

Koroit, coffee and the three-song commute



Artist Clare Fennessy, who works under the name Clare Claybody, in her new studio space at the rear of the historic property she recently bought in Koroit.

Words and photos by Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"]nce known as the domain of retired potato farmers, onion growers and devout Catholics, the south-west hamlet of Koroit is becoming cool – very cool.

The signs of a town in transformation are all there: a Thai restaurant, a retro bookstore (The Bookworm), a revived Country Women's Association bursting with members aged under 45, and a steady stream of young artists and thinkers choosing Koroit as the place to buy their first home.

And if that isn't enough to convince you, then the recent

arrival of the spiritual shop, Sacred Stones, the expansion of the local IGA supermarket, the success of the monthly food swap*, and the popularity of local meditation classes, poetry slam and yoga nights should do it.

Seabreeze coffee roaster and barista **Tim Mellor** has been watching the transition a little more closely than others.

He reversed a trend 18 months ago by moving *out* of Port Fairy to Koroit, because of its affordability. Koroit offered all of the same rich history and country town charm, but without the over-blown house prices (the average is around \$280,000, but rising).

“Port Fairy has become very, very expensive, so younger families are now looking elsewhere,” Tim says.

“What we have is an evolving community that is moving from footy and cricket into a place that still loves its footy and cricket, but is also developing other interests,” Tim says.



Seabreeze coffee roaster Tim Mellor and barista Kerry

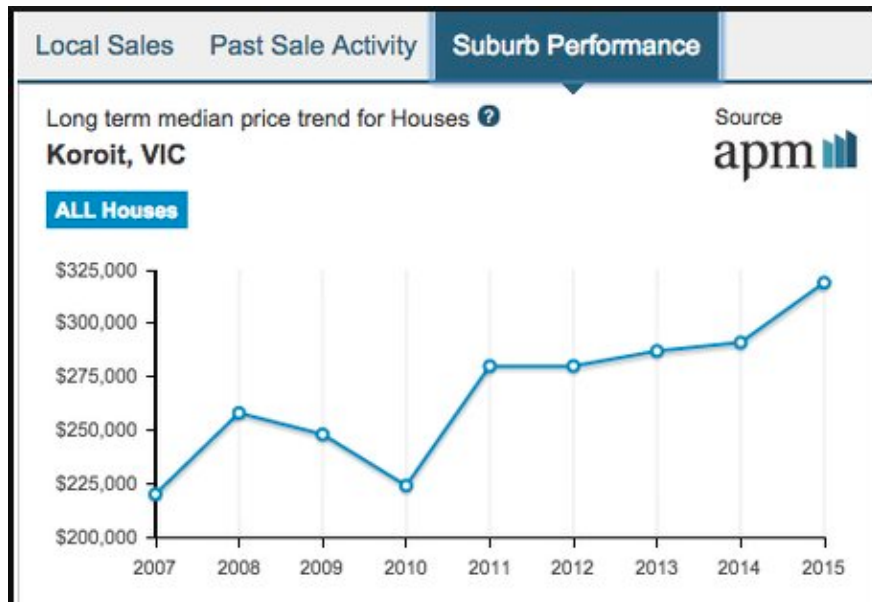
Hughson in the new cafe Tim has opened in the main street of Koroit after looking at the changing demographics of the town.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"]T[/dropcap]im dug around into the statistics that confirmed a much younger demographic was moving into Koroit, compared to Port Fairy, and this sealed the deal for his decision to open an espresso coffee shop in the middle of town.

The former fish and chip shop on Commercial Road has been scraped back, repainted, redecorated, refurnished and [officially open for business](#) as of this weekend, with barista **Kerry Hughson**, formerly of The Farmer's Wife, in Port Fairy, behind the espresso machine.

"Even though we have still been setting up, the women from local exercise class have already made us their coffee stop...and the bike riding guys turned up the other day," Tim says, smiling.

Figures from the 2011 Census, and [available on the Moyne Shire Council](#) website, reveal that Koroit is indeed a nimble little town: only 17.9% of people living in Koroit are aged 60 or over, compared to 32.9% in Port Fairy.



After a dip around the time of the global financial crisis, house prices in Koroit have been on a steady climb, but still remain affordable by most standards. Source: Australian Property Monitors.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"]I[/dropcap>n the same vein, 22.3% of Koroit folk are homebuilders, compared to only 16.7% in Port Fairy, and 27.2% of the Koroit population is aged under 17, compared to 20.9% in Port Fairy.

Artist **Clare Fennessy** (aka Claybody) is among the new arrivals, having bought her first home in the main street of Koroit about 12 months ago.

The historic former fruit and sweet shop is full of the character that people pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for in Melbourne and sits on a block that is large enough to contain a house, a courtyard, a garage, a studio, a workshop, a fernery and a cosy room at the front that Clare intends to use as a small gallery.

"I love Koroit. It is a very cute town and everyone in the shops knows you by your first name," she says, laughing.



The main street of Koroit is still packed with character and original buildings like this fabulous old garage.
Image: Bluestone Magazine.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"]S[/dropcap]ince Clare, 33, moved into her house, locals have been keen to help her uncover its history, with suggestions that its location on Spring St gave the street its name: apparently there was a natural spring in the yard and people would come to collect spring water.

“We think it might be there,” Clare says, pointing to a cement slab that looks suspiciously like it might be covering a well.

It is one of the many charming stories she has already collected and intends to investigate further.

When she is not working on her ceramics (or home renovations!), Clare works at the only childcare centre in town which is exactly 90 steps – yes, 90 steps – from her front door. It is so close, it can barely be called a commute.

“There is really no excuse to be late for work,” she laughs.



Bess Krause found a renovator's delight in downtown Koroit and restored it back to life. She is part of a new generation of people moving to Koroit to buy their first home.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"]N[/dropcap]ot far from Clare's property is that owned by **Bess Krause**, 29, who three years ago bought a 100-year-old miner's cottage earmarked for demolition and, with the help of family and friends, has completely restored it to life.

The blue-and-white cottage has since become one of the most distinctive houses in the street and is within walking distance of what is considered downtown Koroit.

"You think Koroit is tiny, but it has all the necessities, but sometimes you don't realise they are there until you live here," Bess says.

"I can walk down to the bakery, go and have a coffee...head up to the rail trail, which I really love."

Again, affordability was a big attraction and while Bess works in Warrnambool, she finds the 15-minute – or three-song – commute enjoyable.

“It gives you time to decompress from the day; you can play a couple of songs on the cd player and just unwind,” she says.



Koroit is nothing if not quirky – and a stickler for tradition. The annual Koroit Irish Festival, held at the weekend, still pays homage to the town's Irish ancestry.

[box]*The Koroit Food Swap is held at 10am on the third Saturday of each month at Healing House, next to Sacred Stones, 123 Commercial Rd. The next swap is May 16. Contact Loretta on 0425 022 447 for more information.[/box]

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