

New retailers take on heritage site

Peter and Samantha Mannelli have opened a combined grocery store, deli and café at the site of the old Arnott's biscuits factory in Sydney's North Strathfield.

By Hailey Settineri.

The Bakehouse Quarter in Sydney's west is the redevelopment of the former Arnott's Biscuit Factory, which operated from 1908 to 1997. The area houses a number of businesses – including shops, cafés and the head offices for Arnott's and NRMA – in a mix of new and heritage buildings.

Mannelli's IGA is one of the newest additions to the Quarter. Situated in the base of an old brick building that still bears the original 'William Arnott Limited' sign, the store's interior has been designed to complement the area with a combination of rustic features and sleek modern fittings. It's a noticeable change from the Harris Farm Markets store that formerly operated at the site.

"When we first moved in, the shop was very dingy," Store Manager Tony Nassif said. "The windows and side entry were all blocked off by refrigeration. We've opened it up so it doesn't feel like walking into a dungeon anymore."

The store now has two entryways – the main entry/exit at the front where the cash registers are and a side entry, off the main road, which leads to the café at the rear of the store.

Mr Nassif told *Retail World* the café, which operates the same hours as the store, gives the customer a unique shopping experience.

"At anytime from 6am 'til 10pm, anybody can come in, sit down, have a coffee and do their shopping," he said.

"We had a married couple with two children come in. The husband sat down with the kids, grabbed a coffee and a milkshake for the kids and a cake, and his wife was with a trolley doing the shopping. It felt really good that the family felt comfortable to come here and sit down."

The café is staffed by Campos-trained baristas, who undergo regular spot checks and mystery shops to ensure they are keeping to the coffee specialists' high standards. All of the food served at the café – ranging from classic Italian sweets to paninis and pasta dishes – is made on-site daily by Sicilian chef Luca.

There are also plans to expand to a full restaurant in the evenings, with pizza, pasta, seafood and steaks to appear on the menu. The Mannellis are in the process of seeking approval for external seating, which will allow 18 tables and up to 100 diners to enjoy meals made from ingredients they can buy in-store.

Ranging

Mannelli's IGA has a strong focus on fresh – both in the café and grocery – and benefits from its location a stone's throw away from the largest fresh fruit and vegetable wholesale market in Australia, Sydney Markets.

"Where other stores are doing truckloads twice a week, we're doing ute-loads every day, so our fruit is always fresh," Mr Nassif said.

"At the end of each day we do a printout of what we've sold and the next morning restock fresh from the markets, buying only what we need."

Fresh produce is well-presented in low, wide produce bins, allowing good visibility across the store. This spaciousness is further enabled by keeping grocery aisles to a minimum. The Mannellis opted to have just three aisles of groceries, rather than IGA's recommended four, to ensure the store does not feel cluttered.

Despite limiting the number of aisles, the 840sqm store manages to range all the essentials for locals in nearby apartments and the many commuters who pass along Sydney's busy Parramatta Road.

Another focus for the store is its extensive deli range. Mr Nassif says the deli has a strong selection of European styled smallgoods that it sources from German Butchery.

"There's probably only a handful of stores in Sydney that range these products," he said. "German Butchery doesn't supply everybody and anybody. We're very fortunate to be able to offer the range here."

Reflecting the multicultural area, the store has a strong international range, with an extensive selection of German and Russian specialty products lining the shelves by the product section.

Mannelli's IGA is staffed by around 30 workers, and growing. Some of these are former Harris Farm Markets staff, others were brought across from the Mannellis' other café business and the rest are hand-picked hirings.

Learning curve

Mannelli's IGA is the first full-scale grocery store operated by husband and wife Peter and Samantha Mannelli. Peter grew up in the grocery game, with his father operating a small grocery and deli store in the 1980s. He wanted to get back into the industry when the opportunity arose in North Strathfield.

The pair also own and operate a deli and café in Burnside Gardens, North Parramatta, which served as a steep learning curve for Mannelli's IGA.

"We officially opened in North Parramatta in February after we did renovations," Samantha Mannelli said.

"It's in an old estate and has probably been there about 25 years. Four owners had gone through it and it had gone from being a coffee shop to a convenience store, back to a coffee shop and a fruit shop, and it didn't work.

"We've worked hard to build a reputation there, offering grab-and-go lunches and the same great coffee and pastries that we offer at Mannelli's IGA."

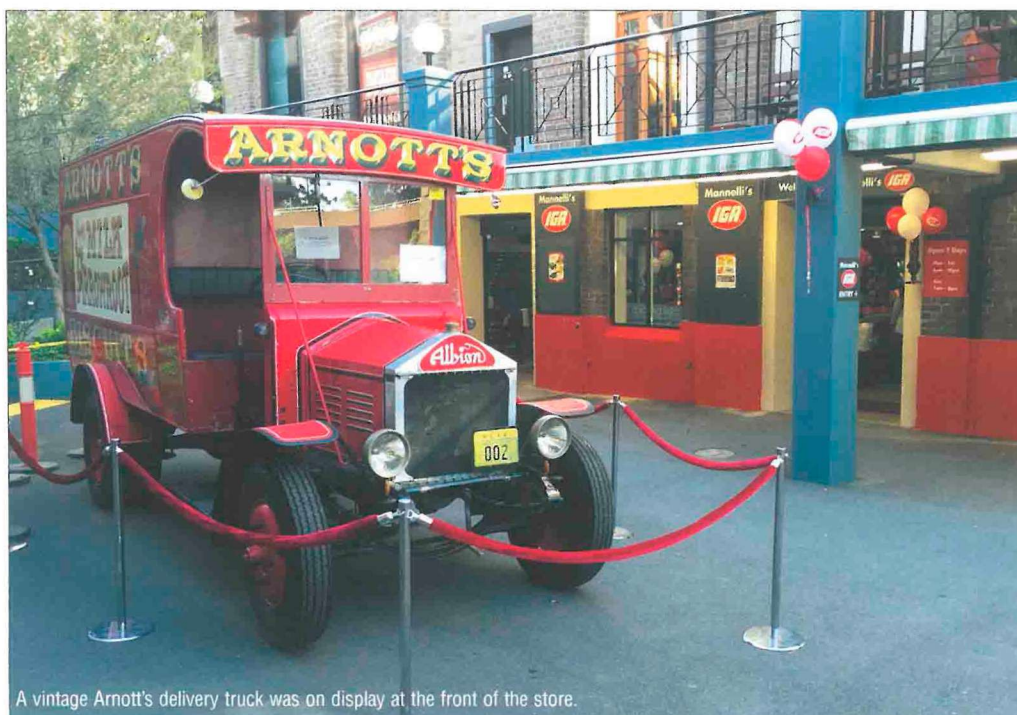
Much of the menu at the two cafés is identical in range and price. Some of the items – such as cakes and cannoli – are made fresh at Mannelli's IGA and driven to the café at Burnside each day.

The close proximity of the two Mannelli's locations is something that will continue as the pair look to grow their grocery business.

"Travel distance will be a big factor in choosing our next site," Ms Mannelli said. "Peter has always insisted on this, because he's very hands on. We need to make sure he's not driving more than an hour to get from one store to the next."

Ms Mannelli anticipates there will be another Mannelli's IGA (if not two) open within the next 12 months.

"Peter has already started looking at sites," she told *Retail World*. "Wherever he decides, it will be the same concept as this store – combining supermarket, café and deli." ♦



A vintage Arnott's delivery truck was on display at the front of the store.