The Dirty Dozen
Stories behind the foods that made Melbourne
Curated by Richard Cornish

13 March to 29 August 2025

City Gallery
Melbourne Town Hall

melbourne.vic.gov.au/city-gallery

CITY OF MELBOURNE

ISBN 978-1-74250-925-9

City Collection guided tours

Go behind the scenes on level 4 of Melbourne Town Hall to explore the Art and Heritage Collection store.

Book a free guided tour by scanning the QR code below.

Curator | Richard Cornish is an award-winning Melbourne-based food writer and presenter, known for his engaging commentary on food culture. He is a regular contributor to *The Age*'s 'Good Food' section and has authored *My Year Without Meat* and more than half a dozen cookbooks on Spanish and Mexican cuisine. A regular contributor to ABC Radio Melbourne, Richard has also co-created food history tours around Melbourne and Ballarat, celebrating the lost stories of our culinary heritage.

Acknowledgements

What a wonderful city we live in, where the City of Melbourne invests in a culinary cultural exhibition that tells the stories behind food. A city that celebrates its culture in this way is truly a city worth living in. Thank you, City of Melbourne, for this opportunity.

This exhibition was overseen by the expert team at the Art and Heritage Collection, City of Melbourne, led by Eddie Butler-Bowdon, with Amelia Dowling, Cressida Goddard and Savannah Smith. Artist Kenny Pittock brought the concept to life, recreating the foods from our past and present, transforming them into a concise and expressive work of his own. Designer Stephen Banham then transformed the gallery space with his insight and vision.

Thanks also to editor Hilary Ericksen for polishing the words within the exhibition, and to Professor Andrew J. May, Professor of Australian History at Melbourne University, for his inspiration. A special thanks to Max Allen for his continued support.

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The Dirty Dozen explores food in Melbourne, delving into the sometimes-dark, often-uplifting stories behind street food, produce markets and the dining habits of the 19th-century elite.

Curated by award-winning food writer Richard Cornish, the exhibition features stunning ceramic replicas of street food by local artist Kenny Pittock, alongside historical menus, imagery and objects from the City of Melbourne collection.

BILL OF FARE

SOUPS:

Mock Turtle. | Julienne.

REMOVES:

Turkeys.

Complimentary

MARITIME BANQUET,

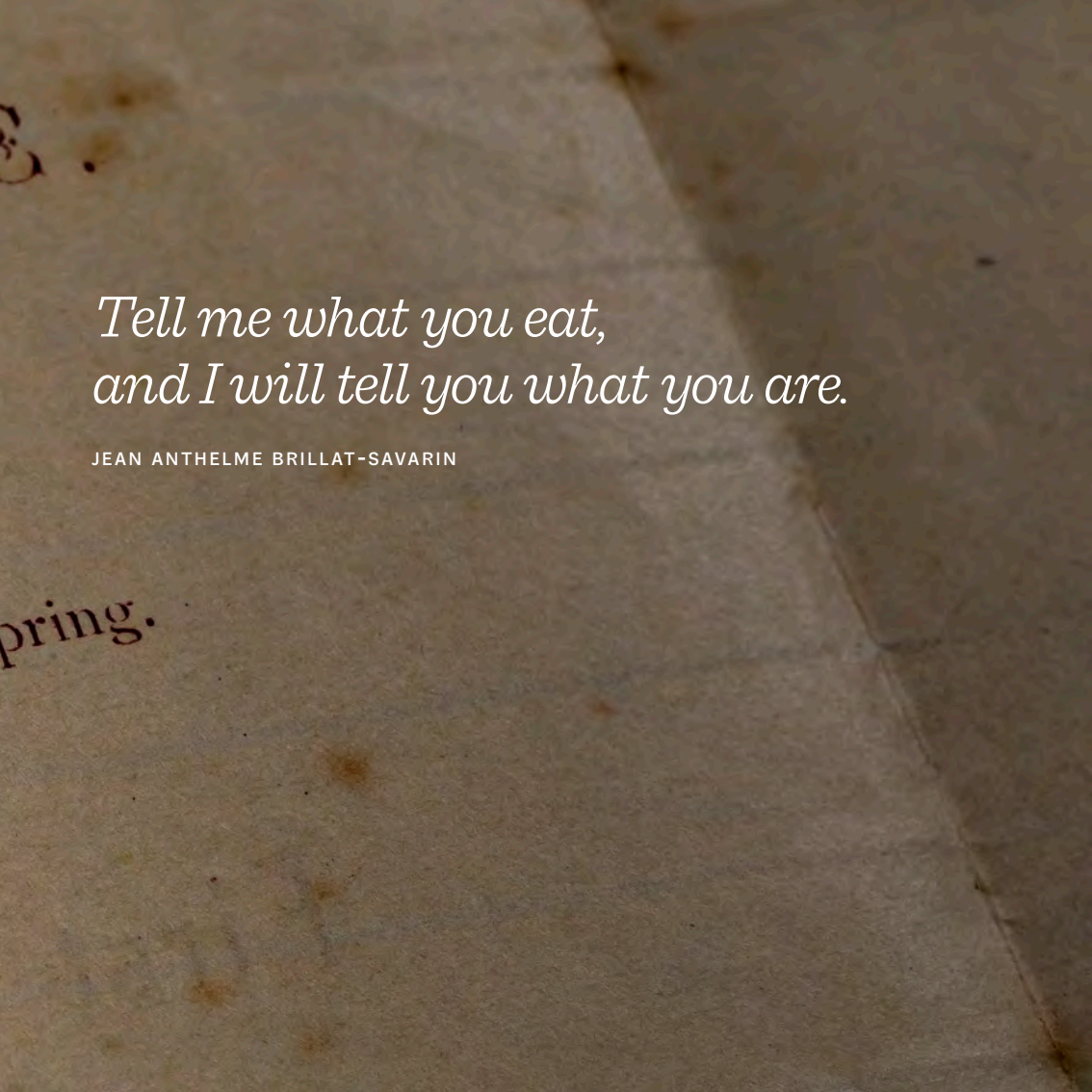
TO

GENERAL LATHAM,

United States Consul,

AT

COHN'S HOTEL, SANDRIDGE



Tell me what you eat,
and I will tell you what you are.

JEAN ANTHELME BRILLAT-SAVARIN

In Naarm/Melbourne, we stand in the shadow of our forebears. We're surrounded by grand buildings, monuments to monarchs and vast parks established on wealth generated during Victoria's colonial past. Missing from this grand picture are the stories of the everyday – the stuff that doesn't get put on a pedestal, the things that historically people ate and drank.

By its nature, food is ephemeral. Without preservation it decomposes quickly and, after a short time, leaves no trace of its very existence. This disappearance is particularly true of the foods of the hoi polloi. In contrast, the banquets of Melbourne's elite were often documented, preserved through elaborately designed menus, many now held in archives.

The Dirty Dozen is not only a deep dive into the archive and the store of the City of Melbourne collection to trace this history, but it also presents a series of specially commissioned ceramic artworks by Melbourne-based artist Kenny Pittock. Kenny has reached back into past, both distant and recent, and skilfully reimagined Melbourne's street foods in clay. Once this exhibition is packed away, these exceptional, artful replicas will remain in the collection for future generations to consider.

Balancing the culinary fare of the ruling class with that of the great unwashed, *The Dirty Dozen* tells the tales behind some of the foods on which our city was built, and it salutes Melbourne's magnificent temples of bounty – our markets, most of which have long been demolished.

The exhibition brings together the ceramic replicas, historical photographs and archived menus to paint a picture of the food and drink that has sated the people since the city's first days – and before, in the case of Angasi oysters – and has evolved into today's celebrated food culture.

Native oysters

Our native Angasi oysters once covered huge swathes of the shallow sea floor of Port Phillip Bay, from Port Melbourne in the north to Sorrento in the south. About the size of the palm of your hand, the shell contained a fat morsel of delicious flesh.

Angasi oysters were integral to the diet of the Bunurong people living on the coast. Bunurong women would spend several days a week gathering native oysters just offshore. Upon invasion of Port Phillip, settlers dredged the Angasi oysters from the bay and then sold them in shacks and street stalls. After the gold rush in the 1850s, opulent halls with marble bars were built. French champagne, chilled on ice that was imported from North America, flowed freely, consumed with oysters by the bushel.

By the 1880s, Melbourne's insatiable demand for native oysters had destroyed the reefs, not only in Port Phillip Bay but also Western Port Bay and Gippsland Lakes. Today, conservationists are working to restore the reefs in Port Phillip Bay.

Kenny Pittock
Native Oysters 2025
acrylic and glaze on ceramic
6 × 21 × 20 cm
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
Image courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne, and Olsen Gallery, Sydney
Photography: Emmy Clifton

Saveloys

Saveloy carts, with their belching smoke, shrill steam whistles and saveloy-scented steam filling the air, were a common sight on the streets of Melbourne from the 1860s. They attracted as much derision from polite society as they did patronage from late-night revellers.

The saveloy cart epitomised the tension between those wanting to create a stable, law-abiding society and the laissez-faire nature of the gold-rich colony, where anything was acceptable so long as it made money. The saveloys themselves incited moral outrage, with reports of household pets and marsupials being minced, spiced and stuffed into sausage casings. Some of Victoria's first food-related laws were passed to ensure saveloy production was safe.

Today's 'Footy Frank' is the modern equivalent of the saveloy.

Kenny Pittock
Saveloy, 2024
acrylic on ceramic
8 × 10 × 25 cm
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
Image courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne, and Olsen Gallery, Sydney
Photography: Emmy Clifton

Ice-cream

One of the first fixtures on Melbourne's streets was the ice-cream vendor. Refrigeration technology was developed in Geelong in the early 1850s, and by the 1870s, ice-cream vendors were selling ices in glass goblets from covered carts.

A good number of the early vendors were Italian, and production was an artisan affair, with fresh, unpasteurised milk products churned in people's homes. The very real risk of milk-borne diseases, such as brucellosis and tuberculosis, sparked public outrage in the early 20th century, leading to the banning of artisan production. This resulted in the rise of big factories such as Snowdrop and Peter's, the latter of which is still a household name.

Kenny Pittock
Ice-cream, 2024
acrylic on ceramic
14 × 12 × 7 cm
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
Image courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne, and Olsen Gallery, Sydney
Photography: Emmy Clifton

Meat pie

Many street vendors were poor or ailing, yet selling hot pies on the streets of Melbourne paved a road to riches for Catalan brothers Joseph and Francis Parer. When they arrived in Melbourne in the mid-1850s, they were broke. They found lodgings in a tin shed near the site of St Paul's Cathedral and teamed up with a French chef to make and sell pies. Within the decade they had made enough money to open the Spanish Restaurant in Elizabeth Street, arguably Melbourne's first Spanish restaurant.

The Parer family eventually owned more than 30 pubs in Melbourne. The family also owned 16 hectares of land at Box Hill, where Francis grew produce for the hotels and was among Melbourne's first to grow tomatoes.

Kenny Pittock
Meat Pie, 2024
acrylic on ceramic
7 × 13 × 13 cm
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
Image courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne, and Olsen Gallery, Sydney
Photography: Emmy Clifton

Fruit

At a time when Melbourne was one of the wealthiest cities on the planet, the streets of Melbourne in the latter 1800s were home to the poor, the old and the infirm. Often, their only source of income was the fruits and vegetables they could sell on the streets. Many were Chinese and most were poorly educated, and well-heeled Melburnians typically looked down on them.

From the 1860s, street hawking was controlled by Melbourne Town Council and was influenced by local shopkeepers. The sale of apples and pears grown in Doncaster, bananas grown in the northern colonies and, later, dried fruit that came from Mildura was the only thing saving hundreds of hawkers from complete destitution.

Kenny Pittock
Fruit, 2025
acrylic on ceramic
7 × 22 × 22 cm
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
Image courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne, and Olsen Gallery, Sydney
Photography: Emmy Clifton

Coffee

Melbourne has always been obsessed with coffee. During the 1850s, vendors would push coffee carts around the streets, pouring brewed coffee from great kettles with copper spouts. With vending operating late into the night, coffee carts perhaps inevitably became associated with lewd and lascivious nocturnal behaviour. In response, Melbourne Town Council restricted the hours that coffee vendors could trade.

Melburnians' attitude to coffee shifted towards the end of the 19th century, with the temperance movement promoting coffee as a stimulating but non-intoxicating drink. Mainly in the 1880s, majestic multi-storey coffee palaces were built, including the Grand Coffee Palace, now the Windsor Hotel.

After WWII, immigration saw Italian migrants set up cafés, bringing with them modern Italian coffee-making technology, such as espresso machines. Again, coffee came under social scrutiny. This time, fears were raised about young women drinking coffee with well-dressed Italian men.

Kenny Pittock
Coffee, 2024
acrylic on ceramic
10 × 14 × 14 cm
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
Image courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne, and Olsen Gallery, Sydney
Photography: Emmy Clifton

Fish and chips

Fried-fish shops depended on access to a cheap and reliable seafood supply. Fishers lived on the banks of the Yarra at Fishermans Bend, with some still fishing commercially from Port Melbourne as recently as 10 years ago.

The shops cooked local fish species such as barracouta, a delicious but notoriously bony fish that is sweet and succulent, especially when deep-fried in batter. Fast barracouta boats were specially designed to bring in the catch from Port Phillip Bay to the city markets as quickly as possible. As 'couta numbers diminished, fishers targeted less bony species such as shark, which was sold as flake.

Kenny Pittock
Fish and Chips, 2024
acrylic on ceramic
10 × 38 × 40 cm
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
Image courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne, and Olsen Gallery, Sydney
Photography: Emmy Clifton

Dim sim

In 1942, Melbourne Chinese chef and businessman William Chen Wing Young saw that a number of elderly Chinese men who had come to Australia to work during the late 1800s were destitute. 'They were like the leftovers from the goldfield days. They didn't make it back home to China and were too old for hard work', his daughter TV chef Elizabeth Chong has said.

William noticed how popular dim sum was becoming and thought that if he could mass produce the little dumplings, the old men could sell them from food trucks to earn a living. He changed the name to dim sim. His son 'accidentally' sold some to a Greek friend with a fish and chip shop; ever since, dim sims have become an Australian fast-food icon.

Kenny Pittock
Steamed and Fried Dimmies, 2024
acrylic on ceramic
7 × 16 × 20 cm
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
Image courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne, and Olsen Gallery, Sydney
Photography: Emmy Clifton

Hamburger

While meat rissoles were nothing new in 1930, trapping them between two halves of a bun, along with lettuce, onions, tomato and ketchup, was. Melbourne's first recorded dalliance with the burger came about in Williamstown during the mid-1930s: Mrs Hayward started flipping them in her Ferguson Street venue opposite the cinema. The addition of a slice of beetroot sometime in the 1940s localised the burger.

Kenny Pittock
Hamburger with the Lot, 2024
acrylic on ceramic
10 × 21 × 27 cm
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
Image courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne, and Olsen Gallery, Sydney
Photography: Emmy Clifton

Chiko Roll

In 1950, outdoor caterer Frank McEnroe saw a competitor selling fried rolls filled with chop suey outside the Richmond Cricket Ground. He developed the idea, making them a robust street food.

Despite the fact they had no chicken – instead filled with filled with cabbage, carrot, celery, onion, green beans, barley and four per cent beef – he called them Chiko Rolls.

He sold the first one at the Wagga Wagga Agricultural Show in 1951. By the 1960s, he was manufacturing them in a factory in Essendon.

Kenny Pittock
Chiko Roll, 2024
acrylic on ceramic
6 × 8 × 22 cm
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
Image courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne, and Olsen Gallery, Sydney
Photography: Emmy Clifton

Souvlaki

A late-night souvlaki in Lonsdale Street is a rite of passage for many Melburnians. Grilled lamb wrapped in pita (flatbread) and served with garlic yoghurt sauce has probably been eaten in Melbourne since the first Greek diaspora arrived during the gold rush.

The rise of 'souva' joints in the inner suburbs during the 1950s followed a second wave of post-WWII migrants from Greece.

Technically, what we eat here in Melbourne is a 'gyros', which refers to the upright rotisserie on which layers of lamb rotate as they're grilled, while a souvlaki refers to skewered meat.

Kenny Pittock
Souvlaki, 2024
acrylic on ceramic
9 × 12 × 35 cm
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
Image courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne, and Olsen Gallery, Sydney
Photography: Emmy Clifton

HSP

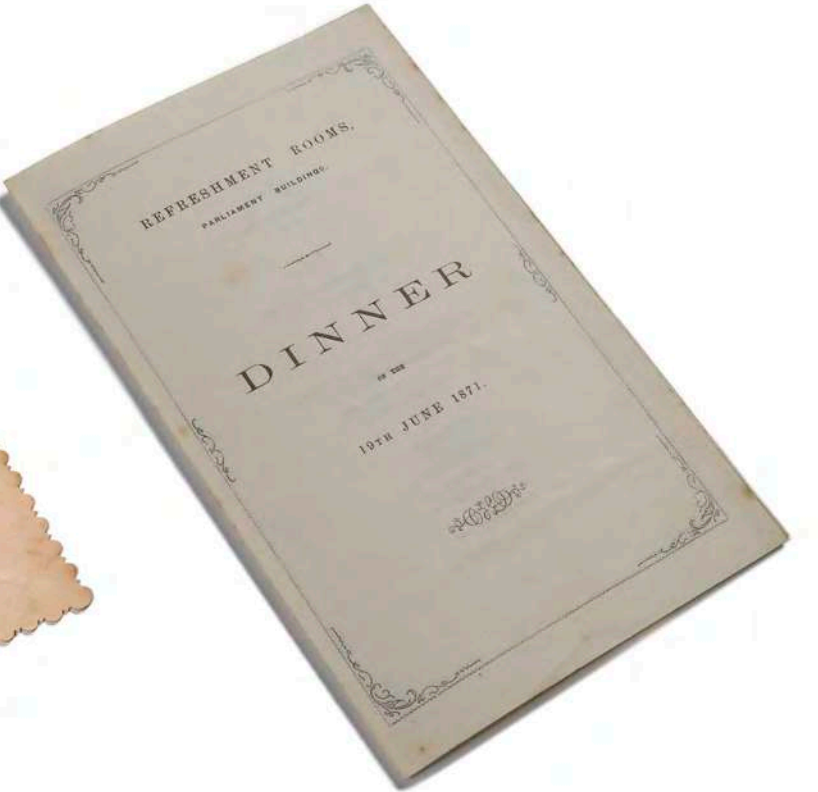
Our nation's politics can play out in our food, especially when it has its roots elsewhere. In the early 2000s, at a time of increased tensions and Islamophobia, the halal snack pack (HSP) – a dish of shaved kebab meat, chips and sauces or gravy – was embraced by non-Muslim Australians, an especially welcome pick-me-up for many in the early hours during a night out. It may perhaps have also been a silent but very public way of showing solidarity for an increasingly vilified section of society.

In July 2016, as the dust settled from the federal election, Iranian-born then Labor senator Sam Dastyari extended a rather cheeky olive branch to a freshly minted One Nation senator, Pauline Hanson: he invited her to share an HSP. Hanson responded: 'It's not happening, not interested in halal, thank you'.

Kenny Pittock
HSP, 2024
acrylic on ceramic
12 × 24 × 34 cm
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
Image courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne, and Olsen Gallery, Sydney
Photography: Emmy Clifton


Complimentary Banquet
TO
LACHLAN MACKINNON, Esq.
By the Staffs of
"THE ARGUS"
AND
"THE AUSTRALASIAN."
Scott's Hotel, Melbourne
MARCH 29, 1867.


First Annual Dinner
OF THE
BUILDERS' & CONTRACTORS' ASSOCIATION,
AT THE
Odd Fellows' Hall, Swanston Street, Melbourne,
28TH JULY, 1870.


REFRESHMENT ROOMS,
PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS.
DINNER
ON THE
19TH JUNE 1871.

Preceding page spread

Left
Fairfax
Menu for a banquet for Lachlan MacKinnon 1867
paper, ink
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

Centre
Maker unknown
Menu for the first annual dinner of the Builders' & Contractors Association, 1870
paper, ink
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

Right
Maker unknown
Menu for a dinner in the refreshment rooms of the parliament buildings, 1871
paper, ink
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

Public displays of wealth, power and pageantry are always crucial to a city's sense of self-importance. In Melbourne's early days, large celebratory dinners were a way of also displaying both fealty and largesse. It's fortunate that several beautiful and ornately designed menus have survived, for they could easily have been discarded after the event. Today's diners would consider these grand, multi-course affairs over the top, but a close look at the menus in the City of Melbourne collection gives insights into local food systems of the past.

At settlement, the creeks and rivers ran with Murray cod and perch, and the bay was replete with oysters and 'schnapper'. Rich wetlands once fringed the coast where the township was founded; these were filled with black swans, herons, brolgas and magpie geese – the latter two now extinct in Melbourne. Plovers may be a protected species today, but in 1872 they were considered fair game, especially for the farewell dinner for Reverend George Vincent Barry. Roast plover was served along with wild duck and teal.

The pomp associated with these dinners was often great. The menu for the 1869 Toorak government house dinner was written entirely in French, as were most menus at that time. One dish, *anguilles à l'anglaise*, or eel cooked in a herb sauce, was prepared with local short-finned eel. The Wurundjeri Woiwurrung people call this rich food source luk and they have been catching them in long woven-fibre eel traps for many thousands of years. Today, the traps are celebrated architecturally in Melbourne's curvaceous Webb Bridge over the Yarra and in Aunty Kim Wandin's eight-metre-long bronze eel trap, *Luk bagurrk gunga* (2023), outside the NGV.

The prevalence of squab and pigeon on menus points to the fact that many wealthy residents had the resources to produce their own food – a small orchard for growing fruit, a plot for vegetables, a nanny goat for milk, a chook yard for eggs and meat, and often a dovecote too. The latter was a series of wooden boxes built on a sheltered wall of an outbuilding for pigeons to nest and breed; the young, called squabs, were taken for the kitchen. In the 19th century, chickens lived longer and did a lot more scratching and flapping than they do today, thanks to our industrialised poultry system. This meant that the meat, while a lot more flavourful, was also quite dry. A dish called 'larded chicken' was served at a parliament dinner of 1871; strips of pork fat were threaded through the chicken flesh to make the bird more succulent and tender.

Most grand meals of the period were washed down with wine imported from France – right when wines from Geelong and the Yarra Valley were exported to Europe and winning awards. The menus proudly boast burgundy from Chambertin and claret from Vergniaud, in Côtes du Rhône, while snobbery saw local drops listed merely as 'colonial wines'. French bubbles were also incredibly popular, with bottles served from some of the most famous wineries, such as Krug, Pommery, Moët, Roederer, Veuve Clicquot and Heidsieck.

Opposite
Left
William H. Cooper
Corporation Markets
c. 1890
photographic paper
mounted on cardboard
City of Melbourne Art
and Heritage Collection

Right
Photographer unknown
Western Market, c. 1900
photographic paper
City of Melbourne Art
and Heritage Collection

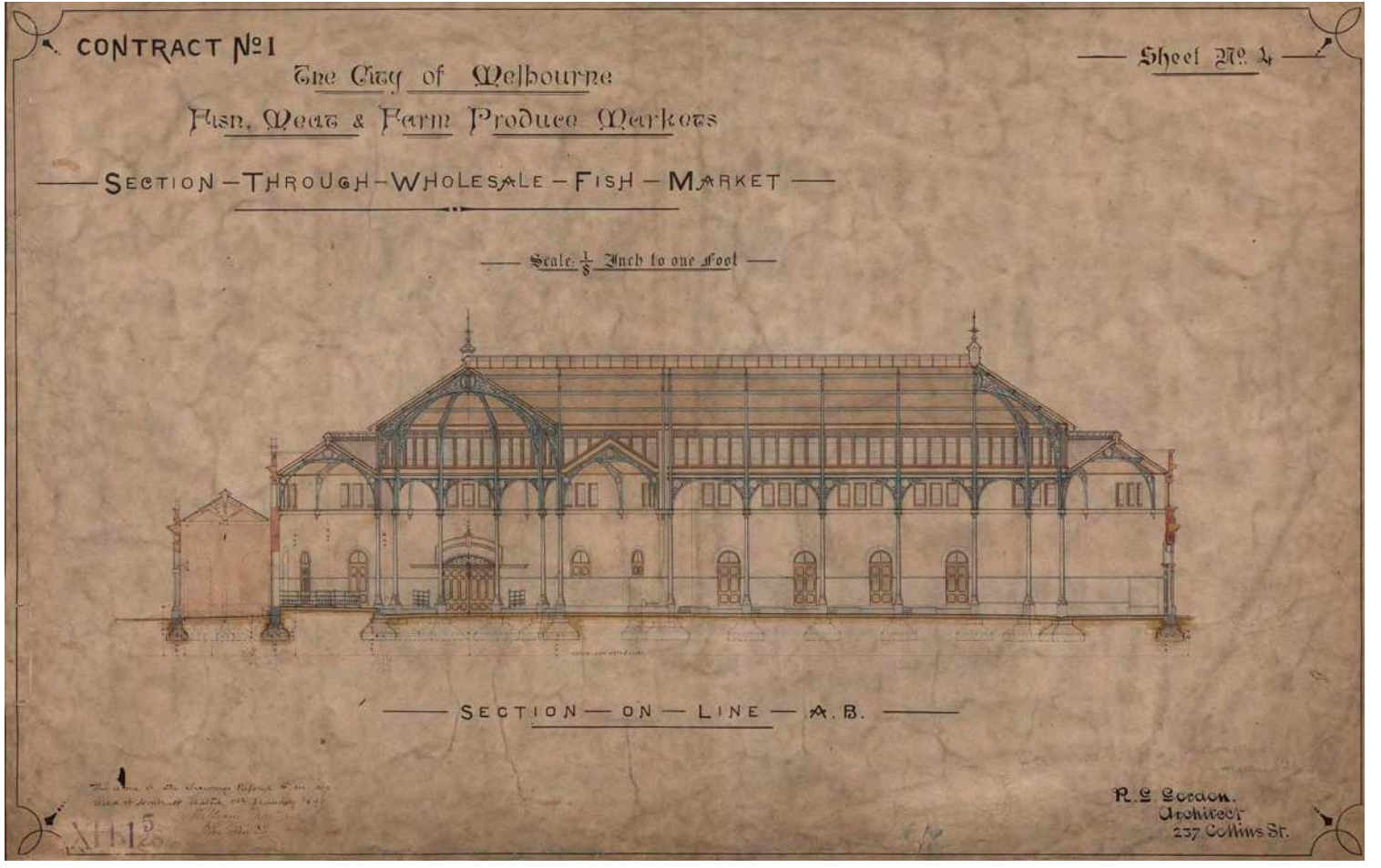
In the first years of Melbourne, food grocers and store holders had a reputation for inflating prices. So as early as 1840, markets were advocated as a means to increase competition, regulate prices and, it was hoped, decrease the cost of goods.

Some impromptu markets sprung up in Melbourne's streets, to which farmers would cart in produce from their farms, orchards and market gardens on land that is now wealthy suburbia. The first official market was established in 1841 on a block of land behind Customs House, bounded by William Street, Collins Street, Flinders Lane and what has become known as Market Street. Called the Western Market, it was initially a fenced piece of open ground, with traders selling from booths and wagons. It developed a bad reputation, better known for its pickpockets and drunks than for its fresh fruit and vegetables. A new organisation was formed to regulate the market and the others that would follow. It was called the Melbourne Town Council.

In 1847, the Western Market was joined by the Eastern Market, which stood on the corner of Bourke and Exhibition Streets. When the sun went down, the surrounding district became a venue for street traders and late-night revellers. The Western Market was remodelled in 1856, after the peak of gold rush, in a grand Victorian style, with a two-storey facade, arched windows and elaborate finials.

A decade later, Melbourne's love of seafood was catered for by a fish market, built on the south-western corner of Swanston and Flinders Streets, where Flinders Street Station (1905) stands today. This pavilion-style building – with its 16-metre-high ceilings, 14 slate slabs and fresh running water – was replaced by a Gothic Revival 'palace' farther west on Flinders Street. With turrets and copper-topped spires, it was a magnificent building to which boats would deliver fresh barracouta, crayfish, salmon, whiting and flathead to its rear via the Yarra. It stood from 1892 until 1959, when it was pulled down to make way for the Flinders Street overpass (now demolished), in what was even then regarded as cultural vandalism. In fact, almost all Melbourne's retail markets met the same, or a similar, fate. The Western Market was demolished by Whelan the Wrecker in 1961, and the Eastern Market was torn down a year later to build the Southern Cross Hotel, which also no longer stands.

The only produce market that exists today within the footprint of the City of Melbourne is the Queen Victoria Market. Established in 1878, it remains a thriving, bustling temple to food, with an open-air fruit and vegetable area, wet meat and seafood market stalls, and an Art Deco-style Dairy Hall, built in 1927, with its original marble counters and signage. It is a place of personalities and characters, where vendors still call out specials at the top of their lungs, and where wit, charm and innuendo are all part of the transaction. It is this tradition of energy, of vibrant humanity, where sometimes, I feel, you can get a glimpse of what it was like buying food and groceries on the street in the past.



Opposite

Robert George Gordon
The City of Melbourne
Fish, Meat and Farm Produce
Markets – contact No 1,
sheet No 4, 1890
ink on paper
City of Melbourne Art
and Heritage Collection

Following page spread

Left

Jeff Carter
R.H. Gibson Butcher
Meat Market Stall
Queen Victoria Markets, 1956
photographic paper
City of Melbourne Art
and Heritage Collection
© Image courtesy of the
Jeff Carter Archive

Right

D.V. O'Meara
Fruit barrow used at
the Eastern Market, n.d.
wood, metal, paint
City of Melbourne Art
and Heritage Collection

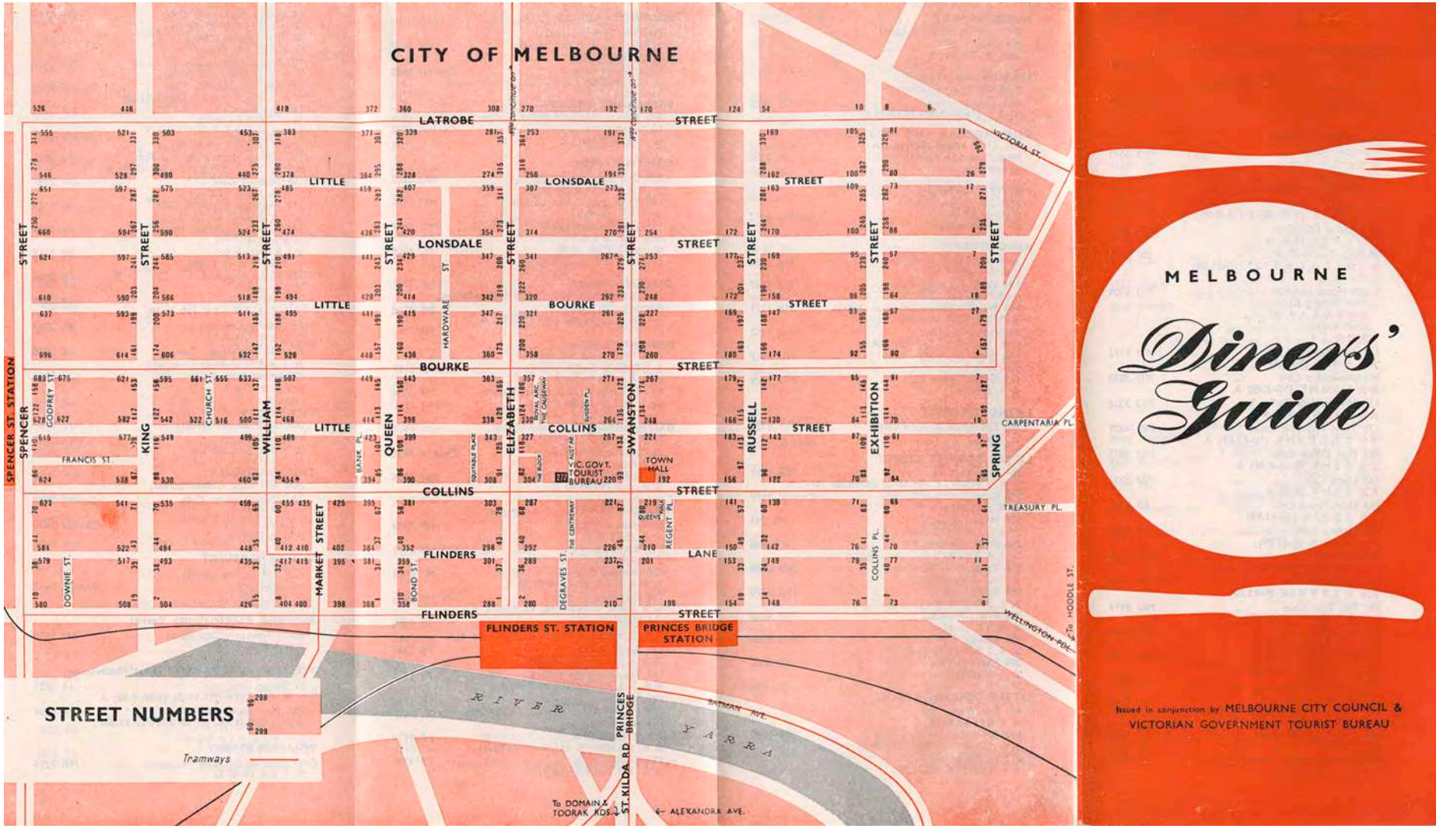
Opposite
Jeff Carter
Early Edition
[*Queen Victoria Markets*]
1956
photographic paper
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
© Image courtesy of the Jeff Carter Archive

Top
Jeff Carter
Chinese Market Gardener
[*Queen Victoria Markets*]
1956
photographic paper
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
© Image courtesy of the Jeff Carter Archive

Bottom
Jeff Carter
Russell's Takeaway Food Van
[*Queen Victoria Markets*]
1956
photographic paper
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
© Image courtesy of the Jeff Carter Archive

Left
Photographer unknown
Fruit stalls at the Queen Victoria Market, n.d.
photographic paper
13 × 18 cm
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

Right
Gregory Allen
After Hours – Victoria Market
1987
watercolour on paper
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
Image courtesy of Gregory Allen



Left

Melbourne City Council & Victorian Government Tourist Bureau
Melbourne Diners' Guide produced for the 1956 Olympic Games
paper, ink
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

Following page spread

Left

City of Melbourne
Image showing a footpath obstruction (Cooley's Pies sign), c. 1959
acetate negative
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

Centre

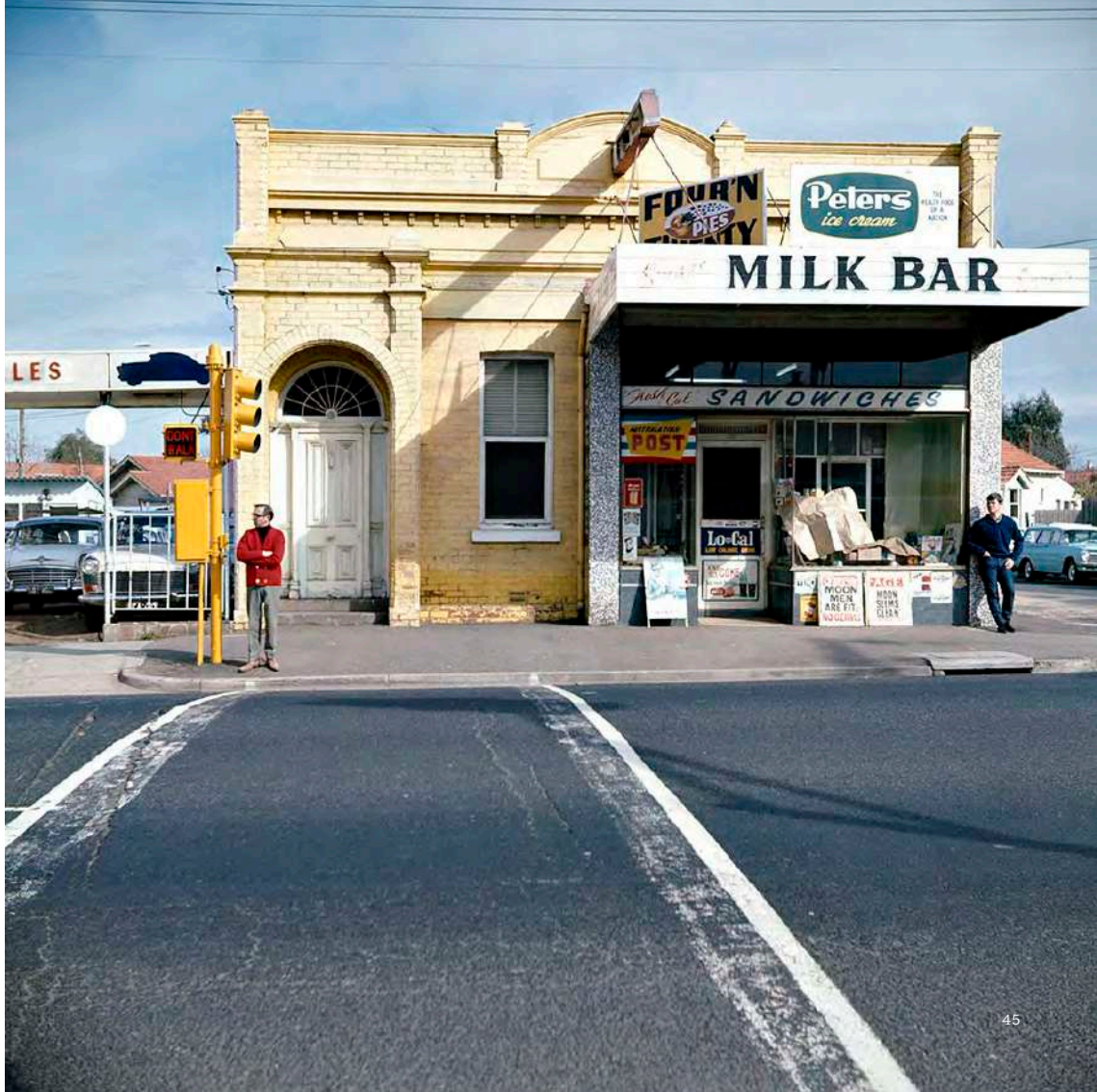
City of Melbourne
Image showing a footpath obstruction (Four'N Twenty Pies sign) c. 1959
acetate negative
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

Right

Angus O'Callaghan
Milk Bar, c. 1986–71,
archival pigment print
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
Image courtesy of Angus O'Callaghan


FOUR'N
PIES
TWENTY
N1074


Cooley's
PIES
N 1075


FOUR'N
PIES
Peters
ice cream
MILK BAR
SANDWICHES
POST
Lo-fat

Opposite
Maker unknown
Menu for a dinner for Sir James Fergusson, 1869
paper, ink
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

Above
Photographer unknown
Day lunch for Councillor Donald Osborne in the Yarra Room, Melbourne Town Hall, c. 1976
photographic paper
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

Following page
Sears Studios
The Citizens Ball given by Lord Mayor William Brunton at the Royal Exhibition Building, 1926
photographic paper
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection