade or so changes to licensing and zoning laws have seen the laneways colonised first by small, idiosyncratic bars and then by an eclectic range of small businesses and organisations. It's these that have come to encapsulate Melbourne's multicultural, artistic and food-obsessed persona. Not your average Aussie city.

Trawling the laneways has become a pastime, a kind of food treasure hunt for grown-ups, complete with unmarked doorways, basement locations, tiny lifts and rickety flights of stairs.

'The less signage you have, the cooler it is,' laughs Kate Bartholomew, owner – together with husband Mykal and chef Adam D'Sylva – of Tonka, a modern Indian restaurant inhabiting a notorious former nightclub in the city's old rag trade district. A favourite of Mick Jagger's, as legend has it.

Tonka delivers the slightly disorienting, element-of-surprise feel that all the best Melbourne laneway joints have. Its entrance, hidden from the main thoroughfare by a curve in the laneway, is small and unassumingly utilitarian. Step through the doors though and you find yourself in a clean-lined, warehouse-sized space with an enormous cloud-like white mesh sculpture hovering over the main dining area and views through huge windows to the Melbourne Cricket Ground, Australia's largest sporting theatre. Just past the entrance, there's a large bar mixing apt cocktails (the Tonka Lassi adds white rum and fresh mango to the traditional Indian street vendor version), and wine from an award-winning spice-friendly list that's equally versed in the New and Old Worlds.

The menu has plenty to keep diners curious, combining traditional Indian street food like a textbook *pani puri* with more hybrid dishes such as a rich Goan curry, made with native Australian barramundi, mussels from Tasmania and sweet juicy Moolooloba prawns from Queensland, all given a refreshing sour note with the addition of kokum fruit, which is most commonly grown and found on the subcontinent.

Factor in that the kitchen is a ghee-free zone and that the mix also includes Southeast Asian flavours like betel leaf and coconut teamed with Tasmanian salmon or tuna tartare served with fresh wasabi (from Tasmania) and rice poppadoms

Travel information

Melbourne is the capital of the Australian state of Victoria. Time is nine hours ahead of the UK, and currency is the Australian dollar. November sees average highs of 21C, and average lows of 10C. Journey time from London Heathrow to Melbourne is about 21 hours, including one lay over.

GETTING THERE

Qatar Airways flies from London Heathrow to Melbourne via Doha daily, taking 21.5 hours. qatarairways.com

Emirates flies from London Heathrow to Melbourne via Dubai daily, taking 26 hours. emirates.com

RESOURCES

Visit Melbourne The official tourist office provides up-to-date information, free guides and maps. visitmelbourne.com

Visit Victoria Don't just hang out in Melbourne's laneways – the region has plenty to offer too. Try itineraries spanning, cycling, mountain ranges, and great food and wine. visitvictoria.com

FURTHER READING

The Birth of Melbourne by Tim Flannery (Text Publishing Company, £10). The book takes the history of Melbourne from a number of cultural voices, from tribal elders to immigrants, politicians and criminals.

Melbourne: Australia's International City by Jennifer Stevenson (Focus Books, £15). The story of how this multicultural metropolis grew, drawing on creative giants, high culture and the importance of the annual horse race in the city's genetic make up.

CARBON COUNTING

If you are conscious about your carbon footprint when flying to Melbourne, then visit climatecare.org where you can make a donation to support environmental projects all over the world, from rainforest restoration to bio-energy schemes. Return flights from London produce 5.66 tonnes of CO₂, meaning a cost to offset of £42.45.



'For most of the last century, the laneways were considered dark, dangerous passages'



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Left to right: chicken dish and wine at Movida; its chef; its decor. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Flinders Street railway station; Kirk's Wine Bar; Movida; its artful plates; street art; the riverfront; graffiti

Where to eat

Prices are for three courses, excluding wine, unless otherwise stated.

Flower Drum Has been serving up classic Cantonese food in luxurious surrounds for 30 years. Don't miss its version of Peking duck, brilliant dim sum and exquisite dishes like braised pearl meat. Can't make up your mind? Ask the waiters for whatever's peaking that day. £42. 17 Market Lane, 00 61 3 9662 3655, flower-drum.com

Kappo Authentic, compact and fun, Kappo has chef Kentaro Usami behind the bar creating a series of small dishes from a daily-changing, seasonally sensitive list of ingredients such as Wagyu, sea urchin, mustard greens and yams. Upstairs is a Tokyo-style bar for a post-dinner *Lost in Translation* moment. Five courses, £42. Ground Floor, 1 Flinders Lane, 00 61 3 9639 9500, kappo.com.au

Kirk's Wine Bar Kirk's is a beacon of quality among Hardware Lane's busker-filled so-so. European bistro-inspired food runs from breakfast through to nightcap. Primo people-watching happens on the outdoor tables, perhaps over a plate of beef carpaccio and an Americano. Charcuterie is a good choice – it's all homemade. £24. 46 Hardware Lane, 00 61 3 9600 4550 kirkswinebar.com

MoVida This timber and terracotta tapas restaurant was an early laneway adopter, drawing a crowd for its small plates and excellent Spanish wine list. Don't miss the signature anchovy and smoked tomato sorbet crouton, spiced and chargrilled lamb or textbook churros. Small dishes, from £2. 1 Hosier Lane, 00 61 3 9663 3038 movida.com.au

Rosa's Canteen Rosa Mitchell showcases her seasonal, rustic Italian cooking in sleek, light-filled surrounds. Her Sicilian family recipes are a highlight – grab a *cannoli* – but there's good stuff from elsewhere in Italy too, like *agnolotti* stuffed with three cheeses. £28. Level 1, Cnr Little Bourke & Thomson St, 00 61 3 9602 5491, rosascanteen.com.au

Supernormal A modern Asian canteen with influences from Japan, Korea and China. Best seats are at the long kitchen bar watching chefs prepare raw sea bream with white soy and ginger, prawn and chicken dumplings with spiced vinegar, and lobster rolls that have a cult-like following. Go at lunchtime for good-value specials. £33. 180 Flinders Lane, 00 61 3 9650 8688 supernormal.net.au

Tonka Modern Indian food in clean-lined designer surrounds, dominated by a cloud-like white mesh sculpture hovering overhead. Chef/co-owner Adam D'Sylva mirrors the blended approach of his other laneway restaurant Coda, here pulling in influences from India, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Fish and poultry from the tandoor are a must. £38. 20 Duckboard Place, 00 61 3 9650 3155 tonkarestaurant.com.au

and it quickly becomes apparent that we're not in old-school Indian cooking territory any more.

'Adam's father is from India and his mother's Italian and he spent a lot of years cooking Southeast Asian food so all those influences tend to surface here in some form or another,' says Kate Bartholomew. 'We definitely wanted to do something with modern Indian food because there wasn't anything like it when we opened but we do it in a way that's very Australian – we respect the technique and flavours of Indian cooking but we don't necessarily feel bound by the traditions.'

'One of the things that we really concentrate on is using the best produce we can find, so when we get great local quails from our supplier we might cook them in the tandoor and serve them with pickled quince or we might take beautiful, locally made burrata and serve it with coriander relish and charred roti.'

The approach of respecting technique over tradition is common in Melbourne. At Flower Drum, a 30 year-old temple to meticulously cooked Cantonese food, there is mud crab in the dim sum and local lamb raised on saltbush (a native shrub with naturally salty leaves) used in spring rolls. Produce and provenance are an integral part of Melbourne food conversation. The city is ringed by open-air food markets with Australia's oldest and largest (in fact the Southern Hemisphere's largest), the Queen Victoria Market, sitting on the CBD's northern border. Easily accessible by tram, it's constantly packed with city workers shopping for dinner on their lunch breaks, older shoppers wheeling trolleys and students from nearby colleges grabbing a quick lunch of *borek* or grilled bratwurst shoved into a crunchy roll with mustard and relish.

The Queen Vic's grand marble and terrazzo deli hall is quite literally food heaven – offering everything from crocodile and kangaroo meat to great slabs of butter produced in nearby Gippsland and cheese, olives, preserved vegetables, hams and salamis both local and imported. Semi-open produce 'sheds' are stacked with an enormous range of locally grown Asian and European fruit and vegetables and the fishmongers hawk live mud crabs, Moreton Bay bugs (a crustacean from northern Australia) and locally caught rock lobsters. This access to great produce is as intrinsic to the Melbourne vernacular as the laneways.

Rosa Mitchell is co-owner and chef of two Melbourne laneway restaurants, Rosa's Canteen in the shadow of the Supreme Court dome in the legal precinct and Rosa's Kitchen, near Chinatown in the city's east. Her food reflects her Sicilian



Opposite, clockwise from top left: a good use for bare walls; Rosa's; its industrial interior; Tonka; persona in the laneways; Supernormal dish and waiter; Tonka; Rosa's

Top to bottom: Rosa's Canteen; barman at Brooks of Melbourne; Tonka cocktail



'Homemade pasta, perhaps spaghetti or casareccia, might be tossed with a fennel-fragrant pork ragu or with an earthy mix of artichokes, peas and salted ricotta'

background but what she cooks is also heavily influenced by what's in season on her farm and winery about an hour outside the city.

'We've got heaps of late tomatoes right now, really sweet and full of flavour, so we'll be using those and some lovely aubergine too – you'll be seeing some of those, probably with pasta but I'm also slow-braising some goat so I'll use them with that as well,' she says, explaining what's making an appearance on the menu today.

And that menu is a moveable feast, changing from day to day depending on what she's harvesting on the farm, what's available at the markets and even what country neighbours leave on her doorstep. 'I'll come out in the morning on my way into work and someone will have dropped off a box of heirloom pears from an old tree in their backyard, or wild mushrooms they have growing in a secret spot or perhaps some lemons. I learned from my mother to cook seasonally and so it's how I like to cook in my restaurants too. I love the challenge it brings.'

Rosa's Canteen is housed in a sleek new building – climbing up a flight of stairs you enter a light-filled room with sloping walls of louvered windows. At lunchtimes in particular, this space is filled with expensively suited lawyers and other well-heeled types. In contrast, the food is consciously, unapologetically rustic.

Homemade pasta, perhaps spaghetti or casareccia, might be tossed with a fennel-fragrant pork ragu or with an earthy mix of artichokes, peas and salted ricotta. For dessert, there might be (if you get in early enough) authentic cannoli dusted with crushed pistachios or a custard tart studded with pears, quince or berries that have come from the farm. Neither Rosa's Canteen nor Rosa's Kitchen has an espresso machine, choosing instead to make stovetop coffee, served black. It's a bold statement in a town where the coffee culture nudges the fetishistic.

It seems appropriate, given the depth of feeling people in Melbourne have for coffee, that one of the city's great cultural monuments is a slim, terrazzo-floored, neon-signed espresso bar on the corner of a laneway just down the hill from Victoria's parliament building. Pellegrini's opened in 1954, in time for the Melbourne Olympics, and while these days it's more a shrine to the city's espresso pioneers than a serious caffeine boutique, it retains a rakish retro charm.

Where to drink



Bar Americano In a lane off a lane, standing room only, Italian vibe, great cocktails, bottled americanos to take away. *20 Presgrave Place, 00 11 61 3 9939 1997, baramericano.com*

Bar Ampere Nighthawks huddle at this hidden back bar, which keeps late hours and has an extensive absinthe list and clever bar snacks. *16 Russell Place, 00 11 61 3 9663 7557, barampere.com*

EDV Dimly lit, hidden-door cocktail den with a members' club vibe and bar food that includes oysters, cheeses and charcuterie. *1 Malthouse Lane, 00 11 61 412 825 441, eaudevie.com.au/Melbourne*

Magic Mountain Saloon Excellent Thai food, two pages of cocktails and a sea of tap and bottled beer. All this and DJs too. *62 Little Collins Street, 00 11 61 3 9078 0078, magicmountainsaloon.com.au*

Romeo Lane Superbly crafted cocktails and sharp, classic bar snacks in a tiny gem of a tucked away room. *1A Crossley Street, 00 11 61 3 9639 8095, romeolane.com.au*





Top to bottom: waiting for the bus; Captains of Industry café; scooter stand. Opposite, clockwise from top left: the city's skyscraping skyline; a tight laneway; Fifties institution Pellegrini's; Movida; dining on the street; Brooks



One of Pellegrini's near neighbours is Traveller, a standing room only coffee joint, owned by Mark Dundon and Bridget Amor. Two of the major figures in the new-wave Melbourne coffee scene, they came into the trade at a time when the approach was old-school Italian.

'I really wanted to change what was happening because I felt that the product was a lot bigger and a lot more interesting than what I'd ever imagined,' says Mark. 'It felt boring to sit and listen to everyone else and what they were saying and not explore it myself.'

The pair have certainly explored with a coffee roasting facility, a stake in a coffee farm in Honduras, importing and sourcing their own beans and pioneering the siphon, pour over and cold drip techniques that are now commonplace across town. Their cafés include two laneway locations, Traveller and the slightly larger and constantly churning Brother Baba Budan. What's notable about these new coffee places that have completely colonised the city is that, unlike the bars and restaurants that tend to be more tribal with the kind of crowds they attract (suits this way, hipsters over there), the coffee crowds are less easy to categorise.

Spend some time in Brother Baba Budan with its communal table, ceiling full of hanging chairs, tiny bar and 15 seats and you can observe urbanite Melburnians from all walks of life – from office workers and couriers to students, journalists, artists and academics – cohabiting while expertly ordering seasonal espresso blends and single-origin batch brews.

Dumplings are another area that attracts this demographic cross-pollination. Melbourne's long history of Chinese immigration (starting in earnest during the 1850s gold rush) has meant that Chinese cooking is one of the food scene's integral components.

There are scores of traditional dumpling restaurants in and around Chinatown but Supernormal, a stylish timber and concrete canteen opposite the Adelphi Hotel on Flinders Lane, encapsulates the Melbourne laneway style of technique over tradition. Chef-owner Andrew McConnell spent five years cooking in Shanghai and Hong Kong and has travelled extensively in Japan. Supernormal reflects those influences filtered through a Melbourne sensibility.

'When I was living in China I became accustomed to the flavours and the way of eating there and after I came home, I realised that they'd become intrinsic to the way I like to eat,' he says. 'When you eat dumplings every day, it's not something you let go of easily.'

Supernormal's dumpling menu includes traditional pork and cabbage potstickers, steamed chicken and prawn dumplings and fried dumplings with less-traditional fillings like braised Wagyu beef shin. But it's not just about the dumplings. There's also Japanese-style raw hapuka and locally-caught bream, lobster rolls, grilled octopus spiced up with Korean chilli and slow-



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'A long history of immigration has made Chinese cooking an integral part of the food scene'





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Clockwise from top left: refreshment at Tonka; its service with a smile; chef’s choice; laneways have gone from back street to mainstream



cooked Sichuan spiced lamb. It’s food that takes its cues from many cuisines and countries, made with local ingredients and served in a beautifully designed space dominated by a bar. Dropped into the context of the unexpected twists and turns of Melbourne’s laneways, it reads like a reflection of the city.

‘I think the food works really well with the way Melburnians like to eat these days,’ says McConnell. ‘It’s a social habit where people might pop in for a snack and drink here and then head off to another laneway place to do the same there. You visit several places in a night, sampling different food. It’s just how we do it here now.’ □

Where to stay

Adelphi Hotel Recently refurbished and with a landmark rooftop pool cantilevered out over Flinders Lane, Adelphi is a boutique hotel with a slightly gritty laneway location. It’s also a haven for the sweet of tooth, with a dessert restaurant Om Nom filling the hotel foyer with wafts of sugary goodness. Doubles from £204. *187 Flinders Lane, 00 61 3 8080 8888, adelphi.com.au*

Hotel Lindrum With open fireplaces, a lounge, a boardroom and a billiard room on the ground level, Hotel Lindrum has something of the private club about it. But this former tea warehouse is very much the modern boutique hotel with spacious, well-equipped rooms and excellent service to match. Doubles from £114. *26 Flinders St, 00 61 3 9668 1111, hotellindrum.com.au*

Sheraton Melbourne This recently opened branch of the Sheraton chain couldn’t be better located for those wanting to chomp their way through Melbourne’s laneways. Sharply furnished rooms, good views of surrounding city lights and all within staggering distance of some of Melbourne’s best bars. Doubles from £114. *27 Little Collins Street, 00 61 3 9290 1000, sheratonmelbourne.com*

Sofitel Melbourne On Collins It’s not the hippest hotel in town but it’s one of the most comfortable and its central location, on levels 35 to 50 of Collins Place Tower, means excellent views from every room and easy access to the laneway maze. The concierges here are great for a hot food tip or two. Doubles from £147. *25 Collins Street, 00 61 3 9653 0000, sofitel-melbourne.com*