

# FOOD & WINE

weekender.

# CITY IS SHAKEN, STIRRED

Producing a top-shelf cocktail is quite a production and best left in the hands of the professionals, writes DANIEL HONAN.

THE room is dimly lit so you can barely see the person opposite you, but the music is loud and clear. Deliberate shadows are cast to conceal the more mundane aspects of this place - a fuse box, a light switch, a speaker system - while strategic lights draw the eye towards shelves stacked with bottles of booze in all manner of flavours, shapes and sizes.

Beneath the shelves, in-between a long narrow space, a few smartly dressed bartenders move swiftly back and forth selecting the ingredients they need. Two napkins are placed diagonally square in front a couple at the bar and a polished low-ball cocktail glass is placed on top. Next to this is a crystal jug filled with ice, one part gin, one part vermouth, and one part Campari.

Every now and then the liquid is stirred together, gently, as the ice chills and slightly dilutes the alcohol. While this happens, the bartender fills a small glass bottle with tonic water and places it next to another low-ball, already filled with gin, a wedge of lemon and ice.

Moving back to the crystal jug, the bartender slowly pours its prepared contents into the waiting tumbler, which now holds a large cube of ice, then cuts a slither of orange peel to garnish the drink, but not before twisting it to release the oils into the finished cocktail.

Much like a chef, every gesture has a purpose every detail has been planned.

The couple, who have been talking with the bartender this whole time, are presented with their drinks.

"Wow, this is delicious, thank you," the bartender hears them say, followed by, "so, what else do you do?"

It's a common conceit heard in bars, both small and large, particularly on a Friday and Saturday night. Unlike a chef, or a sommelier, or, perhaps, even a barista, the job of a bartender is, typically, seen as a stopgap. Done by someone who just pulls a couple of beers and mixes a few drinks on the weekend to earn a few extra bucks. And, to be fair, the hospitality industry is an industry that employs a lot of casual workers; many of who are pursuing other interests beyond four dimly lit walls.

However, there are those who dedicate their time, their careers, and their passion to the service, design, pleasure and diversity of the drinking experience.

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The aesthetic is as much a part of the drink as the taste.

Ethan Ortipp, Coal and Cedar

"There's a substantial amount of thought that goes into the way we present our drinks," says Ethan Ortipp, from Coal and Cedar.

"When you see the entire process from start to finish, from the moment you walk in the door and see the space, down to what the bartender is wearing, to how the drink is prepared, what ingredients are used, and how it's served.

"All of this is factored into what we do and how we do it. The aesthetic is as much a part of the drink as is the taste."

"It takes time and skill and great produce to create a well-made drink," says Paul Davies from MoneyPenny [sic]. "Unfortunately, some people think value for money directly correlates to the size of the drink, when, actually, you're paying for the fresh produce and the skill and time of the bartender."

Just like a fine-diner, the ingredients, the thought, and the gestures involved in creating a cocktail, from the initial concept to the final service, are always planned with a purpose in mind.

"This is a full time job for us," says Chris Wilson from The Koutetsu.

"We don't do this on weekends, we're hear all the time, constantly working on making our drinks list and what we offer better, to showcase our passion and our skills."

In the past few years, at least, Newcastle has experienced a paradigm shift towards a much more cosmopolitan way of nightlife with the emergence of small bars like Coal and Cedar and The Koutetsu, both on Hunter Street.

This is due, in part to the lockout laws, but also to a large number of young Novocastrians who have spent time in cities elsewhere, experiencing their bar and restaurant scenes, and upon returning to Newcastle have wanted to create a similar experience in their home town.

"We grew up in Newcastle, we love this



LIFTING THE BAR: Barman Reece Glynn at MoneyPenny. Picture: Max Mason-Hubers



MEASURED: Chris Wilson, of Koutetsu.

place," continues Wilson, "and we want to see it evolve just as much as everyone else. We're inspired by bars in Sydney and Melbourne, and overseas. We wanted to create a place that we would enjoy going to. Not to just have a drink, but to have an experience."

Understanding a little something about anything can heighten the pleasure and enjoyment of experiencing it, especially when that something is as sensual as food and drink.

"Fresh, seasonal fruit is one of the key ingredients in our cocktails," says Davies.

"We try and show our customers why they're paying \$18 or \$19 for a drink, because we've used fresh fruit, like a real mango in a mango daiquiri, which is made by someone who's knowledgeable and passionate about what they're creating."

"I think it's very close to the level of a good chef in a restaurant," says Ortipp.

"It's important for people to know where the product comes from and why it's being

used. For example, if we use a certain type of honey for a certain type of drink, we make it known to our customers where it's from as well as how and why we've used it."

Davies says a skilled bartender will always measure things out.

"We all know it looks cool if they free pour because it makes it seem like they know what they're doing, but that's bullshit."

"A skilled bartender will always measure things out. No one's that good."

Having the time knowledge, passion, and requisite skills are important, but being consistent is crucial. Consistency, especially in hospitality, is what sets apart the good from the bad, and the ugly.

"We strive for consistency without it becoming boring," says Wilson. "We change the drinks menu to coincide with the seasons. We'll spend countless hours designing a new cocktail list that includes around seven to eight unique cocktails created in-house, alongside the classics."

Bars like The Koutetsu, Coal and Cedar, and MoneyPenny, along with Fortunate Son, Reserve Wine Bar, Nagisa, and others, are changing the way Newcastle drinks. They're places run by passionate professionals, with a respect for alcohol, who are dedicated to their craft and the drinking experience.

"To simplify it," says Wilson, "we're standing in between what people want, and what they could have at home. They come into places like ours because of the experience they receive."

"That includes the greeting at the door, the way the place is set up, including the atmosphere, the type of drinks on offer, the style of glassware they're served in, plus the knowledge, skill and care that goes into making the drink."