

A KOOGLHOUPF ADVENTURE IN THE MONARCH CAKE SHOP

By Irene Ritchie

The Monarch Cake Shop is in many ways a reflection of Melbourne's immigration story. Located in Acland St. it is regarded as a St. Kilda icon, drawing people from all over the world with its ambience, its variety of continental cakes and excellent coffee. It is particularly famous for its chocolate kooglhoupf and Polish style cheesecake.

Sitting in the shop indulging in a slice of kooglhoupf and a cappuccino, I interviewed the current owner, Gideon Markham, to find out more about the fascinating history of the cakes, the shop and the people who have worked here in a long unbroken chain still using original recipes.

Gideon tells me that the origins of the shop go back to 1931, when Pearl Levine, a Polish Jewish émigré established it as the Monaco High Class Cake Shop in the suburb of Carlton. In 1934 she sold it to the Jimmy Watson family. She then moved it to its present location in St. Kilda, naming the new cake shop the Monarch as it was the closest name to Monaco she could think of.

Over the years a number of families ran the establishment, using the same original recipes passed on from one family to the next.

For close to seventy years the Monarch was a take-away shop until Gideon [an architect by profession] and his wife Shirley [a travel consultant] together with their daughter Nikki and son Daniel introduced coffee and tea, making it a sit-down as well as a take-away establishment.

Gideon was born in Poland shortly before the outbreak of World War 2 and came to Australia in 1963 to study architecture, married Shirley, a local girl whom he met at University and he worked as an architect-builder until his retirement when he got involved with the Monarch in 1996. Over the years this involvement has become not just a job, but a passion for Gideon and his family.

Going back to the history of the shop, Gideon tells me about how in the post war years up to the 90's, St. Kilda and Acland St. in particular, were centres for European migrants of different ethnic origins who frequented European style restaurants and cake shops. This area however, began changing in the late 90's to become younger and trendier and a big draw card for the interstate and overseas visitors. It now attracts a lot of people of Asian origin who have acquired a taste for continental cakes especially of the chocolate variety.

Since the introduction of coffee the Monarch cake shop has become an attraction not only for the quality of its products, but also for its old world style combined with a certain 'quirkiness'; a mixture which appeals to young and old - Aussies as well as overseas visitors. Gideon believes that one of the reasons for the Monarch's wide appeal is that it's like an enclave in the vastly changing make-up of St. Kilda and Acland St. These changes are attributed to economic forces which have brought in franchises and chain stores in place of local fruit shops, groceries, newsagents and other individually owned small businesses that found it difficult to cope with sharp rental increases.

'In the nearly nineteen years of running the business,' says Gideon, 'we had to adapt to the changing demographic and economic climate by introducing sit-in facilities with coffee and also by discontinuing half of the original one hundred or so varieties of cakes while keeping the most popular ones such as the chocolate kooglhoupf, cheese cake, plum cake, custards, cherry, apple and lemon tarts and introducing some less traditional products like gluten, milk or egg free ones.'

I asked Gideon what he looks for in an employee and he lists reliability, professionalism, endurance, a willingness to work out of hours and of course honesty. He tells me that apart from generally having two pastry chefs on a regular basis, the business employs casual labour- mainly students, musicians or artists who use their part time work to help them financially to be able to complete their studies or travel abroad.

Such a famous and traditional cake shop was bound to attract well known personalities - for example Peter Phelps, Bryan Brown, Ben Mendelsohn, Eric Bana, Magda Szubanski, Rachel Griffiths, Paul Young, Kate Blanchett, Kathie Freeman, Graeme Blundell, Ricky Ponting Nick Riewoldt, Dermot Brereton, Besart Berisha, Nicky Winmar, Michael Danby and many more.

I asked him about any amazing stories in the life of the Monarch Cake Shop and he said the best moment was when Max Klinger [Jamie Farrah] of 'Mash' fame came in.

'I was here when he walked in and we struck up a conversation. He is one of the most recognizable people on the planet.'

The Monarch is also heavily involved in promoting the 'Saints Footy Club' and sponsoring one of the team's new players every year.

Last year, as recognition of the Monarch's eighty years in Acland St. the City of Port Phillip named the lane next to the shop Monarch Lane. A special Council dispensation and vote were required to hold the event in the Lane and many celebrities and dignitaries attended to observe the name plate being unveiled.

As for the future of the Monarch Cake Shop, Gideon assures me that it is not an endangered species provided that the local council and other authorities recognize the importance of icons such as the Monarch by offering as much support and assistance as is possible. As I looked at my kooglhoupf with affection I envisaged all the tradition, history and business acumen that had gone into that cake and I felt a great sense of appreciation for Acland St. for although it has changed from a European enclave to a more international one it still has its special appeal.

My thanks to Gideon Markham for the interview.