



## Café Ism

187 Wilson Street

Newtown

(02) 9519 1166

Hours: Mon–Fri 7AM–4PM, Sat–Sun 8:30AM–4PM (Kitchen closes at 3PM)

Train: Newtown

Strolling like stray cats around the back streets of Newtown one night with a friend, we discovered a hidden gem: Hollis Park, a strikingly handsome neighborhood square, reminiscent of a village green, flanked by equally fine-looking terrace houses.

Beckoning to us at the bottom end of the park slope was a café—Café Ism—in a corner store bulging with heritage charm. It took me hours of research to identify the name of that park and relocate the café. I still find something odd about the name, which is not nearly as memorable as the café itself.

Daniel, the owner of Café Ism, felt he had very strong *raison* to drive his café ideology home on this little corner of Sydney suburbia. “I was really horrified when I first got to Sydney and went to cafés. After just three minutes you are expected to pay. No way—that is not at all my idea of a café—a café is a living space.”

Following on the French tradition, a café is also something intensely public where you connect with people in non-virtual way.

“In France, if you want a mechanic, a plumber, an electrician, you don’t go through the white pages, you go to your local café.”

Daniel is delighted to have succeeded in bringing *un morceau*, a piece, of France to the peaceful side streets of Newtown.

“In the morning, people sit out on the pavement in the sun and have coffee, there are children all over the place, it’s like a family home.

“Sure, it is very local... and *oui, bien sûr*, we also get the engineer, the plumber, and the doctor.”

As if to illustrate his point perfectly, Daniel has just walked over from his nearby home and is standing outside the alcove window engaged in colorful conversation with several customers—gesticulating and grinning, his hands and feet ducking everywhere. One of the regulars—the café’s former owner—is seated at a diminutive outdoor table in his navy blue King G work overalls.

The vision is so very Newtown—the Inner West neighborhood is all about the clash of the vintage and the new, of laid-back Aussie and inspired new world.

Sydney’s former home of bohemia has slowly morphed into an epicenter of urban creativity and cool. A new generation of restaurants, clothing shops, and



beauty salons have popped up between the picturesque 19th-century churches, bank buildings, and English-style village greens.

On nearby King Street, anything goes. An edgy atmosphere pervades the mile-long stretch, lined with fetish clubs, vintage clothing stores, Thai eateries, Turkish pide, and tattoo parlors.

A couple of blocks away, the feel of yesteryear breezes through old buildings and eucalyptus trees along Wilson Street. Café Ism fits in perfectly here—a picturesque slice of French life framed in an historic Australian setting.

The 1888 building is a marvel of Gothic Victorian architecture, with a dramatic modernist touch: its soft grey brick façade peaks with an arched gable and decorative moldings, a black wraparound metal awning with a spider web interior is suspended over the sidewalk.

Inside the old parlor, hand-painted Alsace porcelain—a keepsake from Daniel's grandmother—black-and-white photos and vintage French posters of art salons and Café Malt deck the walls. The café is clearly a part of Daniel's life that he relishes—but it is just a part. The rest of the day is reserved for his family and some personal *joie de vivre*.





The modernized pavilion is home to one of Sydney's culinary icons, the Bather's Pavilion Restaurant, whose owner and executive chef, Montreal-born Serge Dansereau established Le Kiosk as a casual eatery. The Kiosk might seem just little bait alongside the ultra-glam pavilion, but for scenic immersion it is unsurpassed.

You cannot get closer to the water without getting wet. In fact some customers are doing just that—dangling their feet over the jetty to cool down. No one bats an eyelash.



## *The Source Espresso Bar*

6/914 Military Road (entrance on Raglan Street)  
 Mosman  
 (02) 9969 1368  
 Hours: Mon–Sat 6:30AM–4:30PM,  
 Sun 6AM–4PM  
 Bus: 245 or 247  
[www.thesourceespresso.com](http://www.thesourceespresso.com)

As I sit in The Source having a particularly strong macchiato, the micro-roaster café's name suddenly impresses me as a powerful coffee hit and ideological message all in one.

The starting point is a double shot of espresso combined with a couple of mouthfuls of milk. Beyond that, the real source is probably a small coffee farm in Ethiopia, the "birthplace of coffee" according to café owner, Russell Beard.

"Coffee is an organic product. A farmer picked, processed, and dried it and then it was shipped—all we did is roast it. We really wanted to draw the attention to that and say, 'There's more to it than your little latte in your cup.'"

Europe's great cafés were historically thinking people's places. At The Source the dominant ideology is the coffee itself. Once his customers' minds are fueled on

espresso, Russell Beard wants to get them thinking more about the whole production process, in a responsible, coffee-conscientious way.

“We still provide a place where people can come to relax and a nice place to have breakfast, but we will also give people some information. People love a story—the more info you give people, the more they want.”

The sharing, caring, forthright philosophy even flows through the design of The Source: the efficiently cohesive space with a communal table, coffee roaster, service counter, and bench seats opens onto a leafy side street of Mosman. The full-frontal roller windows bring the café inside-out and vice versa to create a great sense of place and minimalist luminosity. Staff in striking black and red logo t-shirts, artisan panini, and fuss-free, earthy furnishings complement The Source’s fresh approach to coffee, as a business and a product.

“The idea with a small roaster is that it allows us to roast each variety individually. We are on the micro, micro level—we sell just here in the shop and on-line. We try and purchase the best possible coffee we can buy.

“The focus is only on seasonal coffee. When it’s finished it is finished, we are not going to allow the coffee to become baggy or old. Sometimes we only buy very small lots—one to two bags or ten at the most. We don’t ever put an expiration date on coffee, we put a roasting date, which always puts a pressure on us to make sure we are roasting beans regularly—about every four days—to be consumed within two or three weeks.”

The overtures of coffee responsibility at The Source are geared not only toward the well-being of the world, but toward customer pleasure, which go hand in hand, as with many environmental and hedonistic concerns.

“As a coffee retailer, we help tailor the purchase to suit your style of drinking and advise you on the roast,” says Russell, who is proud of the manner in which The Source has made waves in the neighborhood, all the way down to Balmoral Beach.

“Swarms of people come here and meet their friends; loads of them come off



the beach, which is a real compliment since there are four or five places for coffee down there, but not good coffee like this.”

Russell talks a lot about benchmarks of coffee-making in Australia. He has been in the coffee business since he dropped out of University—“coffee is all I have ever done.”

With his beard, sparkling eyes, and blunt manner, he has something of the wild coffee colonial boy about him. Referring to a landmark Sydney café, which got the ball rolling toward faultless espresso a decade ago, he says it is no longer a benchmark.

“The key to their success has been the preparation. In early 2000, it was rare to find a café that could produce latte art with such consistent quality, now it is much closer to the norm.”

Likewise, he says the days of “fanatical obsession with the quality of the double

espresso” are over. “That was groundbreaking at the time, now it is just a medium—the preparation—we are all over it as baristas.

“What I think we will see in Sydney in the next 10 years is coffee going in this direction” (he uses his car key, Blackberry, and pen to help illustrate his case), “toward a lot more specialty coffeeshouses.

“I even think the relationship between you and the beverage will improve with this greater choice. It doesn’t have to be coffee with attitude. You should just give people the best possible coffee available.”

I have just one gripe about Russell’s discourse, and that is his negation of Italy’s claim to fame as espresso land, the true home of espresso coffee culture. Somehow he has been led to believe that few of the 130,000 cafés in Italy are serving up the best possible coffee available—from the 70 million espressos served every day.

“I don’t get the feel from what I have heard that things are at the cutting edge in Italy—it’s behind the times. There is just no fanatical approach to the beverage there,” he adds.

The slightly naïve claim, from someone who admittedly has never stepped foot in Italy, is even more ironic given the number of references to Italy inside his café: vintage posters of La Marzocco Automatica machines and a Marzocco mobile 1950s café parked before the Florence Duomo.

Coffee culture in Australia, as it is today, was born among Italian immigrants. To think that 10 years of espresso-making can equate with a centuries-old culture is, again, along the line of green beans.

Russell travels frequently to the source to purchase his beans personally. I catch up with him days before he leaves for Costa Rica.

“I traveled to Ethiopia earlier in the year. I get excited on the unique nuance inherent in each estate coffee there. Coffee is such a diverse product. Costa Rica is interesting because they have all these little mills—each farmer has his little mill—

