BUSINESS

At the corner of Loss & Renewal

One iconic street tells a thousand pandemic stories

BY JASON MARKOSKI • For retailers and restaurateurs across Canada, the pandemic meant all sorts of things at once—survival, adjustment, cutbacks, reinvention, rushed e-commerce, unhealthiness levels of anxiety. Everything, it seems, except good sales.

To conduct a post-check, Maclean’s visited a normally bustling block of Whyte Avenue in Edmonton—one hit by both COVID-19 and the partial collapse of Alberta’s oil sector. A half-year into the twin crises, independent businesses are hanging on better than chains, and some had fared more resilient than others. Many enterprises are struggling. A few are managing to thrive. Nearly all are reliant on government support programs, and must rely on the federal wage subsidy that’s been extended into fall. The present? The traditional customer still puts up a struggle about mandatory masks which for staff can be anxiety-inducing as the business situation itself. The future? Who knows.

As the pandemic hit, When Pigs Fly was forced to close, and one of manager Tara Chapman’s first acts was to cut every spring product order. That left the reusable gift shop without its popular stock of garden gloves and bird feeders it once sold in May. Without the tourists, the store’s traditional clientele and local customers were left without their usual options for leisure and gifts. With Christmas around the corner, the store’s collection of cheerful and seasonal cards still sells well. But the sign customers to use a card before losing the cards. So do face masks, made by Cheekydog in the store’s backroom. She’s seen about 1,000.

The Ollie Quinn eyeglass boutique wasn’t quite one year old when the U.K.-based chain temporarily closed its Edmonton locations. While most other locations reopened in time for summer, the Edmonton store did not.

After transactions at The Wishlist Gifts, a clerk often tells customers, “Thank you for supporting small business.” Aside from wall art (people are redecorating) and Lampsy (they’re attracting air purifiers), shortened in-store sales at Gayle Martin’s 29-year-old shop are up. But she’s proud not to dodge in-person commerce, at the belief in online sales and Amazon are killing local storefronts. “Unless people get out of the online shopping,” she says. “There’s not going to be much retail left.”

Shades of Grey Tattoo no longer allows customers to watch the needle-and-ink process—primarily for public health reasons, but also because it’s a distraction for the artists. Walk-in business is banned, so the three resident tattooists work by appointment only. Owner Shane Turgeon comes in at home between appointments, and his tattooing time, he says.

Young Edmontonians, tired in part to CERB, still have money to spend. From another’s well-curated stock of vintage clothing and old-school sneakers. “We’ve had a fantastic summer,” almost on par with 2019, says Keaton Challifour, the 23-year-old store owner. Efforts to boost its Instagram following hoped online sales, he says, but buying hundreds of masks for customers and staff is among many new expenses.

If you order online from Jorge’s Burritos, Perogy Wonder, Bally Sandwiches or Canadian’s Ink, you will come out hot through the back door of Ghost Kitchens. At least 10 different delivery-only restaurant names are attached to the short-order specialists at this address, opened last year by a fast-growing national chain of character-driven takeout places. Thanks to delivery apps, sales from this kitchen have roughly tripled, said Ross McWilliam, the company’s area developer. “We’ve had to add cooks during the pandemic. People can dine in, too, and pick from a food-court worth of menu items—open until 3 a.m. daily, but the late-night walk-in crowd has disappeared.

Shade’s margarita on Whyte brought some normalcy this summer. The extended patio at 27-year-old Jutara Bar & Bistro opened soon after restaurants were allowed to do so in May. With QR codes on each table so servers and customers didn’t have to handle menus. A public health guideline restricting drink pitchers was eventually relaxed, and the Mexican eatery installed floating water fountains between tables. But one block away, in July, another of the same ownership group is long-running bars closed.

Yiannis Taverna caters to an older and more conservative crowd than most restaurants on Whyte. In September, the Greek restaurant had booked one Christmas party reservation; by then, it’s normally booked solid for the week’s Friday and Saturday. A surge in delivery and takeout have helped a bit, the basement lounge has stayed closed, serving as storage for Yiannis’ takeout containers.

ECONOMY
Gravityscape, the flagship store in a trendy food court, is doing okay with sandwiches and big-brand sneakers, Italian labels, though, don't show up on Zoom calls, and fewer people are wearing out any shoes. Sales are down by about 40%, offset slightly by an increase in the volume of work, says a manager there. Owner Louis Dirks is fretting over how much to buy for spring, dreaming in a mess of paperwork for the wage subsidy and other new COVID-19 demands: “Everything has taken so much more energy. I've never worked so hard and I've been in business for 35 years.”

Customers must knock before entering the narrow Blackwood Mycock, which allows four people at a time. But one insider, a shop owner, says he's most concerned about people who are not wearing masks, and that business is down 60%.

Despite being tuned into this alley, artisanal ice cream shop Made by Marcus drew up to 150 customers a day. The owner, a man with a beard and glasses, says he's open to the public and has been forced to close, with sales down by 50%. He helps that the store owns its building: “That’s the only reason we’re surviving,” he says. “We have the flexibility.”

Malt and Mortar opened in a redeveloped heritage-style building in 2016. The second venture on the same block for the group that owns the Balas, an Asian eatery, is a new “total solution” that includes table reservations and a side street location. Dresser offerings for men and women are moving slowly, but upscale sneakers and comfort wear are strong. Sales have surged for the last few weeks, but made up ground by running the Edmonton Oilers’ short-lived playoff drive, on TV screens, the pub has had to shorten its hours: 10 p.m. until 6 a.m.

The only reason Grass will continue to operate is that it moved into the main drag from a side street location. Dresser offerings for men and women are moving slowly, but upscale sneakers and comfort wear are strong. Sales have surged for the last few weeks, but made up ground by running the Edmonton Oilers’ short-lived playoff drive, on TV screens, the pub has had to shorten its hours: 10 p.m. until 6 a.m.

It took a few tries, but owner Margaret Metcalfe finally figured out how best to arrange her wares. He went through the rooms—through the used books, past the Eastern drums and coins, through the vintage clothing and then past the quirky 20th-century antiques and typewriters to the cashier. Her store relies in part on browsers—“the so-called brags,” she says. Even with limited hours and sales, she’s not thinking enough to pay herself. Old-school habit, early on Metcalfe took photos of vintage wares, posting them to social media, and selling them over the phone.

Jeans and casual clothing, along with gutter shoes, have been in demand, says a manager. She says she’s already been booked for the spring. A local artist came up with a Rainbow Road, a colouring page for a staged art exhibit, a local artist came up with a Rainbow Road, a colouring page for a staged art exhibit.

Over 17 years, Jupiter has survived. A shop competition and the rolling of local catering stores, and was still holding on well enough through the pandemic to be advertised for new stuff. Before the crisis, the store had diversified into another door for music, and other city. Last year, it had opened the City Town. It now offers next door for those in need of munchies. Now, the store is closed to the public and is used to handle shipments for Jupiter’s online store.

To offer more distancing for visitors to the shop’s busiest pedestrian block, the business association got the city to take out a lane of traffic along most of this block, in favour of larger tables and benches. This removed a handful of parking spots, but more shoppers and diners arrive by foot than by car, says association director Charlie Manon. ▶