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Pakington Pantry: A Gastronomical experience with a Croatian vibe

By [Julie Marinovic](#)



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On Pakington Street in Newtown, Geelong, there is a place called Pakington Pantry. Behind it are chef Matt Dulic and his wife Anne-Maree, who have built something truly exceptional.

“Food has always been about more than what’s on the plate,” Matt says, in the understated way of a man who has never needed to convince anyone of anything. His cooking does that for him. “In our culture, you feed people because you want to. It is a way of bonding and expressing yourself. Because it is who you are. My mum never measured anything. She just gave. I learnt discipline and commitment from the family table. It was absorbed in me long before I ever stood behind a commercial kitchen. Mum always said that cooking is an act of love, and I have never forgotten it.”









A twist of fate in 1998

Matt Dulic did not grow up dreaming of restaurants. He grew up playing soccer, the way so many youth from Croatian families in Geelong did, with the kind of seriousness that blurs the line between sport and identity. He was good and committed, but when injury intervened, he looked at his options.

“I started my apprenticeship on a Monday in 1998,” he recalls, smiling at the precision of the memory. “By that Friday, I had played my last soccer final. And honestly, from that first week in the kitchen, I just knew. I never looked back.”

From that Monday, Matt threw himself into the industry with the discipline of an athlete who had simply redirected his training. He moved through Melbourne’s top kitchen scene, working at Docks Restaurant, Sweet Hearts and Cafe Bastille, building quietly and seriously, earning a reputation the old-fashioned way: through the food itself, hard work, always learning and never giving up.

The call from George Christopoulos

In the tight world of Melbourne hospitality, reputations travel faster than any CV. Matt’s did. And eventually, it reached George Christopoulos.

Christopoulos is a name that carries weight in Australian dining. A former professional Socceroos player who rebuilt himself as one of the most formidable figures in Melbourne’s restaurant scene, he is the force behind iconic venues including Beer Deluxe, Belgian Beer Cafe and Ormond Hall. He tasted Matt’s food at Cafe Bastille and did not waste time.

“He came in one day and just said, come and work for me at the Belgian Beer Cafe,” Matt says. “He had been impressed. It meant a lot. George had been at the top level in football and then built something incredible in hospitality. For him to notice your work, that tells you something.”

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Coming home

For all that Melbourne offered, Geelong was where Matt and Anne-Maree had grown up. It was where their roots were. And when the right space came available on Pakington Street, the decision, though significant, was not complicated. Family came first.

“Every chef dreams of opening their own place,” Anne-Maree says. “Matt had more than 15 years of experience behind him at the time we opened. We knew the timing was right.”

In 2013, Pakington Pantry opened its doors. Anne-Maree, whose quiet force shapes everything from the interior design to the daily rhythm of the business, built a space that felt instinctively right.

Matt is straightforward about what her contribution means. “Togetherness is the key here. Anne-Maree is not background noise in this story. She is half of it. The cafe would not be what it is without her presence, her eye, her steady, tireless support. She is the reason so much of this works. I could not have done any of it without her.”

What the food does











The menu at Pakington Pantry is modern Australian. The soul of it is Croatian, even if the dishes do not announce that directly.

The day I visited with a friend, Matt cooked up a storm for brunch. Dish after dish arrived, each one layered with flavour, aroma and freshness. It reinforced my own Croatian heritage, where everything was generously served, the freshness of ingredients, the complimentary flavours, all just irresistibly appetising. Our eyes were bigger than our stomachs. The food came quickly, yet every plate looked as though

several chefs had carefully added their finishing touches but Matt did it like second nature. That ease, that flow, comes from years of doing something properly and knowing, without needing to say it, that it shows.

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The night before 300 games



Among the familiar faces that fill Pakington Pantry on any given day, certain ones carry a particular weight in this city. Geelong Cats players have long made the cafe a regular stop, drawn by the same things that bring everyone else: quality, consistency and the knowledge that Matt Dulic will not let them down.

On one recent visit, the face that stood out belonged to Mark Blicavs. The following day, he would walk onto the ground and become the eighth Geelong Cats player in history, and only the sixth this century, to play 300 AFL games. A milestone that compresses an entire career into a single number. Three hundred mornings of training. Three hundred times trusting the body to hold. The kind of achievement that demands the people around you pause and feel the weight of it.

On the eve of his 300th game, Mark Blicavs came here. Not somewhere extravagant. Here. Where the food is honest, the serves are generous, and the chef behind the pass has never once decided that good enough would do.

It says something, that choice. Elite athletes understand their bodies and what they need. They do not leave the night before a defining moment to chance. Blicavs, along with other AFL, has been coming here long enough to know exactly what he will get. On the eve of history, he came back for exactly that reason.

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The Croatian way

That same pride extends beyond the kitchen. Matt and Anne-Maree have employed dozens within the Croatian community, offering opportunities to young people finding their way and working lives they have not yet mapped out.

They give back through CafeSmart, an initiative supporting the homeless and remains deeply connected to their cultural roots. They supports Croatian community events and organisations across Geelong. They also give, in the steady, matter-of-fact way of someone who was raised to understand that generosity is not exceptional. It is simply what you do.

“That comes from how we were raised,” Matt and Anne-Maree say. “Our mums, Croatian families in general, you do not think twice about it. Someone needs something, you help. Someone comes to your table, you feed them. You take care of them and never let them go hungry.”

What the numbers say

The recognition has come, as genuine recognition does, because it could not be avoided. Pakington Pantry was voted Geelong’s *best brunch spot by Geelong Advertiser* subscribers 2021 poll, finishing first among more than 20 finalists from across the region. It currently sits at number seven of 396 Geelong restaurants on TripAdvisor as of April 2026, holds a 4.5 out of 5 star rating, and carries a Travellers’ Choice award for sustained excellence in reviews. The Australian Good Food Guide lists it among Geelong’s notable dining destinations.

These honours reflect decades of trust, built plate by plate by Matt and Anne-Maree Dulic, and recognised by a community that knows when food is truly given.