

FINDING YOUR FIRST SITE

What to check on the site, in the area and in the lease, before you sign anything.

BEFORE YOU START

The site you choose decides more about your venue than almost anything else. It sets your rent for years, it decides how many people walk past, and it can add tens of thousands to your fitout before you've sold a single coffee.

Most new venues that struggle don't have a bad product. They have the wrong site, or the right site on the wrong lease. Once you've signed, it's very hard to fix.

This guide is the checklist we use when we look at a site with a new owner. Work through it for every site you're serious about, and use the scorecard at the back to compare them.

Who we are. We're Dallas and George. We've both run hospitality businesses, and at Silver Chef we saw hundreds more from the finance side. Through Whisk and Finco we also supply equipment and finance, so we see what it really costs to open.

About the costs. The prices in this guide are rough Melbourne figures for 2026, before GST unless we say otherwise. Every site is different, so use them to spot a big cost early, then get a real quote.

Fill it in on screen. Open this PDF in Chrome or Adobe Acrobat to tick the boxes and type in the fields, then save a copy for each site. Or print it and take it with you.

1 START WITH THE NUMBERS

Before you look at a single site, know two numbers.

Your weekly sales target. What do you realistically expect to take in a normal week once you're up and running? Not your best week. Write it down before GST.

The most rent you can pay. A simple rule: rent plus outgoings should be no more than about 10% of your sales. At 15%, it gets hard to make money.

WEEKLY SALES (BEFORE GST)	RENT AT 10%	RENT AT 15%
\$8,000	\$800 a week	\$1,200 a week
\$10,000	\$1,000 a week	\$1,500 a week
\$15,000	\$1,500 a week	\$2,250 a week

Now you have a ceiling. When an agent shows you a site above it, you know before you fall in love with it.

YOUR NUMBERS

Weekly sales target

\$ _____

Rent ceiling at 10%

\$ _____ a week

Danger line at 15%

\$ _____ a week

Ask for the full cost. Agents often quote base rent. Ask for rent plus outgoings (council rates, water, building insurance, cleaning of shared areas) so you're comparing the real number.

2 TWO CHECKS BEFORE YOU MAKE AN OFFER

Some things are cheap if the site already has them and expensive to add later. Two matter most.

IS THERE A GREASE TRAP?

Every food business needs one, and a Trade Waste Agreement with the local water retailer. If the site doesn't have a trap, adding one can mean digging up the floor and connecting to the sewer.

HOW TO CHECK

- Ask the agent for the site's current Trade Waste Agreement. Depending on the area it's with Yarra Valley Water, South East Water or Greater Western Water.
- Look for heavy round or square lids in the kitchen floor, the yard or the car park.
- Ask what size it is in litres, and when it was last pumped out. A plumber can tell you if it's big enough for your menu.

If it's missing: about **\$5,000 to \$20,000** to install, and more if the slab has to be cut inside.

Ongoing: a Trade Waste Agreement is about \$660 a year (Yarra Valley Water, 2026 to 27), plus pump outs from about \$280 + GST each for a 1,000 litre trap, usually every quarter.

Your quote to add it: \$ _____

IS THERE AN EXHAUST CANOPY, OR CAN ONE BE ADDED?

If you're frying, grilling or using a commercial oven, you'll likely need one that meets AS 1668. The canopy itself is the cheap part. The duct and the fan are where the money goes.

HOW TO CHECK

- Look for a canopy with a duct going up through the ceiling, and a fan on the roof.
- Ask for the mechanical drawings and the last duct cleaning record.
- No canopy? Ask where a duct could run to the roof, and whether there are homes or offices above that the landlord needs to think about.

If it's missing: the canopy alone is about **\$2,000 to \$10,000**. A full system with duct, fan and make up air is usually **\$10,000 to \$30,000** or more.

Ongoing: filters cleaned weekly by your staff, and the duct professionally cleaned, often every 6 to 12 months for busy kitchens.

Your quote to add it: \$ _____

If both are already there, you've saved yourself a lot of money. If they aren't, get a rough quote to add them before you make an offer, and use it in your negotiation. A landlord will often pay for some of it, or give you rent free time to cover it.

3 THE AREA

Go and stand outside the site. Then go back at a different time and do it again.

- ☐ **Foot traffic at your hours.** People walking past only help if they walk past when you're open. A busy weekday commuter strip won't help a bakery that trades Friday to Monday
- ☐ **Visibility.** Can people see you from the main road or the busy side of the street?
- ☐ **Parking and public transport.** How will your customers get to you?
- ☐ **Competitors.** Who else nearby sells what you sell, and how busy are they?
- ☐ **Shops that bring people in.** A good supermarket, a gym, a school or a popular venue next door all help
- ☐ **Things that keep people away.** Empty shops, a hard to cross road, nowhere to stop
- ☐ **Who lives and works here.** Does the area match the customer you have in mind, and what they'll pay?
- ☐ **The calendar.** School terms, football seasons, summer holidays. Will your trade drop at certain times of year?
- ☐ **What's coming.** New apartments, a shopping centre or roadworks can change an area quickly, for better or worse. Check the council's planning applications
- ☐ **Why the last tenant left.** Ask the agent, and ask the neighbours. Their answer is often more honest
- ☐ **The neighbours.** Will they welcome you? A supportive neighbour can help, and a hostile one can cause problems with noise, smells and signage

COUNT THE FOOT TRAFFIC

Stand outside for 15 minutes at the time you'd be busiest and count everyone who walks past. Do it on a weekday and again on a weekend. Times by four for an hourly figure.

Weekday Time _____ Count _____

Weekend Time _____ Count _____

FREE WAYS TO CHECK FROM HOME

Google Maps. Look up cafes and shops nearby. Popular times shows when the street is busy.

ABS Census QuickStats. Search the suburb for ages, incomes and how many people work there.

Your council's planning search. See what's been approved or applied for nearby.

Cost: free, plus a couple of hours of your time.

4 IS IT READY FOR FOOD?

A site that has had a food business before is not always ready for yours. Check each of these, and ask the landlord to confirm it in writing before you sign.

WHAT TO CHECK, AND HOW	ROUGH COST IF IT'S NOT THERE
☐ Grease trap , installed and big enough for what you'll do See step 2. Ask for the Trade Waste Agreement.	\$5,000 to \$20,000
☐ Exhaust and canopy , or the ability to add one See step 2. Ask for the mechanical drawings.	\$10,000 to \$30,000+ for a full system
☐ Power . Enough capacity for your equipment, and three phase if you need it Ask an electrician to check the switchboard and tell you the supply in amps.	Switchboard \$2,000 to \$6,000. New three phase supply from the street \$12,500+, and 6 to 8 weeks
☐ Gas connection , if you'll use gas Is there a meter? Ask a gasfitter if it can run all your appliances at once.	Get a quote. A bigger meter goes through the gas network and can take weeks
☐ Water, drainage and floor waste where your kitchen and wash up will go Ask a plumber where the drains run. Drains in the wrong place mean cutting the slab.	Get a quote. Often thousands if the slab is cut
☐ Cool room , if there is one, and whether it works Check it holds 0 to 5°C, and ask how old the fridge unit is.	New small modular cool room \$6,000 to \$15,000 installed
☐ Council approval for a food business on the site Call the council's planning and health teams with the address before you sign.	Food registration about \$1,100 to \$1,970 a year (City of Melbourne). Planning permit fee about \$1,500 if needed

Tip. Get your equipment list sorted before you sign. One piece of equipment can change what the site needs. A bigger oven might need three phase power, which might need an upgrade the landlord should pay for.

5 LEASE QUESTIONS TO ASK

Ask the agent each of these and get the answers in writing. Then have a lawyer who knows commercial leases read it before you sign.

- ☐ **Length.** How long is the first term, and what options are there to renew?
- ☐ **Yearly increases.** A fixed percentage, linked to CPI, or a market review? How much could your rent go up?
- ☐ **Incentives.** Is there a rent free period or a contribution to your fitout?
- ☐ **Outgoings.** What's included, and what share do you pay?
- ☐ **Bond or bank guarantee.** How many months, and do you have to sign a personal guarantee?
- ☐ **Make good.** What do you have to remove or restore when you leave?
- ☐ **Assignment.** If you want to sell the business later, can you transfer the lease to the buyer?
- ☐ **Trading hours.** Are there any limits, for example on early starts for a bakery or late nights for a bar?
- ☐ **Restrictions.** Any rules on noise, signage, smells, or what you can sell? Is there an exclusivity clause that protects you from a competitor in the same centre?
- ☐ **Is it a sublease?** If the person offering it is a tenant themselves, you're also bound by their lease. Ask to see it, and check the landlord agrees
- ☐ **Food ready in writing.** Will the landlord confirm in the lease that the site is ready for food service?
- ☐ **What else is going in nearby?** Ask about any empty shops in the same building or strip

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS IN VICTORIA

Most cafe and restaurant leases are covered by the Retail Leases Act 2003. Under it:

- The landlord must give you a disclosure statement and the proposed lease at least 14 days before you sign.
- The lease must run at least five years including options, unless you get a waiver certificate from the Victorian Small Business Commission.
- The landlord can't pass land tax on to you.
- Your bond must come back within 30 days of the lease ending, if you've met your obligations.

GET THE LEASE CHECKED

A lawyer who knows retail leases will spot the clauses that cost you later. It's the cheapest insurance you'll buy.

Cost: fixed fee reviews start from about **\$500 to \$900 + GST**. Expect more if they negotiate for you.

Lawyer's quote: \$ _____

6 SITE SCORECARD

Compare up to three sites side by side. For each line, mark Good, OK or Problem, and add a note or a cost to fix it.

	SITE 1			SITE 2			SITE 3		
	Good	OK	Problem	Good	OK	Problem	Good	OK	Problem
ADDRESS									
THE NUMBERS									
Weekly rent plus outgoings	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Rent as % of your weekly sales	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
BEFORE YOU OFFER									
Grease trap	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Exhaust canopy	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
THE AREA									
Foot traffic at your hours	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Visibility	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Parking and transport	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Competitors	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Shops that bring people in	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Why the last tenant left	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
READY FOR FOOD									
Power and gas	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Water and drainage	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Cool room	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Council approval	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
THE LEASE									
Length and options	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Yearly increases	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Incentives	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Bond and personal guarantee	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Make good	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Landlord confirms food ready	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
PROBLEMS COUNTED									
ROUGH COST TO FIX THEM									

A site with a few Problems isn't always a no. Some can be negotiated, some can be fixed for a price, and some can't be fixed at all. Knowing which is which is where the numbers come in.

NEXT STEP

Found a site you like? Before you sign, let's go through it together.

Book a free 30 minute call and we'll look at the site, the lease and your numbers with you. No cost and no pressure.

whiskhospitality.com.au/pages/open-your-first-venue

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This guide is general information only and isn't legal or financial advice. Get a lawyer to review any lease before you sign. Whisk Consulting is part of Whisk Hospitality.