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California city reopens Woolworth's lunch counter - the last one in the nation

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The Woolworth's lunch counter was once a nucleus of community in Bakersfield. Now, new owners hope a revamp of the historic space will breathe life back into the city's struggling downtown.

For decades, Woolworth operated hundreds of luncheonettes in stores around the country. The lunch counters became famous as the site of sit-in protests against segregation in 1960. Some outlasted the retail chain itself and continued to serve customers after Woolworth went out of business in 1997. But many closed their doors.

Bakersfield's Woolworth's lunch counter - the last of its kind in the country - has been closed for renovations since 2022. Before that, it had the novelty appeal of a Blockbuster store, joked new owner Sherod Waite. But Waite and his wife, Emily, believed the lunch counter could be restored to its former glory. When the couple purchased the former Woolworth store to house their wealth management company, Moneywise, they saw potential beyond office space in the mammoth building.

After years of renovations, the Bakersfield Woolworth is reopening with a block party on Saturday. The updated building will contain a bar, event space and recording studio in addition to Moneywise's offices. The "crown jewel," Waite said, is still the lunch counter, which has a facelift and a new menu.

"Bakersfield is just an underdog city," Waite said. "This means a lot to everybody. We have something that we can point to to be proud of, beyond just Buck Owens and Merle Haggard. There's more to Bakersfield than oil and gas."

Bakersfield's urban core is in "recovery mode," Waite said. The city was hit hard by the pandemic, and many of the downtown storefronts are vacant. Many of Bakersfield's oldest buildings were leveled by a 1952 earthquake,



Installation view: Rico Gatson, *Sacred Bodies (From the Counter into the Cosmos)*, 2025, Bakersfield, CA. Image courtesy Sherod Waite.



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he said, but the Woolworth building - built in 1950 - remained. The Waites are in the process of getting it added to the National Register of Historic Buildings.

The redesign was “blessed” by the discovery of original construction drawings discovered in the building’s boiler room, said local architect Daniel Cater. His hope wasn’t to create a “museum piece,” he said, but a space that honored the nostalgic diner aesthetic while serving the modern city.

The decor nods to the lunch counters’ role in the Civil Rights movement - in a piece by Brooklyn-based artist Rico Gatson, photos of the sit-ins are overlaid with bright beams of color. While much of the kitchen equipment is still original, the stools have been reupholstered and the laminate floor removed to expose the original terrazzo tile.

The menu has also been updated. In 1939, Woolworth’s lunch counters visitors could purchase dishes like cubed minute steak and buttered beets. Now, the Bakersfield location will serve chef Richard Yoshimura’s elevated versions of diner classics like patty melts, reubens and icebox cheesecake.

Seeing the space come to life as the store has “soft opened” in recent weeks has made it an especially rewarding project, said Cater, who typically works in an office just a few blocks away.