

Dining Out In Melbourne

Where do we go from pandemic lockdowns to a new normal with dining out in Melbourne? I think dining out will become dining outside, especially with the warm weather on its way. I remember when I lived in Germany for a time I was amazed that once summer came along Germans really came out of their winter hibernation and their seemingly reserved mien to enthusiastically dine and drink outside. The desire to dine outside was so strong that the inside of restaurants became completely empty and if there were no seats available outside then people would go on to the next place rather than sit inside. Visiting Paris one January when it was so cold that there were snow drifts in the parks and frozen fountains I was amazed to see all the outside seating at bistros still full of Parisians in overcoats enjoying a drink. Melbourne councils should be a bit forgiving and let restaurants use footpaths and maybe even allow the closing of some streets after 7 pm. It would be wonderful to let bicycles and foot traffic claim the streets instead of cars for a change. This take over by the people of local streets has sort of happened by default during lockdown in some neighborhoods. I know some restaurants on busy thoroughfares would miss out on this opportunity but perhaps those places would be eligible for some compensation provided their indoor dining arrangements met with COVID-19 restrictions. Pubs that base their business model on large crowds of punters with sport on screens for "atmosphere" may have to change. I've always lamented the lack of proper beer gardens in Australia: apart from the wonderful Belgium Beer Cafe that used to operate in Prahran, there are few if any that actually have a garden or even a single tree to sit under. Most are just dreary concrete spaces. St Kilda Road has really good set backs, something long gone with building developments, and some of these spaces would make lovely, treed beer gardens or outdoor dining spaces. Greening the city

with more street plantings is a great heat mitigation strategy by councils but there is scope for commercial property owners to be encouraged with reduced rates to include gardens with trees as part of their redesign. Many coffee shops have been ahead for some time with their take away coffee windows and concertina doors and windows that open out to the street seating. Modern housing and redesign of terraces have long been merging the indoor with the outdoor eating spaces, so perhaps we need that extended to more restaurants and cafes. Size is also an issue with restaurants, we have tended to go big for economies of scale as profit margins are impossibly tight. Perhaps a rethink is needed on the excessively high rents and restrictive council regulations. There should be a possibility for small local eateries that seat only a dozen patrons to actually work. After all tiny neighborhood izikaya, kaiseki and ramen shops are commonplace in Japan. The pandemic will cause many permanent closures but with every massive change in history people do adapt and pivot to create something new and enduring. I am hopeful.