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Tolarno Boutique Hotel, Bar & Bistro 42 Fitzroy Street, St Kilda

Of course, the Tolarno Hotel existed before Georges Mora noticed an advertisement for its sale in 1965, but who remembers it then? Georges, restaurateur, art gallery owner and curator and his wife Mirka, the artist, made the bistro and gallery one of the most famous places in Melbourne and seminal to the life and vigour of Melbourne's cultural and culinary history.

During World War I, there was severe persecution of Jewish people in Lithuania where Mirka's father lived (and where Avram Zeleznikov was born in 1924 and lived until 1943 (5) and in Romania, where her mother was born and subsequently lived. When he was 16, Mirka's father fled from home alone and walked right across Germany, to Paris. After the persecuting ransack of her shop, Mirka's mother failed to escape to New York as she wished, but also settled for Paris where the couple soon met, and where Mirka, named after her Romanian grandmother, was born in 1928.

Eventually, the family came to live in rue Maitre Albert, on the Left Bank, with its view of Notre Dame across the Seine. Mirka's father was active in the French Resistance. Despite a series of narrow escapes and constantly dashing between hiding places, somehow the family survived the danger and the terror of World War II.

Georges Mora (1919-98), former Foreign Legionnaire, was head of the orphan organisation that employed Mirka. They met in 1947 in Paris. Although they had, survived the war, like the Zeleznikov family, the Moras feared that the 'peace' of the Cold War could not last and that world war must erupt again. So they sought refuge. Mirka was obsessive in pursuing her inspiration to get to Melbourne after reading of Antoine Fauchery, the photographer, whose colourful life is depicted in the novel *Scènes de la vie de bohème* by Henri Murger, which she had secretly devoured at the age of sixteen. Fauchery had first returned to Paris in 1858, having travelled across Victoria, vividly recording Gippsland aboriginals in full ceremonial paint, the excitement of gold panning at Castlemaine and waterfront early Melbourne.

The Moras arrived here with their young son, Phillipe in 1951, 'to tackle a new life'. Badly advised, they lived first in rural McKinnon. From there, they discovered the former studios of Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts, Frederick McCubbin, John Longstaff, Jane Sutherland and Ola Cohn at 9 Collins Street, into which the decanted and lived happily in the 'Paris' end of Collins Street for 15 years. The building has now been demolished (except for its

facade) and the studios all gone. It was a time when 'no-one lived in the city' and their place became a centre of cultural life in Melbourne.

Mirka made money dressmaking. Sunday Reed commissioned a dress, which led to a long friendship with John and Sunday and frequent visits to their house, Heide at Bulleen, with its extraordinary circle of artists, their hospitality, intertwined relationships and patronage. The Reeds and Moras built adjoining beach-houses at Aspendale. George worked managing a noodle factory.

In 1954 Mirka and Georges opened the Mirka Café together at 183 Exhibition Street, on the corner of Little Bourke Street, opposite to both Her Majesty's and the Comedy theatres, and of course then unlicensed.

The Contemporary Art Society was born upstairs from the café, with Georges Mora as president and John Reed as director in 1954. It began organising art exhibitions for the Royal Visit of Queen Elizabeth II, opposed to the official one in the Melbourne Town Hall. In 1956, the CAS Gallery of Contemporary Art opened in an old warehouse in Tavistock Place, behind Fletcher Jones, with early shows in the lead-up to and during the Olympic Games by Charles Blackman, Arthur Boyd, John Brack, Laurence Daws, Robert Dickerson, Joy Hester, Roger Kemp, John Percival, Clifton Pugh and Edwin Tanner.



Tolarno, Fitzroy Street, St Kilda, 2002

But two years earlier, the Mirka Café had hosted provocative exhibitions, and innumerable parties as Barbara Blackman put it: ‘Georges and Mirka offered us new sites. They were happeners, not owners’. *Le tout* Melbourne came.

Success led to a need for larger premises and a real restaurant, Balzac, at 62 Wellington Parade, East Melbourne opened in 1958. Charles Blackman and Georges cooked. It was the first restaurant in Victoria to get a 10pm licence. I remember my father taking me there when I matriculated, my first meeting with George Mora. Balzac survived until 2001, Victoria’s oldest licensed restaurant. After a short while as ‘Toeys’; it is now the Gaze Restaurant, following “an extreme makeover”.

In 1965, 9 Collins Street was to be demolished (it wasn’t, then) and so Balzac was sold. Georges bought the Tolarno Hotel, and then announced the news to his wife. It was to be hotel, restaurant, gallery, residence and a studio for Mirka. It had been a Boom house built

in the 1884, by a mayor of St Kilda, who in 1886, converted it into a genteel guesthouse, complete with croquet lawn on the front garden.

In 1928 (or 1933), a Moderne rear wing of 29 bedrooms was added, designed by G.G. Cronin, for the owner S.C. Cronin which substantially all survives. The addition consists of 29 bedrooms, a larger dining room and kitchen. The house was renamed after the Tolarno Station, a pastoral property south of Menindee, on the Darling River in the Riverina, New South Wales. This property is depicted in the book *Australia Unlimited*. The connection between these two Tolarnos is not yet clear.

The Modernist six bedroom wing and the present restaurant were added to the Victorian house on its former front garden and croquet lawn, purportedly in the 1940s, although they appear to be of the 1960s, just before Georges Mora bought it. Building commercial premises in the front garden of former mansions is a frequently recurring St Kilda pattern (18).

The Moras converted the rear dining room into the art gallery, the family lived in rooms on the first floor and the restaurant was on the left of the lobby, as it still is. Mirka used the hotel's bridal suite as her studio. The Moras built a new kitchen and toilets at the rear. Mirka painted the murals on the walls and with the young artist Martin Sharp from Sydney (later of *Oz* magazine), climbing roses on the windows and doors of the restaurant. Tolarno French Bistro, Gallery and Hotel opened later in 1965. In the first edition of *The Age Good Food Guide* in 1980, Tolarno was still the only restaurant that the editors felt worth mentioning in Fitzroy Street. It was then the trendiest French bistro in town.

A second gallery was opened at the rear, next to the kitchen. Eventually, the management of the hotel became too onerous for the Moras and it was sold. The Mora bedrooms and studio moved to the basement.

A series of remarkable art exhibitions were held at Tolarno. The Sidney Nolan Ned Kelly series was shown there. All the brilliant men and women of Melbourne came. Each year, Georges travelled to Paris, and managed to return with a unique series of shows for Melbourne, of drawings and prints of French masters, including Renoir, Toulouse Lautrec, Picasso, Chagall, Vuillard and Bonnard. And the local work shown was cutting edge.



Mirka Mora

In 1970, the Moras' marriage crumbled (although when Georges died, Mirka said their relationship had lasted 51 years). Mirka moved into Wellington Street, around the corner. Then she moved successively to Rankins Lane in the city (1978-81), returned to St Kilda at 116 Barkly Street and finally to a remarkable new building in Tanner Street, Richmond she shares with her son, William, his family, his gallery and her studio. The William Mora Gallery shows indigenous and innovative young artists. Other sons live in Los Angeles: Phillippe, a film director and Tiriell, an actor. In 1973, the young (later to become significant) film-maker Paul Cox made a short biographical film 'Mirka'.

In the late 1970s, Tolarno was sold to Leon Massoni and his wife. The Tolarno, (St Kilda) Gallery continued as United Artists Co-operative, under Anna Schwartz (Weiss) and Luba Bilu. Later, both left, Luba opened a gallery in Greville Street, Prahan and Anna opened her gallery at 45 Flinders Lane. Later this became the Robert Lindsay Gallery.

Georges built a remarkable new pink Tolarno gallery in River Street, South Yarra. The Tolarno Gallery continued in Fitzroy Street and an initial altercation between the two Tolarnos over the use of the name was settled. After Georges died, his partner, Jan Minchin relocated Tolarno Galleries to Victoria Street, Fitzroy, and most recently to Flinders Lane

in the city. So, there continue to be two Tolarnos. Since 1991, the Fitzroy Street establishment continues under the ownership of the larger-than-life tellychef, Ian Hewitson, Ruth Allen and Tony Gowing. And in *The Age Good Food Guide. 2002*, Mirka Mora still recommended it.

In a later gesture to St Kilda, Mirka completed a wonderful mosaic for the pavilion on St Kilda Pier (1) based on the view in that direction, from her house in Barkly Street (now destroyed).

In 1999, a major retrospective of her art throughout her life was held appropriately at Heide Museum of Modern Art (9), the Reeds' former house. In 2000 her autobiography, *Mirka Mora. Wicked but Virtuous. A Life* was lavishly published. In 2001, Mirka Lane was named, off Barkly Street, near to where she lived.

In December 1954, the Mirka Café was the first in Melbourne to put chairs and tables for patrons on the footpath. In 1958 Leon Ress of the Ress-Oriental Hotel obtained grudging Melbourne City Council approval to continue the tradition. The Mirka Café was probably the first French café in Melbourne, separate from the Italian tradition. (Mirka made coffee in a saucepan in the French way, not Espresso). In 1958, Balzac Restaurant held the first licence in Victoria to allow alcohol to be served with meals until 10pm. In 1956, Tolarno was the first art gallery in St Kilda and the first restaurant to serve fine food in St Kilda. Even in December 2004, Simon Plant still awards it 15/20 in the *Herald Sun*.

In each of these ways, Mirka and Georges were pioneers of so much that have since become normal, if not a deluge, in Melbourne's and St Kilda's culinary and cultural life. The particularly Australian word 'identity' could have been coined just for someone as quirky, idiosyncratic, pioneering and always surprising as Mirka. Above all, she is a much-loved Melbourne identity.

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