Tucked in at the back of Coles in Melbourne's Little Bourke St is the Kun Ming, an institution in Melbourne's Chinatown. It's probably the cheapest place in that long stretch, but it's the unfailingly good food which draws the crowds and (often queues) at lunchtime and on Friday nights. I started eating there in 1976, when I was a student. Then, you could get three dim sims, a bowl of green pea soup and a pot of Chinese tea for $1.30. The menu hasn't changed since then; nor have the prices (well, not much). The laminex tables are still the same, too.

The Kun Ming serves fairly standard Cantonese fare, but it's always fresh and tasty. The black bean dishes and the sate dishes are excellent. The servings are generous, the service quick and unobtrusive. It's terrific for a quick meal before a meeting, and a two course meal costs around $7/$8. After only four or five years of operation it hardly rivals the Kun Ming as an institution, but it already has a devoted clientele. Make sure you try its lobaok, mouthwatering rolls with a beancurd skin and served with a sweet sauce. Worth trying, too, is the laksa, a spicy soup made with coconut milk, chicken, seafood and vegetables — a meal in itself.

The Satay Inn specialises in 'howkee style' dishes, including a large variety of noodles. Other dishes come from 'across the Causeway', reflecting their Singaporean influence in the greater use of chillies.

Its fish curries, chilli prawns and spinach balachan (stirfried with dried shrimp and shrimp paste for less than a minute) are highly recommended. Try them with achar achar (a salad of roasted peanuts and pickles) and the coconut rice. If you have room, sample the desserts and don't be deterred by the quaint descriptions on the menu.

The service is friendly and quick. Two courses costs about $12-$14, and it's a good idea to book if you're trotting out on a Friday night. Carmel Shute

Kun Ming, 212 Little Bourke St, Melbourne. Ph: 663 1851. BYO, no cards.
Satay Inn, 205 Swanston St, Melbourne. Ph: 663 4703. BYO, all major cards.

Norton Street Leichhardt hold a growing part of Sydney's Italo-Australian culture. After the Italian victory in the World Cup soccer series in 1982 it was almost impossible to move down the street without becoming part of the enthusiastic celebrations. Although soccer victories have been less frequent since that year, the presence of things Italo-Australian has continued to grow.

Nearby in Parramatta Rd, if you're fortunate enough to read Italian, there's the Libreria Italiana, where, depending on your fancy you can read wht the PCI is saying in L'Unita, pick up a copy of the locally produced Nouvo Paese, or even see how James Joyce reads in translation or Gramsci in the original.

Also at this time of the year you can enjoy a production by the FILEF Groppo Teatral, one of Australia's few bi-lingual theatres at the state school on the corner of Marion and Norton Streets. For the more immediate needs of a bite to eat, a good coffee and pleasant company, there is the Norton Street range of cafes and bistro, each of which has marked a fairly distinct following.

Near Parramatta Rd, Bar Veneto and the Cafe Bon tend to cater for the morning and early afternoon trade. The former is best either for an early morning coffee before work, or a place to take a break from Saturday morning shopping.

The Cafe Bon, with its sunny balcony and friendly proprietress, is equally relaxing, and for about $5 you can enjoy a coffee and foccacia while overlooking the loneliness and fro-ing on the street below.

The eastern, or city side of Norton Street operates best from mid-afternoon onwards (even up to 3am at Bar Baba), though by this time at night you'll probably only have your chess board for company. Next door, the Bistro of the Imperial pub provides an earlier start to the night with a decidedly meaty and proletarian menu.

Here you'll either be rubbing shoulders with your families having a Friday night break from home cooking, or former partisans who punctuate their card games with a well earned meal or more frequently a glass of wine or beer. It's open for lunch most days, but only for dinner on Fridays. Further along the street and for a couple of dollars extra ($8 or so) you can choose from the range of pastas, parmigians and seafood at the Rugantino restaurant. Although the menu is again fairly meaty, it's possible to find some concessions to vegetarian diets.

The Bar Italia, up past the Town Hall, is possibly best known as a place to meet feminist friends over an excellent gelato or to catch welfare workers outside hours still pondering over their funding submissions. Bar Italia also has a useful notice board which may provide your next collective household, allow you to finally take the plunge into yoga or simply find homes for the recent litter of kittens that has mysteriously arrived in your back yard.

Peter McNiece