

BUSINESS

# At the corner of Loss & Renewal

One iconic street tells a thousand pandemic stories

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

To conduct a pulse check, *Maclean's* visited a normally bustling block of Whyte Avenue in Edmonton—a city hit both by COVID-19 and the partial collapse of Alberta's oil sector. A half-year into the twin crises, independ-

ent businesses are hanging on better than chains, and some had feared more disaster than there is. Many enterprises are struggling. A few are managing to thrive. Nearly all are reliant on government support programs, most notably the federal wage subsidy that's been extended to next summer. The present? The occasional customer still puts up a stink about mandatory masks, which for staff can be as anxiety-inducing as the business situation itself. The future? Who knows.



This summer, in the middle of everything, the owner of this 111-year-old building applied

to rezone and demolish next fall to make way for an eight-storey apartment tower, with ground-level retail, called **The Baron**. That factored into Ollie Quinn's decision to vacate the site, but the developer hopes to keep the old gift and cigar shops in the new edifice.

Jewellery designer and importer Sabrina Siponen opened her first physical store last August; when it came time to renew **Saraswati Designs'** lease in July, she extended only until February. After that, she may leave Whyte, and sell only online and at trade shows (when they come back). On a decent day now, five people come into her store. It's open Thursday to Sunday, noon to 5 p.m.—hours that she can juggle with her childcare needs.

A set of jointly managed eyelash and laser hair removal studios (the latter cleverly called **Bush Whacked**) left this space to set up shop 12 blocks south in July. They'd planned to leave before the pandemic for a place with better parking and lower rent.

**Metterra Hotel's** room occupancy is normally 85 per cent during a summer capped by the nearby Edmonton International Fringe Festival. It sounds disastrous that the hotel was only 30 per cent full in the Summer of COVID, but that's about three times better than hotels downtown or in the south end, general manager Joel Hollingsworth says. He credits his hotel's "Rediscover Whyte" marketing campaign aimed at out-of-town Albertans. But to cope with COVID, Metterra roughly halved its staff (and got the rest on wage subsidy), suspended its nightly wine-and-cheese reception and positioned a tissue box in the elevator so guests don't have to touch the buttons.

**Shades of Grey Tattoo** no longer allows customers' friends 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 an hour before opening every day to deep clean all the store's surfaces; his tranquil time, he says.

Young Edmontonians, thanks in part to CERB, still have money to spend on **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 Chalifoux, the 23-year-old store owner. Efforts to boost its Instagram following helped online sales, he says, but buying hundreds of masks for customers and staff is among many new expenses.



As the pandemic hit, **When Pigs Fly** was forced to close, and one of manager Tara Chekowski's first acts was to cancel every spring product order. That left the venerable gift shop without its popular stock of garden gnomes and birdhouses when it reopened in May. With virtually no tourists this year, the store's Canadiana stock idled on the shelves. Reduced hours and fewer browsers shrank sales to about 35 per cent of normal levels; Chekowski's hoping for a better Christmas. The store's collection of cheeky and bawdy cards still sell well. (A sign urges customers to use sanitizer before touching the cards.) So do face masks, made by Chekowski in the store's backroom. She's sewn about 1,000.

Even with a mask covering your nose, the cigar and pipe-tobacco smell hits you inside **Burlington Tobacconist on Whyte**. Only two customers are permitted inside the shop at once, and only one inside the humid, with an employee. You can't touch the pipes or cigars, but may remove your mask briefly to get a better whiff of a product. Traffic at the store is down, but customers are buying more on average and, to owner Chris Hansen's surprise, sales have improved over last year. "I'm almost embarrassed to admit we're up," he says. He chalks it up to people spending more time at home; they're smoking more, it seems, just as liquor stores have found they're drinking more.

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

After transactions at **The Wish List Gifts**, a clerk often tells customers, "Thank you for supporting small business." Aside from wall art (people are redecorating) and Lampes Berger (they're attractive air purifiers), in-store sales at Gayle Martin's 28-year-old shop are low. But she's proud not to dabble in e-commerce, as she believes online sales and Amazon are killing local storefronts. "Unless people get off the online shopping," she says, "there's not going to be much retail left."

If you order online from Jorge's Burritos, Perogy Wonder, Bully Sandwiches or Canadian Jerk, odds are your food comes out hot through the back door of **Ghost Kitchens**. At least 19 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 chameleonic takeout joints. Thanks to delivery apps, sales from this kitchen have roughly tripled, said Rishi Mittal, the company's area developer; they've had to add cooks during the pandemic. People can dine in, too, and pick from a food court's worth of menus—it's open until 3 a.m. daily, but the late-night walk-in crowd has disappeared.

Sidewalk margaritas on Whyte brought some normalcy this summer. The extended patio at 27-year-old **Julio's Barrio** opened as soon as restaurants were allowed to do so in May, with QR codes on each table so servers and diners didn't have to handle menus. A public health guideline restricting drink pitchers was eventually relaxed, and the Mexican eatery installed Plexiglas barriers between tables. But one block away, in July, another of the same ownership group's long-running bars closed.

**Yiannis Taverna** caters to an older and more conservative crowd than most restaurants on the pub-laden block. Since reopening in May, with far fewer tables thanks to distancing rules, owner Tammy Anast hasn't seen nearly half of her regulars. But "it hasn't been as bad as I thought it would be in March," she says. Owning the building helps. But by mid-September the Greek restaurant had booked one Christmas party reservation; by then, it's normally booked solid for the season's Fridays and Saturdays. A surge in delivery and takeout have helped a bit; the basement lounge has stayed closed, serving as storage for Yiannis' tables and takeout containers.

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**Gravitypope**, the flagship store in a trend-conscious footwear chain, is doing okay with sandals and big-brand sneakers. Italian loafers, though, don't show up on Zoom calls, and fewer people are wearing out any shoes. Sales are down by about half, offset slightly by an e-commerce surge. Owner Louise Dirks is fretting over how much to buy for spring, drowning in a mess of paperwork for the wage subsidy and other new COVID-age demands: "Everything has taken so much more energy. I've never worked so hard and I've been in business for 36 years."

Customers must knock before entering the narrow **Blackbyrd Myoozik**, which allows four people at a time. But once inside, shoppers enjoy customized help. The pandemic, says owner Arthur Fafard, has accelerated a trend that's long plagued physical music stores: they're increasingly reliant on hardcore buyers of vinyl.

This space ceased being a Ten Thousand Villages after the fair-traded goods chain collapsed in January. In a March meeting via Zoom, the local non-profit society rebranded the store **Village Goods**. It had barely secured its website URL before everything closed, but quickly launched its e-store. The acting manager greets customers as they enter to ensure they're masked and cleansed with sanitizer. Curbside delivery has become a popular and likely permanent offering, says manager Roberta Taylor.

They've halved the store's opening hours, but staff costs are already low, as the store is mostly run by volunteers. With sales down by nearly 50 per cent, it helps that the non-profit owns its building. "That's the only reason we're surviving," Taylor says. "We have the flexibility."

Despite being tucked into this alley, artisanal ice cream shop **Made by Marcus** drew epic lineups after it opened in June 2019. Long lineups also defined its second summer, in part because—mmm—takeout roasted strawberry buttermilk, but also because staff allow only three parties to enter at once, with two-metre hashmarks down the alley demarcating where people can stand. The shop also has separate entrance and exit doors. Managers are acutely aware of the hazards: an employee at a Calgary location contracted COVID in July, shutting the shop temporarily.

**Malt and Mortar** opened in a redeveloped heritage-style building in 2016, the second venture on the same block for the group that owns Julio's Barrio. Like its Mexican sister, it has installed plastic barriers between tables, and applied for a patio extending onto the sidewalk (and into the adjacent alley). It suffered for the lack of summer festivals, but made up ground by running the Edmonton Oilers' short-lived playoff drive on its TV screens. The pub has had to shorten its hours: 10 p.m. used to be the start of late-night happy hour; now that's closing time.

The only reason **Gravitypope Tailored Goods** is doing about as well as it did last year is that it moved last fall onto the main drag from a side-street location. Dressier offerings for men and women are moving slowly, but upscale sweats and comfortwear are strong pandemic sellers. For the first time, the clothing store's sales pace is better than that of its sibling shoe store, owner Louise Dirks says. Clothing gets stored away for 48 hours if a customer tries on and doesn't buy. Signs urge customers to sanitize before touching handheld products like jewellery.

**Second Cup** announced in August it will close underperforming cafés as more people brew and work from home; this company-owned location never reopened after the COVID shutdowns. It's still technically "temporarily closed," according to the company, with no timeline to determine its fate. Inside, the signage and counters remain, and bottles of some fancy cold tea drink still sit in a display fridge. Meanwhile, the Starbucks across the street has also shuttered.

The first Canadian franchise of a U.S. **acaí bowl and smoothie shop** opened last spring. It didn't make it to its first birthday.



It took a few tries, but owner Margaret Metcalfe finally figured out how best to arrange the one-way directional arrows through **Junque Cellar**: start through the used books, past the Eastern drums and candles, through the vintage clothing and then past the quirky 20th-century antiques and typewriters to the cashier. Her store relies mainly on browsers—the "so-called brave," she says. Even with limited hours and subsidies, she's not making enough to pay herself. Old-school by habit, early on Metcalfe took photos of vintage wares, posting them to social media yet selling them over the phone.

This former **hemp and bong shop** has been vacant for a couple years. Its sheltered doorway makes for a popular busker's perch.

Next to a jumbo sanitizer bottle, sample menu pages sit on a table at **Cacao 70's** entryway. "Do not touch," a handwritten sign on each page states. Plastic wicker-style chairs have been stacked at the back of the restaurant to allow for table distancing. The franchise of a Montreal-based dessert-and-brunch chain leaned heavily into delivery apps for the first time during the pandemic. Those orders now make up about 30 per cent of its revenue, manager Hank Wang says.

Jeans and casual clothier **Glam Slam**, a Whyte Avenue mainstay, went into the pandemic shutdown without a web store. It developed a Shopify-powered website by April 9, tiding it over until May's store relaunch. For an uncertain period in June, it closed Mondays and Wednesdays. But it has returned to seven-day shopping—albeit without evening hours.

A **frozen yogurt shop** closed here more than a year ago and the space has been up for lease ever since.

The local business association commissioned a sprucing up of this nondescript, brick-lined alley. A local artist came up with **Rainbow Road**, a colourful homage to a stage in the original Super Mario Kart video game.

Over 17 years, **Jupiter** has survived bong-shop competition and the onset of legal cannabis stores, and was still humming along well enough through the pandemic to be advertising for new staff. Before the crisis, the store had diversified into another vice: vibrators and other sex toys. Last year, it had opened **Melt Town** snack shop next door for those in need of munchies. Now, the space is closed to the public and is used to handle shipments for Jupiter's online store.



To offer more distancing for visitors to the strip's busiest pedestrian block, the business association got the city's okay to take out a lane of

traffic along most of this block, in favour of picnic tables and snazzier "parklets." This removed a handful of parking spots, but more shoppers and diners arrive by foot than by car, says business association director Cherie Klassen. ♣

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