

white



out

ENTER THE WORD 'COCAINE' into the pop culture collage machine that is your cerebrum and what do you get? Al Pacino flecked in spittle and white granules in *Scarface*. Johnny Depp and Penélope Cruz's charlie-fuelled romp in *Blow*. Robert Downey Jr's semi-autobiographical descent into oblivion in *Less Than Zero*.

For many years the only occasion the average Australian was likely to see anyone snorting coke was while watching an American film or TV show. As a country with a small population, located a long way from the coca fields of South America, Australia just wasn't a market the Pablo Escobars of the world paid much heed to. But, in the midst of a seemingly interminable global downturn that's hammered their long-established markets, drug cartels have taken notice of our soaring dollar and strong economy. Those cartels have been making a big push into what they see as virgin territory promising huge profits.

They're seeking to import their product in ever more ingenious ways. In May, Australian Federal Police seized a shipment of 600 barrels of hydraulic oil at a Mackay rail yard. Seventeen of the barrels contained a combined total of 50-

plus kilograms of cocaine, which had been suspended in a

viscous womb by a chemist in Colombia, with the intention of it being extracted here in Australia.

Produced in South America, packaged up in Central America then shipped to Australia, the consignment was destined for the streets of Australia's eastern seaboard. With a value topping out in eight-figure territory, the haul provided further evidence that cocaine is gushing into this country.

That's something Australian Federal Police commander Mark Walters is all too aware of. "It highlights the sophistication of the importation and the lengths to which these transnational organised crime syndicates will go to import cocaine and other illicit drugs," he says. "There's a lot of money involved in the importation of drugs and they will take extraordinary lengths to avoid law-enforcement interest and detection of the substances."

That's not surprising when you consider the mark-up importers of happy dust can get away with. According to John Lawler, CEO of the Australian Crime Commission, a kilogram of cocaine in Colombia costs about \$2500, while its net worth on the street in Australia can sit around the \$150,000 mark.

As the Aussie dollar has soared, so have the seizures. In the 2010-2011 financial year, the AFP and its partner agencies captured some 692kg of cocaine — a 76 per cent increase on the 2009-2010 figures. Much of the trade seems to be originating from Mexico, where cartels such as Sinaloa have twigged to the cash flow that can be generated in this wide brown land.

There's no shortage of eager customers. A report by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research found arrests for possession and use of cocaine rose by more than 76 per cent in the 12 months to June 2010, while a 2011 report by the Australian Crime Commission noted: "Australians are among the world's highest per capita consumers of illicit stimulants."

Contrary to popular belief, it's not just Toorak lawyers, Mosman hedge-fund managers and Gold Coast property developers who are snapping up the burgeoning supply of joy powder. Its increasing affordability means cocaine is now a mass-market rather than top-end-of-town intoxicant. As the *Sunday Herald Sun* recently put it: "Victoria is in the grip of a cocaine boom with a hit of the drug, at \$20, now cheaper than a footy ticket". Data collected by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research indicates men aged 20-40 account for the majority of cocaine users. Methods of ingestion divide along class lines: white-collar types snort while the less well-heeled inject.

Falling prices mean that teenagers and 20-somethings who would have previously restricted themselves to more garden-variety highs have joined the increasingly diverse ranks of Australia's cocaine users. AFL demigods — such as Fremantle's Michael Johnson and Geelong's Mathew Stokes (both 27) — have had the misfortune of being charged with cocaine possession, but it's not just highly paid, high-profile types in the under-30 age group who are using. A detective told the *Sunday Herald Sun*: "These kids used to drink and smoke cannabis, but now they'll put their money together and share a bag of coke. There's a lot of status attached to it. These are the same kids who would drink Champagne because that's what their favourite rappers sing about."

For Tim*, a 32-year-old Brisbane plumber, cocaine was a drug that signalled "you had made it". Like many of his mates, he experimented with marijuana in his teenage years, then graduated to ecstasy when he started clubbing. He was 28 when he snorted his first line of coke. Like a lot of recreational drug users, dissatisfaction with a steady decline in the purity of ecstasy had swayed him towards trying something different.

"At first, it was a line here or there to add something to a special occasion," he says. "On coke I felt more alive, more confident, more attractive to women. Without a boss or a girlfriend who might have seen what was happening to me, my cocaine use went from 'every now and then' to 'more often than not'. It got to the point where I was spending around \$700 a week on it. I didn't see it as a problem ▶

WORDS DAVID SMIEDT PHOTOGRAPHY ANTHONY GOTSIFAS

COCAINE IS FLOODING INTO AUSTRALIA AND BEING EMBRACED BY EVERYONE FROM CASHED-UP TRADIES TO TEENS KEEN TO LIVE OUT THEIR ROCK-STAR FANTASIES. BUT THERE'S A DISTINCTLY UNGLAMOROUS SIDE TO WHAT'S HELD UP AS THE FRENCH CHAMPAGNE OF ILLICIT SUBSTANCES.

as I was showing up to work on time and not hurting anyone. In fact, I was probably more fun to be around, especially as I shared my lines with anyone who asked. I was popular, the life of the party."

As the number of new acquaintances queuing up to share his stash grew, older friends quickly faded into the background. "I figured we were just into different things and I brushed away their concerns, thinking I had it all under control," he recalls.

Even when Tim began looking at jobs and thinking, 'There's my coke money for the week,' it failed to set alarm bells ringing. "I genuinely thought I was playing the drug and not the other way around," he says.

As he built up a tolerance to cocaine, it wasn't long before Tim's drug use began to seriously affect his moral compass. "I started charging 10 to 15 per cent more on jobs than I needed to," he admits. "I was also hiring apprentices instead of experienced people because I knew I could pay them less and have more money for coke. I began to lose customers that had been with the business — which I'd inherited from my dad — for years. And still I refused to believe any of this was related to my drug use. My profits were disappearing up my nose and I chose not to see it."

The stark realisation of what his life had become struck when his dealer asked him over to fix a leaking shower. "I walked into this apartment and was blown away by the luxury of the place," he recalls. "This guy was a decade younger than me and his life revolved around gorgeous women, amazing cars and drugs. So I'm bent over in his bathroom figuring out how to ask about doing a bit of dealing on the side when he comes in and asks how much he owes. When I gave him an invoice for \$300, he plopped a piece of folded tinfoil on the counter and walked out. He paid me in cocaine. And I accepted it."

"Sitting there in my van afterwards, I couldn't escape what I was now working for. Looking through my phone for someone to talk to, I realised my speed dial was filled with people who liked coke as much as I did — and that was about all I knew about them. I hadn't spoken to many of my closest friends for almost six months and they were the people I now needed the most."

With his personal life ripped from its moorings and his business floundering, Tim decided to go cold turkey. The hyper-alertness, boundless energy and lack of appetite he'd experienced while using were replaced by listlessness,

depression and an inability to focus. His cocaine 'friends' drifted away and his weight blew out by 20kg.

"One of the things I was unprepared for was that I would not only feel bad, but look bad," Tim says. "As shallow as that sounds, it was what drove me back to the drug a couple of times before I finally quit for good. In a way, I'm grateful that coke taught me what was really important in my life and what wasn't. But it was a fucking hard lesson."

Stephen*, a 28-year-old journalist from Sydney, knows the feeling. In his case, cocaine also provided a terrifying glimpse of his own mortality. Six hours into a party, he was enjoying his third or fourth line of the night, on top of several whiskies, when he began to feel short of breath. Stepping into the garden, he collapsed. "The only thing I can liken the feeling to is when you're doing a bench press at the gym and your muscles give out and the bar ends up on your chest. I couldn't feel the left side of my body and my hands were frozen," he recalls. "I heard someone screaming to call an ambulance and the next thing I knew I woke up in an intensive care unit."

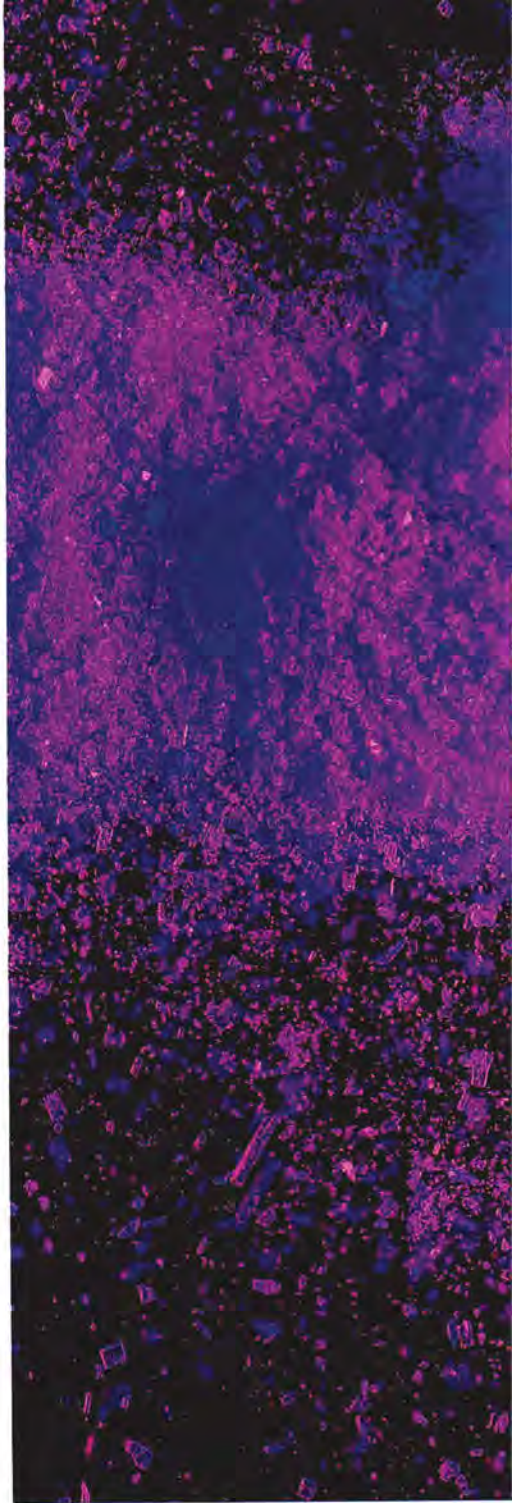
Stephen had suffered a cocaine-induced heart attack. Although he was too embarrassed to admit to his drug use while in hospital, he later came clean to his GP. "He told me I was an absolute idiot who was lucky to have survived," he says. "He warned that if I ever did coke again, it would probably kill me."

Dr Gregory Nelson, director of the Interventional Cardiology Unit at Sydney's Royal North Shore Hospital, deals with cases like Stephen's on a regular basis. "In 2010, we had six cases of people who had heart attacks and who admitted to using cocaine. Normally we would get one a year," he says. "If you were to design a drug to induce a heart attack, it would be cocaine." And when booze is added to the mix, the already significant risk is kicked up several notches. This is because when cocaine and alcohol combine in the liver, they form cocaethylene, a substance far more toxic to the heart than either of its constituent materials.

There's been very little Australian research done into the link between cocaine and serious health incidents — colloquially known as 'coke strokes' — but overseas studies paint a frightening picture.

Research conducted by the British magazine *Druglink* in 2008 showed the number of UK drug users being admitted to hospital with cocaine overdoses was four times higher than it had been at the turn of the millennium. The medical journal *Circulation* has published research suggesting that up to 25 per cent of heart attacks occurring in people under 30 may be due to cocaine use.

"I GOT A REPUTATION AS A PARTY GIRL. IT WAS CLEAR I WAS OPEN TO HAVING SEX WITH GUYS IF THEY SUPPLIED ME WITH COKE."



Not everyone is concerned about our nation's growing appetite for Bolivian marching powder. "This is a good time for cocaine users," says Andy*, a 35-year-old photographer from Melbourne. "I've had a few lines a month since I was in my early twenties. Like anything — alcohol, weed, whatever — as long as you keep things in moderation, chances are you won't be any the worse for it. And you'll probably have a brilliant time."

Andy maintains he leads a healthy life. He eats well, hits the gym several times a week

Although he's aware of the health and legal risks posed by his drug use, Andy justifies his actions with rationales buffed smooth by repetition. "I've seen mates really screw up their lives thanks to coke, so I'm very careful in how much I use. Whenever I spend more than \$1000 in a month, I know I've overstepped the mark and don't get any the next month."


"I just happen to like cocaine where other people like alcohol — which the government makes a load of money on. My drug of choice doesn't make me violent, it's done me no harm and I respect it. I don't see what the problem is."

Daniella*, a 27-year-old Melburnian who works in hospitality, felt the same way. For a while. "Working in bars, I saw people who did coke and seemed none the worse for it," she says. "In fact, they gave the impression of being pretty successful. I wanted in on the good times they were having. And compared with the dangers of ice or heroin, coke looked relatively harmless."

Six months after having her first line, Daniella was snorting around \$1000 worth of coke a week — the same amount she cleared after tax. "After racking up \$4000 in debt on my Amex, I started dating guys who were into the gear too and got a reputation as a party girl. That was fine with me — I was single and having a good time."

After a year of partying, however, Daniella had a fight with a female colleague who'd once been a friend. Harsh words were exchanged and Daniella was accused of being a "coke whore".

"I've never felt so disgusted in my life," she recalls. "No matter how I tried to look at the situation, it was clear that I was open to having sex with guys as long as they supplied me with coke. Would I have slept with as many if there weren't drugs involved? I don't think so. It was maybe five men, but that was more than enough. God only knows what they were told about me beforehand. And some of it must have been true. Coke made me feel invincible, but looking back I just wanted to die of embarrassment."

Just as it did with Daniella and Tim, cocaine looks set to send the moral compass of an increasing number of Australians into a tailspin. Authorities are getting better at intercepting the vast quantities of the drug bound for our shores, but they are up against both ruthless cartels with enormous resources and a public with a taste for nose candy and little understanding that cocaine can be every bit as destructive as ice or heroin. "The market for cocaine is growing at an exponential rate," says Dr Don Weatherburn, the director of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research. "It is safe to say we are in a cocaine epidemic." 

*Names have been changed.

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DRUG MONEY

ONE KILOGRAM OF WHOLESALE COCAINE IN COLUMBIA:
\$2100

IMPORTED INTO MEXICO:
\$12,500

IMPORTED INTO THE UNITED STATES FROM MEXICO:
\$28,500

IMPORTED INTO AUSTRALIA FROM MEXICO:
\$146,000

PROFIT MARGIN:
7000%

BLOWN AWAY: Cocaine played a part in the deaths of John Belushi, Michael Hutchence, AFL player Chris Mainwaring and River Phoenix.

and believes he deserves his weekend "treats". Getting his hands on those has never been simpler. "One thing that's changed in recent years is how easy it is to get coke," he says. "When you saw a story on the news about a major drug bust a decade ago, you knew the price was going to rise and your chance of scoring would fall. These days, that rarely happens. Yes, the cops are seizing a lot of coke, but that's only because there's so much more coming in." Andy is also pleased that the supply chain seems to have shortened. "It used to be that you knew a guy who knew a guy who sold cocaine. Today you just know a guy. It's more immediate."