

The sweet smell of success

Australia's longest continually-running milk bar lives on

Story MERCEDES MAGUIRE

Every night before he locks up the Bells Milk Bar in Broken Hill, owner Matt Spresser calls out “goodnight Bells” just in case the shop’s long-gone owners are listening. He’s not superstitious, but there has long been talk of ghosts at Bells – which is the longest continually-running milk bar in Australia – with odd occurrences like items being moved or lights mysteriously turning on or off.

If anything, the nightly farewell is more a sign of respect to the past owners who have made the milk bar an institution in Broken Hill and Australia with people travelling far and wide for a classic green lime spider or vanilla malt milkshake.

Matt and his wife Chelsea stumbled upon Bells last year when they were in Broken Hill looking for a laundromat during the Mundi Mundi Bash music festival. “Stepping inside for the first time was really like stepping back in time,” Matt says of the milk bar’s mid-century facade and retro 1950s interior decor. “When we saw that Bells was for sale my mind just started racing with all of the possibilities.

“Bells is a Broken Hill landmark and the opportunity to breathe new life into such an iconic part of Australian history really excited me. I love the idea of taking this amazing history that everyone in Broken Hill seems to have a connection with and bringing it back to life.”

The last time Bells had a major makeover was in 1956, so you will still find the classic glass and Formica counter, retro milkshake makers and old-school dancing fruit murals on the wall, some of which were uncovered in a minor renovation during Covid, and which have been placed behind glass to protect them.

But the Spressers aren’t just about



Bells Milk Bar started as a confectionery in 1892 and was renovated in the 1950s; Matt Spresser serves up a malt milkshake; the original F Fenton Confectioner & Co storefront; Minnie and Les Bell Sr owned Bells Milk Bar in the 1920s to 1940s.

renovating and modernising the joint, in fact they are conscious that any changes must be sympathetic and in keeping with the milk bar’s unique history.

Bells on Patton St, Broken Hill, started as a small store called F. Fenton Confectioner in 1892, named after the owner Frederick Fenton who was also a cordial maker. He took on an apprentice called John Joseph Longman and in 1903 Minnie Pearl Davis also joined the business as an apprentice cordial maker. By 1908

Longman was running the store for Fenton and he eventually acquired the business.

Minnie and Longman married and had three children but Longman was killed in France in 1918 fighting in World War I. Minnie went on to run the store by herself and around this time, it became known as Pearly Longman’s. In March 1923, Minnie married Les Bell, a toolmaker on the Broken Hill South Mine and they had a son, Les Jr. They renamed the shop Pearly Bell’s and Minnie continued to run the shop while her husband toiled in the mines.

Matt says there’s a popular story told about Minnie standing out on the street before closing to make sure there were no more customers as she didn’t want anyone to miss out on their special Bells drink.

The attraction of Pearly Bell’s was the cordial and milkshake syrups that were

made on site in small, handmade batches passed down in old recipes that had been developed by Fenton.

The store had its first major renovation in 1938 and it is believed that around this time it was renamed Bells Milk Bar.

Les Jr and his wife Mavis took Bells into a new era during the 1950s with a major renovation that has left it much as it is today. Les also took his mum’s old syrup recipes, which had been handed down from the late 19th century, and modernised them adding new ingredients. And it’s these syrup recipes that are still handmade on site today, with an inventory of 58 flavours.

“Tracey, who makes the syrups, is convinced it’s Mavis turning the lights on and off, just letting us know she’s here and checking in with us,” Matt says.

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PAST AND FUTURE

The Bells Museum

Adjoining Bells Milk Bar is a small museum in what was once Les and Mavis Bell’s home. The space has been styled in 1950s decor and made to look like the couple have just popped out. There’s a living room featuring a classic box TV set that runs a short film about the history of Bells and mid-century furniture that you are welcome to sit on to enjoy your milkshake. There’s a 1950s kitchen complete with classic retro milkshake makers and you’ll find historic photos on the walls of past owners and signage. Entry to the museum is free.



A small museum next to the milk bar was once Les and Mavis Bell’s home and is styled with 1950s decor.

A modern twist

While Matt and Chelsea Spresser are conscious any changes they make to Bells Milk Bar are sympathetic to its unique history, they are keen to bring in new elements to take it into the next era. The famous syrups are now available online so they can be enjoyed offsite as well, and they have just introduced a range of 10 chocolate bars with flavours inspired by their famous milkshakes, like raspberry, peppermint and Turkish delight, and also available online. They are bringing hot food back with classic hot dogs and loaded fries soon to be added to the menu.