

## Icons of Acland



Source: Trove National Archive; Photographer: Brian Giesen

How did an unsurveyed dirt road first named Acland Street in 1842, transform into one of Melbourne's favourite cosmopolitan landmarks one hundred years later; and why does it still attract tourists from all over the world?

In 1942 Acland Street St Kilda, six kilometres from Melbourne's central business district, gained a reputation like other older Melbourne roads for its spectacular private mansions, many subdivided, to accommodate several tenants.

Also at this time, well-groomed wealthy US soldiers arrived in troop ships and 'invaded' Acland Street seeking good food, good wine, and a good time. Relationships between Australian women, girls too, as young as twelve years old, varied from frivolous flirtations to basic exchange for services rendered as well as affairs and marriages.

Amid the ambience of The Prince of Wales Hotel at one end of Acland Street, and an array of boutique shops at the other end, there were restaurants, music venues and the first G.C. Coles store, that embodied the latest ideas in chain store retailing, in-between.

Around the corner at 19 Robe Street, from 1947, The Bialystoker Centre, commemorating the Bialystok Ghetto, which confined 54,000 Jewish people during the Holocaust, became a refuge for Jewish residents.

Prime Minister Robert Menzies had already been in office since 1945, the war was over, and while the political atmosphere was certainly raw, the general mood on Acland Street was resplendent. No where else in Melbourne was Sunday trading allowed. Businesses began to boom.

The Europeans were devoted to prosperity in their new homeland that welcomed them; they would influence the cultural milieu of Acland Street and indeed Australia's economy in a profound way.

Sunday mornings outside Monarch Cakes and Scheherazade Restaurant Coffee Lounge, were the gathering places of mainly single Jewish men living in St Kilda's boarding houses or one-bedroom flats, the men who had lost whole families in the Holocaust.

Yiddish, Polish, Hungarian, Russian and English in an array of accents, were regularly heard while walking along Acland Street.

In cardigans, corduroys, long coats, woollen flat caps and narrow-rimmed trilby hats that hid silver hair, men from legal professions spilled out onto a more affluent, cosmopolitan street by the late 1950s. Their iconic presence remained throughout the 1960s, 1970s until the early 1980s.

Leaning against flashy cars; hands and arms would gesticulate wildly, giving momentum to explosive political debates at times. And there was the fear of inciting anti-Semitism.

Scheherazade Restaurant Café owner and Victorian Senior of the Year in 2015, Masha Zeleznikow together with her husband Avram, provided sanctuary for these men inside their cafe.

For exactly 50 years from 1958, the men were 'mothered' and served a home-cooked meal from 'Bubba's' menu of goulash, Russian cutlet and calves' liver; Italian cassata, gelati and tartufo; cappuccino, espresso and Vienna coffee, or 'Tasty Quick Snacks' that included roll-mops, yoghurt, frankfurts and potato salad.

Patrons would then file out at 1.00 pm for their regular 'Jewish parliament' as their gatherings are endearingly remembered.

Driving through Acland Street before the era of road closures, early on a Sunday morning, one could easily have missed the colourful parade of mouth-watering cakes and biscuits' displays behind pristine shop fronts that the all-male crowd masked.



Source: Judith Buckrich; Photographer: Rennie Ellis, Outside Monarch Cakes 1980s.

If you visited Acland Street on foot, Scheherazade is where you went to feast for lunch. But at Monarch Cakes, as it was known until 1996, is where your taste buds were dazzled, like a star struck audience after a Beethoven or Chopin concert.

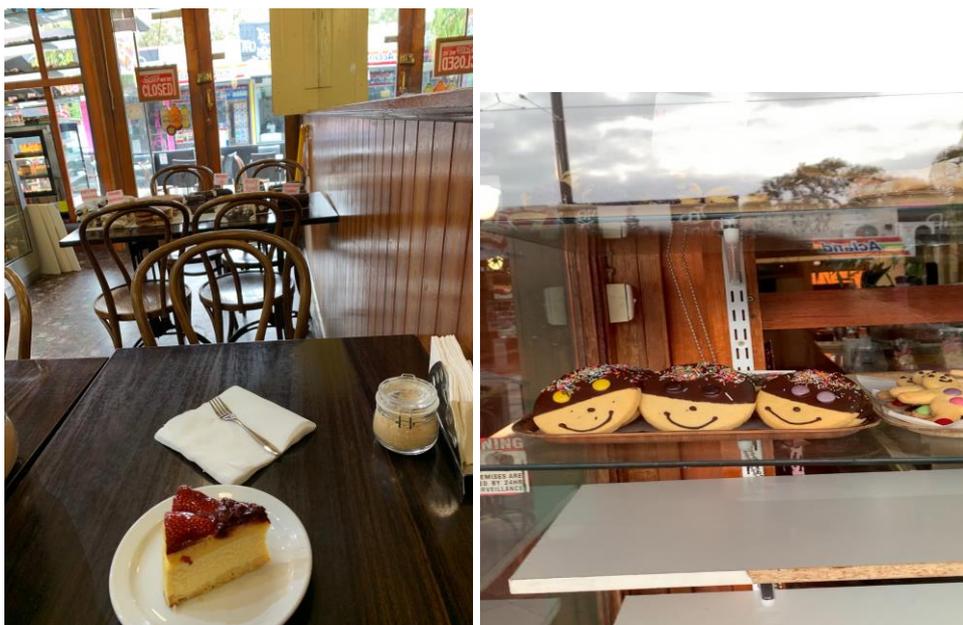
Chocolate kugelhupf or the traditional Polish baked cheesecake would become quintessential icons of Acland and their recipes would hold more royalties than the cake shop itself.



Welcome to Monarch Cake Shop. Photographer: Agnes Remy

For the Australian palate not accustomed to liquor in desserts, a simple chocolate biscuit with smiley faces could also be purchased and continues to be showcased at Acland Continental Cakes.

There were a few empty trays that extremely cold morning in August when I visited Acland Continental Cakes' shop. Simply too early for more than a very few smiley faces.



Acland Continental Cakes. Photographer: Agnes Remy

'Acland Street rents are still very high', says Mayor of Port Phillip Dick Gross 'and in recent years no other commercial real estate in Melbourne has been as high as Collins Street, Melbourne'.

Mark Talbot from Fitzroy Real Estate confirmed premises now fetch up to between \$900- \$1,000 per square metre a year. The annual rate for 132 Acland Street leased in October 2019 is \$57,000.

Monarch Cake Shop first opened by Pearl and Joseph Levine in 1934 set a precedent for other cake shops here. 'My wife used to love the plum cake and I loved the brandy snaps', says current proprietor Gideon Markham. 'That's why we bought the shop.'

The longest standing owner of a cake shop in Acland Street is not Mr Markham, who bought his business in 1996, but Leon Siapantas, whose family of pastry chefs spans four generations. Mr Siapantas is the sole proprietor of Le Bon at number 93 and is proud to be delivering a selection of 300 handmade desserts daily to his range of patrons.

Traders complain about the cost of customer parking and the multi storey commercial and residential complexes. Some say they fear Acland Street will lose its distinctive appeal.

But Gideon Markham a Polish Jewish immigrant, is adamant that Acland's famous cake shops are 'not an endangered species', 'We don't want eulogies here,' he says.

'The cake shop businesses are death defying,' adds Dick Gross.

That golden era of the St Kilda cake shop of which there are only a few superlative remnants, may have undergone a cultural handover, but the abundantly flavoured treats are as delicious and colourful today as the history of the street in which they are lovingly homed.

Gentrification dialogues on Port Phillip have replaced the Acland Street 'Knesset' and today councillors discuss Acland's future in far less ubiquitous style. Issues are around economic stagnation due to online shopping; road closures; parking spaces and infringement notices; massive rent rises; whether the trams should remain; and the fate of the Triangle site next to the Palais,' says Mr Gross.

There are a few recognisable lingering aromas, in the district historically renowned for Melbourne's best coffee, if you care just to imbibe them for a few minutes by sitting on one of the artistically chiselled mosaic benches. You may even hear sacred indigenous busking as the strip has been famous for live music.



Source: SLV; Photographer: Doug

Ground coffee beans, marzipan or almond paste, strawberry cheesecake and chai latte are some of the olfactory delights on a cold winter's morning.

That European metropolis of yesteryear is being replaced by Asian influences, there's no doubt, but is this not something to celebrate?

Mr Peter Ong leasee of Acland Continental Cakes immigrated to Australia in 1997 during the decimation of his country, Cambodia, by Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, is a pastry chef who knew little about the European history of Acland Street before we met.



Acland Continental Cakes. Photographer: Agnes Remy

Mr Ong, who has been the leasee of Acland Continental Cakes for seven years, hasn't changed the business model at his cake shop and his cakes are as exquisite to taste as decades ago.

'Australia is a multicultural country. It doesn't really matter who makes the cakes so long as they still follow the recipes correctly. And we do,' he says.

Staff at Mr Ong's and at Le Bon Cake Shop are all Asian. Another few languages to add to the eclectic mix of languages Acland Street is renowned for.



Inside Le Bon Cake Shop. Photographer: Agnes Remay



Heading in for a treat at Le Bon Cake Shop. Photographer: Agnes Remy

If you're really not phased by gentrification and you're happy to dine in, or you prefer outside to share your edible artwork with eclectic company, including inquisitive Sparrows, obviously there's still much to recommend Acland Street.

On any warm Sunday afternoon, when you're out for a frolic on your own, walking your dog, eager to meet friends and family, there are still three cake shops to choose from. Bring your picnic basket and fill it with a range of those most delectable cakes, biscuits or savoury pastries, to take with you to enjoy at St Kilda beach.



Source: Google Images, St Kilda Beach 2019

Romanticising a European culture is not merely the work of poets and painters. Along Acland Street St Kilda an Australian-Asian fusion pays vibrant homage to an earlier unique moment in Australia's European migration history.

Having the skill to adopt any foreign dish by embracing traditional techniques doesn't merely transform it into several variations to suit a range of appetites, but shines a brilliant multifarious light on the place and people that [allow for change](#).

The road much travelled.



Source: victorianplaces.com.au Acland Street St Kilda 1950s

The road still talked about.



Rooftop Party. Photographer: Agnes Remay