

A U S T R A L I A N

BARTENDER[®]

April 2026

The Voice of Bar Professionals

#296

Bartender of the Year Spirits Academy backs the best in the business



*Plus:
Rum's
reputation
grows up*

**Fortunate Son's
Dylan Howarth**
ON HIS HOST OF
THE YEAR WIN



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THE BAR EXAM

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Welcome.



Hello shakers and stirrers,

Welcome to April, when everything at *Australian Bartender* HQ ramps up a notch with the launch of this year's Australian Bar Awards and planning for Sydney Bar Week well underway. Entries have been pouring in, and it has been wonderful to see everyone embracing this year's new entry requirement of providing a short statement explaining why you are nominating that person or venue.

You have until midnight on 15 May to get your nominations in. This year is also a special one – the 25th anniversary of the awards – get ready to celebrate.

Brad Wright is back writing for us this issue, swapping his Single Malt Whisky Club hat for his Rum Tribe one. It's a great read about the maturing of rum's reputation in the Australian market – take a look on page 22.

Marcus Motteram – owner of Adelaide's Ralph Louis Frederick and Hains & Co – is also back (he wrote for us about his gin love in the June 2025 issue), this time reflecting on his whisky situation and its blossoming from dislike to appreciation. As someone still on training wheels with whisky, Marcus' experience made me feel a lot better about it taking time. Head to page 28 for that.

We also have some stellar profiles in the Back Bar. The 2025 Australian Bar Awards Host of the Year, Dylan Howarth, talks to Alexandra Zinghini about his career (page 38); as Odd Culture Group gets ready to open two new venues on York Street in Sydney, I chat with CEO, Rebecca Lines, about her time in hospitality and how she just couldn't quit it (page 40); and our postcard this issue is from Aurélie Panhelleux, bar operations manager at CopperBay in Hôtel Lancaster Paris on the Champs-Élysées (page 43).

See you at the bar.

Kim Berry, Editor

On this month's cover:

Spirits Academy is the driving force behind the 2026 Bartender of the Year and the Top 100 Most Influential List, reinforcing its position at the centre of education, advocacy, and community in Australia's hospitality industry.

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Australian Bartender is published by Yaffa Media Pty Ltd

ABN 54 002 699 354
17-21 Bellevue Street,
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All mail to:
GPO Box 606, Sydney NSW 2001

Subscriptions

www.greatmagazines.com.au
Call: 1800 807760
Email: subscriptions@yaffa.com.au

Subscription Rates

1 year/9 issues \$88

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The Rail.

Born Lucky

Marble Bar, Hilton Sydney
@marblebarsyd

Crafted at the iconic Marble Bar in Hilton Sydney, with over 130 years of history, the Born Lucky cocktail pays tribute to the bar's original founder, George Adams. Adams was known for his charm, good fortune, work ethic, and catchphrase, "It's better to be born lucky than rich".

Inspired by his legacy and the bar's history, this signature blend of Plantation Pineapple rum, Havana Club rum, passionfruit, lime, vanilla and banana liqueur offers a vibrant, tropical twist that's as bold and memorable as the man himself.

Born Lucky

- 20ml Plantation Pineapple rum
- 20ml Havana Club rum
- 10ml Monin vanilla syrup
- 15ml banana liqueur
- 30ml passionfruit puree
- 10ml lime juice

1. Add all ingredients to a shaker with ice and shake
2. Strain into a rocks glass with ice
3. Garnish with $\frac{1}{2}$ passionfruit and a charred cinnamon stick



Headlines & Stuff

Spirits Academy: Official sponsor for 2026 Bartender of the Year and Top 100 Most Influential

Australian Bartender is thrilled to announce Spirits Academy as its powerhouse partner driving the 2026 Bartender of the Year and the bi-annual Top 100 Most Influential.

As the advocacy and training arm of Spirits Platform, Spirits Academy exists to educate, entertain, and reward. It delivers national venue training, ambassador-led sessions, and large-scale activations that go beyond theory and into application – giving bartenders not just the knowledge of what they are pouring, but why it deserves a place on the back bar and cocktail list. Brands including Cointreau, Michter's, Disaronno, Licor 43 and more from the Spirits Platform portfolio become part of the creative process, part of the conversation and part of the bartender's toolkit.

Sponsoring Bartender of the Year and the Top 100 Most Influential puts Spirits Academy at the centre of the industry's most important moments and alongside its best talent. It is a platform where education meets competition, where brands meet bartenders and where influence meets genuine opportunity.



For bartenders, the value is immediate: deeper knowledge, direct brand engagement and the chance to experience liquids in a way that goes well beyond a standard tasting.

For Spirits Academy, it is a chance to demonstrate its position as a leader in hospitality education not through statements, but through meaningful participation.

On the ground, the program is powered by a national ambassador team. Stephanie Rainbow leads across New South Wales and the ACT; Max Borrowman across Victoria and Tasmania; Liam Shephard across Queensland and the Northern Territory;

with Mark Hickey leading nationally while also overseeing Western Australia and South Australia.

From immersive brand dinners to large-scale activations like Aperitivo Sociale, Spirits Academy builds experiences that stick. Add initiatives like Luxe Obscura and the Foundation – recognising talent, loyalty and progression across the trade – and this is a partner genuinely invested in the people behind the bar and the careers they are building.

Spirits Academy is not just supporting the industry, it is actively shaping it, and *Australian Bartender* is excited to have the team on board.



Headlines & Stuff

Jack Daniel's and Jameson under one roof: Pernod Ricard and Brown-Forman confirm merger talks

Two of the biggest names in global spirits are in talks to combine in a deal that would reshape what sits on back bars worldwide.

Pernod Ricard and Brown-Forman confirmed on 26 March that they are in discussions regarding a potential merger, a move that would unite two of the world's five largest spirits companies.

The two companies account for some of the most-poured spirits on back bars across Australia and the world. Pernod Ricard's portfolio spans Jameson Irish whiskey, Absolut vodka, Beefeater gin, Chivas Regal, The Glenlivet, Martell cognac, Malibu, and Mumm and Perrier-Jouët champagnes. Brown-Forman brings Jack Daniel's – the world's best-selling American whiskey (17.6 million cases annually) – alongside Woodford Reserve, Herradura and El Jimador tequilas, Diplomatico rum, Gin Mare, and Glendronach, Benriach and Glenglassaugh Scotch whiskeys.

Both companies described the potential transaction as “a merger of equals”, framing it as a combination that would leverage Brown-Forman's dominant position in American whiskey and tequila with Pernod Ricard's global distribution network and exposure to high-growth markets.

The combined entity would have an estimated market capitalisation of around \$43.6 billion (US\$30 billion) and volume close to 200 million nine-litre cases, ranking it second only to Diageo globally.

A key complication is governance. Both Pernod Ricard and Brown-Forman are family-controlled businesses – the Ricard family on one side, the Brown family on the other – and a ‘merger of equals’ would require both to accept a dilution of that control.

Both companies have stressed no agreement has been reached. Pernod Ricard said it “does not intend to further communicate until an agreement is reached or discussions are terminated.” Brown-Forman issued identical language.

If a deal does proceed, the combined portfolio would represent a significant concentration of brands that bartenders across Australia pour daily – and would create a direct competitor to Diageo of a scale the industry has not previously seen.



Fresh look for Tequila Ocho Plata

Tequila Ocho, the Highlands tequila created by legendary tequilero Carlos Camarena and the late Tomas Estes, has released its new packaging. The refreshed look is the result of a four-year design process that honours Ocho's commitment to terroir, tradition and transparent craftsmanship, while maintaining the same agave-forward tequila made a mano y corazón – by hand and by heart.

The new bottle design marks the next evolution of Ocho's global visual identity, unifying the brand across markets. The label paper has a rustic feel with “fingerprinting” texture throughout – a nod to the fields or ranchos from which generations of jimadores have harvested the agave that Camarena distills into the world's finest sipping tequila.

The rear label features a QR code which, when scanned, leads to Ocho's website and a reservoir of information about the field profile and characteristics, as well as the complete tasting notes for each vintage.

Tequila Ocho's new packaging will roll out across Plata and Reposado expressions in Australia, distributed exclusively through Vanguard Luxury Brands, Ocho's long-standing partner in the market.

Headlines & Stuff

Queensland distillery puts the Outback to work

A new Queensland distillery is making a case that extreme climate is not a liability for whisky production but a maturation tool. The Outback Distilling Co. has launched its first whisky and gin range from Roma, 480 kilometres west of Brisbane.

Founded by Will Fellowes and Michael McLaughlin, the makers behind Western Queensland Spirit, the distillery sits at the edge of Australia's outback where daytime temperatures exceed 44°C, nights can drop below zero, and humidity is near-absent. Rather than mitigate these conditions, the founders have built their production philosophy around them, coining the term 'arid-aging' to describe what happens to whisky in the bond store across the cycle of outback seasons.

"The summer heat drives the spirit deep into the oak, pulling colour, tannin, and flavour. The cooler winter season then acts as a settling period, allowing the spirit to integrate what it has absorbed," said Fellowes.

"This continued rhythm builds layered complexity and depth at a pace the climate demands. What we see in the glass at three years, some distilleries don't see for much longer."

The launch portfolio runs to three expressions. The Arid-Aged Single Malt Whisky (\$139, 700ml, 40% ABV) is matured in a blend of ex-bourbon and Oloroso sherry casks, with bond store temperatures ranging from 8–16°C in winter and 28–35°C in summer. The profile is sherry-led: sweet ginger, honey syrup, and sandalwood on the nose; stewed fruit,



almond, and vanilla cream on the palate.

The Native Dry Gin (\$89, 700ml, 40% ABV) is built around botanicals grown on-site or foraged locally, including saltbush, desert lime, lemon-scented gum, and bush lemon. More than fifteen recipe iterations preceded the final formula, with star anise proving too dominant in early trials and bay leaf ultimately providing the roundedness the team was after. The gin took a gold medal at the 2025 London Spirits Competition ahead of launch.

At the top of the range sits the Pioneer's Collection – The Founders Cask (\$220, 500ml, 43–48% ABV), a limited twice-yearly release drawn from premium Oloroso, PX, and Australian Muscat casks. The Muscat barrels are a deliberate reference to Western Queensland's history

as a fortified wine-growing region. The Founders Cask, celebrating the first barrel ever filled by Fellowes and McLaughlin, has limited stock remaining; the next Pioneer's Collection release is due at the end of 2026.

The operation runs on solar power for more than two-thirds of its energy demand, uses a closed-loop cooling system, and harvests 200,000 litres of rainwater annually for spirit production. The founders describe the seasonal schedule as a practical necessity: distilling in winter when cool nights improve cooling efficiency, and steeping and macerating in summer when heat does the work.

The Outback Distilling Co. is available nationally and online at outbackdistilling.com



Beluga Vodka is back, and ready to make some noise

Now exclusively distributed by Altus Brands, this global luxury brand returns to the Australian market with a fresh perspective and refined sense of occasion.

Crafted for those who appreciate the finer things, Beluga has long been synonymous with elevated drinking experiences, from five-star venues to standout retail shelves. This time, it's here to invigorate the category, not just sit within it.

Beluga brings a renewed focus on ritual, pairing, and a more considered approach to vodka service, reintroducing a sense of occasion to every pour.

With a focus on influential venues and retailers nationwide, Beluga is set to re-establish itself at the top end of the market, blending heritage, luxury, and a confident, modern perspective.

For all enquiries head to their Instagram [@altus.brands](https://www.instagram.com/altus.brands)

Headlines & Stuff

Sante Cocktail Bar is set to close with news of a potential new opening in Sydney

Toowoomba favourite Santé Cocktail Bar is set to close its doors in mid-May, as owners Alexandra Percy and Loic Mouchelin prepare for a potential next chapter in Sydney.

After six and a half years of trade, the venue has been listed for sale, closing out a run that saw it pick up multiple accolades, including Regional Bar of the Year at the 2022 and 2025 Australian Bar Awards. Over that time, Santé built a reputation as both a late-night mainstay and a community anchor for the regional city.

Percy and Mouchelin say the closure will allow them to shift focus toward their recently launched digital venture, the Santé Cocktails app, while taking time to reset before their next move.

“Our plan is to move to Sydney, go travelling for a little bit, and refresh,” they said. “We haven’t secured anything yet; we want to move down, settle, and then look for a space. Exciting times ahead.”

While no new venue has been confirmed, the pair have made it clear this isn’t necessarily the end of Santé – just a relocation in progress.

Before the lights go out, the team plans to send the bar off the only way they know how: with a blowout party celebrating more than six years of cocktails, community, and late nights in Toowoomba.



Sydney pub The Oaks sells for 140m to Gallagher family

Sydney’s North Shore just saw one of its biggest pub deals land, with the Oaks Hotel in Neutral Bay selling for around \$140 million to Gallagher Hotels.

It’s a headline number – equal second-highest ever paid for a pub in Australia – and it closes a 50-year chapter for the Thomas family, who’ve held the venue since 1975. For most locals, the Oaks isn’t just a pub. It’s where afternoons disappear and plans get extended.

The Gallaghers aren’t coming in to flip it. This is a long-term hold, with Patrick and Angela Gallagher and the next generation already involved. The approach is light-touch – small changes, not a full reset.

Which makes sense. Between the courtyard, Taffy’s Sports Bar and its established mix of food and drinks, the venue already does exactly what people turn up for.

What the deal really shows is where the market’s at. Big, proven pubs are pulling serious weight, even while other parts of commercial property soften. Buyers are chasing scale, consistency, and venues with built-in demand.

This sale now sits alongside other major pub trades across the country, reinforcing the same point: if the asset is strong enough, there’s no shortage of interest.

Headlines & Stuff



Sullivan's Cove wins World's Best for a record fourth time

Sullivan's Cove has done it again. The Hobart distillery has been named World's Best Single Cask Single Malt at the 2026 World Whiskies Awards, making it the only distillery in the competition's history to have claimed the top title four times.

The winning whisky is Single Cask No. TD0112, an 18-year-old matured in a French oak ex-white wine cask. It is already sold out, but the win puts Australian whisky back at the top of the global conversation. Previous world titles for Sullivan's Cove came in 2014, 2018, and 2019.

White wine cask maturation is increasingly explored across the whisky category, but rarely at this age. The format brings brightness, tannin, and structure that demands careful management across its full lifespan.

Director of Whisky Creation, Heather Tillott, said the process is anything but passive.

"Decisions are made incrementally, with a long view, allowing the whisky to develop without ever losing balance or clarity of character. To see that tension resolve so completely at this age is deeply rewarding."

CEO Andy Gaunt said the fourth title speaks to process over product.

"To be recognised again at a global level speaks less to any single whisky, and more to the philosophy that underpins everything we do. With patience, discipline, and clarity of purpose, new benchmarks can be set from outside traditional centres of production."

The World Whiskies Awards also handed Sullivan's Cove two Icons of Whisky titles: Heather Tillott as Global Innovator Manager of the Year, and Supply Chain Manager Marcelo Viapiana as Global Warehouse Manager of the Year.

Current wine cask releases are available at sullivanSCOVE.com.

Trish Brew named Teremana's first Australian ambassador

Trish Brew is the national brand ambassador for Teremana Tequila – the first person to hold the role in Australia – as the Dwayne Johnson-founded ultra-premium small-batch tequila pushes further into the local on-premise market. She brings almost 20 years of hospitality experience to the position, with a career spanning award-winning venue leadership, education, and industry advocacy. Her remit will cover bartender and operator engagement through tailored education, in-trade activations, and a "consistently practical approach to brand building".

Brew said, "This role is about showing up consistently, supporting venues in a real way, and building a brand that earns its place behind the bar."

Teremana, produced in the Jalisco highlands by the third-generation Lopez family, is built on the idea of 'mana' – a shared energy and sense of connection – a philosophy Brew says aligns directly with how she approaches hospitality.

"There's something powerful in creating moments where people feel connected to each other and to what they're drinking. That's the kind of energy I want to build through this role," she said.

Mast-Jägermeister APAC area director, Rob Marsh, said, "Trish's appointment reflects Teremana's commitment to the trade, with a clear focus on consistency, credibility, and genuine connection within the hospitality community. Her experience and reputation makes her uniquely placed to help build the brand in Australia."

For trade enquiries and collaborations, Brew is contactable at tbrew@spiritsplatform.com.au



COINTREAU'S MARGARITA CHALLENGE

Shaking up global creativity for the 6th year in a row, the iconic Margarita competition returns bigger, bolder, and more global than ever.



Cointreau returns in 2026 with a bold new direction for its global Margarita Challenge, built around one simple idea, **Shake It Up**.


This year is not about playing it safe. It is about breaking habits, pushing creativity, and rethinking what a Margarita can be. Bartenders are challenged to step outside their comfort zone and create something unexpected, expressive, and completely their own.

At the centre of this year's competition is a new mechanic designed to test true creativity. Once registered, bartenders will access a digital shaker. With one shake, they will unlock one of ten secret ingredients that must be used in their Margarita.

No swaps. No second chances.

This element of surprise forces bartenders to adapt, think on their feet, and turn limitation into inspiration. It is a test of flavour, balance, and originality, all built around the versatility of Cointreau.

The Cointreau Margarita Challenge has become one of the most respected bartender competitions in the world, known for spotlighting talent and pushing the craft forward. The journey once again leads to France, with finalists travelling to Paris and Angers, the home of Cointreau, where the finalists will take part in immersive experiences, hands on workshops, and present their Margaritas to a panel of leading global industry figures.

Entries will be judged on creativity, balance, technical execution, presentation, and how each bartender brings the Shake It Up concept to life. 

How to Enter

Entries are now open and close on 31st May 2026.

Professional bartenders can enter via the official Cointreau Margarita Challenge website <https://www.cointreau.com/int/en/cointreau-margarita-challenge> or Scan the QR code below.

1. Register online now
2. Shake the digital shaker to reveal your secret ingredient
3. Create and submit your Margarita using Cointreau
4. Bring the Shake It Up concept to life in your entry

The countdown is on.

Follow Spirits Platform Instagram for updates, regional selections, and the road to the global final in Angers, France.



Vince Sidari, Australian winner of Cointreau Margarita Challenge 2025

Contact your local Spirits Academy Ambassador

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123 Gotha St, Fortitude Valley

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By Kit Kriewaldt

The first thing you learn about Alcotraz, Brisbane's new prison-themed cocktail bar, is what it isn't. Staff are quick to say the venue is not really a bar, an escape room, or a stage show, but some combination of the three. There are actors, a plot, puzzles to solve and, of course, cocktails.

In front of a nondescript building in Fortitude Valley, you're handed a pack of (fake) cigarettes and ushered inside for processing. You're given an orange prison jumpsuit and assigned to one of six cells by the surprisingly friendly guards, who assure you that although booze is banned in Alcotraz, the rules can be bent.

The venue's fit-out is meticulous. From the solid metal bars on the cells to the faux newspaper articles stuck on the walls – alongside barely legible diary entries and graffiti – every detail supports the theme.

But Alcotraz is a far cry from most high-concept bars. There's no menu to order from, no snacks, no bartender asking whether you've been here before. The only decision to make is whether the drinks you trade your cigarettes for will be alcoholic or not. After that, everything takes a backseat to the story unfolding around you.

Even the bar itself is disguised as the prison kitchen, staffed by performers playing fellow inmates.

Over the course of each 105-minute session, they bring four rounds of "chicken soup" that's best kept hidden when the warden's around.

Cocktails start out fruity with the Crime of Passion (vodka, passionfruit liqueur, strawberry purée, lime, cranberry and orange) and get more complex as the night goes on.

The cast rotates regularly and different cells are drawn into different activities and subplots, so repeat visits aren't always the same experience.

The venue is a collaboration between



UK-based Inventive Productions, which opened the first Alcotraz in London in 2017, and event company Fever. Brisbane is the third Alcotraz outpost in Australia (the eighth worldwide), following venues in Melbourne and Sydney, which opened in 2024 and 2025 respectively.

Inventive Productions has three other immersive cocktail experiences in London, including the magical Hexmoor and the Wild West-themed Moonshine Saloon, which tells a prequel to the story of Alcotraz.

Founder, Sam Shearman, says, "We're

taking it beyond just a themed bar fit-out, to a full theatre-style experience with costumes and actors helping to create something all-enveloping."

The company is betting big on Brisbane audiences, with the first Moonshine Saloon outside of the UK set to open on 10 April, next to Alcotraz on Gotha Street.

"Brisbane felt like the perfect place to welcome a new generation of outlaws," says Shearman.

Alcotraz Brisbane is open from Tuesday to Sunday.

Opens



The Flynn

2A Bligh St, Sydney
@theflynnsyd

Sydney CBD pub The Flynn has reopened following a \$2 million-plus renovation, marking a new phase for the long-running venue from hospitality group East Coast Collective.

The 200-seat venue returned on 16 March with a refreshed layout, full table service replacing traditional bar queues, and a new menu from chef Justin North. Known for his work at Bécasse, North's menu sits somewhere between elevated pub classics and casual dining, blending Mediterranean and Asian influences with familiar crowd-pleasers.

But the bar program remains central to the venue's reboot.

Spritzes lead the drinks list, forming the backbone of a menu designed for easy CBD drinking – bright, fruit-forward serves built for after-work sessions and long afternoons that drift into evening. Alongside the spritz focus, the bar also pours a lineup of signature cocktails and reliable classics, with margaritas, martinis and palomas forming the core of the offering.

The drinks list is rounded out with a rotating selection of beers on tap, keeping the pub format intact while lifting the overall experience.

The redesign by EJE Architecture has brightened the space, shifting the feel of the venue toward a lighter, more contemporary CBD pub while maintaining the scale and energy of a large city bar.

Co-owner and group general manager Josh Green says the aim was to lift the quality of the experience without losing the accessibility of a traditional pub.

"We wanted to elevate the experience without losing what people love about a great pub. You'll find a level of quality you don't always expect, but with the same relaxed vibe and great value," said Green.

Opens



Molly Rose Brewing

279-285 Wellington St,
Collingwood
@mollyrosebrewing

In the backstreets of Collingwood, neighbourhood pub Molly Rose Brewing is resetting the tone of the venue it first opened with a simple goal: make it feel like a local again.

The brewery has rolled out a refresh across the space, food, and drinks program, bringing the venue back toward a more casual, beer-led environment after it drifted into restaurant territory over the past few years.

Founder Nic Sandery describes the new approach as “Collingwood beer hall chic.”

“At one point we were starting to feel a bit too much like a restaurant,” Sandery says. “We’ve brought it back to something warmer, more relaxed and more us. We want Molly Rose to feel like a place anyone can walk into and feel at home, beer drinker or not.”

Inside the brewpub, the changes lean into that communal atmosphere. Long

tables have returned and the venue has relaxed its approach to group bookings, allowing parties of up to 20 people to book in without minimum spends, fixed packages or set menus. The idea is simple: turn up, order what you want and stay as long as the night lasts, with a late-night bar menu available as the evening rolls on.

The food offering has shifted as well, with new Head Chef Sam Field steering the menu toward European beer hall-style dishes with a Melbourne spin.

Field began cooking at 13 in a country pub in Chichester before moving through fine dining kitchens in the UK. Since arriving in Australia in 2021, he’s worked with chefs including Nick Blake at Noosa Beach House and most recently Peter Sheldon at The European in Melbourne, where he was part of the team that secured the venue’s first chef’s hat.

“There’s so much care and hard work that goes into brewing,” Field says. “My goal is to use our menu to highlight that, to create dishes that sit naturally with the

beers and make the whole experience feel cohesive and delicious.”

The drinks list continues to centre on beer brewed onsite, with the lineup rotating through seasonal releases, small-batch experiments, and collaborations. But the program has widened to reflect more of what the team produces in-house, including spirits distilled onsite and a cocktail list built around those products.

The distillery side of the operation produces small-batch gins and a range of house-made liqueurs, including strawberry vermouth, banana bread liqueur and pastis, which appear across the cocktail list alongside local wines and non-alcoholic options.

“We’re brewers first,” Sandery says. “But great hospitality means having something thoughtful in the glass for everyone.”

For Sandery, the direction is less about reinvention and more about getting back to what worked in the first place – a brewpub where drinks, food and conversation all happen at the same table.

Linla

413 Bourke St, Surry Hills
@Linla_sydney

In Sydney's bustling streets of Surry Hills, Linla has taken over the former home of Dead Ringer – and given the space a new identity.

From the street, it keeps things open and social with alfresco seating, but step inside and the layout shifts. You pass the bar before the room tightens into something more intimate – low lighting, warm timber, and a mix of bar seating and tucked-away tables that feel built for long, slightly loose nights.

The concept comes from Taiwanese-born, Sydney-based restaurateur and mixologist Charles Chang, whose background (including a Top 100 finish in the Diageo World Class Competition) shows up in the drinks as much as the room itself. Linla leans into Taiwanese hospitality and pan-Asian social dining, built around a simple idea: drinking together as ritual. The name itself comes from the sound of a toast – that shared moment before the first sip.

The food follows that same thinking. It's designed to be passed around, pulled apart, and not taken too seriously. Night-Market Crispy Chicken arrives in a



paper bag with spices to shake through yourself. Pork and prawn wontons land in a rich tom yum beurre blanc, and a dessert that turns fairy bread into a bao stuffed with ice cream. It's playful, but it knows what it's doing.

Behind the scenes, there's more weight. Moku chef Ha Chuen Wai brings his omakase format into a private dining room next door, offering a tighter, more focused counterpoint to the main

space – a reminder that Linla isn't just operating on one level.

Then there's the bar, which is where things get interesting.

The cocktail list is built for easy drinking but doesn't cut corners on technique. It's layered, precise, and quietly ambitious without feeling like it's trying to prove a point. A standout is the Mi-Bubble – a bubble tea-inspired cocktail. Aged rum is worked through earl grey, English breakfast tea, black sugar, milk, milo and tapioca pearls, landing somewhere between dessert and drink. It hits like a Milo chocolate bubble tea, with the rum folded cleanly into the sweetness rather than sitting on top of it.

It's a good example of how Linla approaches drinks overall: familiar entry point, then a bit more going on underneath.

That approach carries into how the bar positions itself more broadly. Linla has celebrated the launch with their first bartender collaboration with Penicillin Hong Kong – one of Asia's most influential bars when it comes to sustainability cements. Founded by Agung Prabowo and Laura Prabowo, Penicillin has built its reputation on fermentation, foraging and upcycling, with a "scrap-less" model that reworks waste into fully realised cocktail ingredients.



Bar Coopers

Shop 4/321 Chatsworth Rd,
Coorparoo
@barcoopers.bne

In Coorparoo, Bar Cooper's is carving out a clear identity as a neighbourhood bar that leans refined without losing its local edge. Led by venue manager Samantha Pritchard, the venue sits alongside Snug and Jane's Deli but pushes into moodier territory.

"At the heart of it, we just wanted to create a place people feel really good being in," says Pritchard. "Somewhere that has the familiarity of a local pub, but with a genuine love for great food and beautiful drinks behind everything we do. Elevated, but never intimidating."

Positioned as "the older sibling of the corner," Bar Cooper's shifts the pace of the precinct. It's designed for evenings that stretch out, a space where guests can drop in casually, then settle in longer than planned.

The bar program is built to match that rhythm. Pritchard's brief was simple – keep it joyful. "Delicious, balanced, and interesting, but never overly serious," she says. The list moves between well-executed classics and signatures shaped by the kitchen, allowing guests to play it safe with a Martini or lean into something more expressive. "We really wanted to cater to different moods and occasions... keeping classics alongside signatures creates familiarity while still expressing our personality."

That connection to the kitchen is literal. A 35-year-old woodfired oven anchors the room and informs both the food and the drinks. "The oven gives the room such a beautiful energy and makes the space feel alive," says Pritchard. "It naturally inspired us to think about depth of flavour and balance... there's a constant conversation between the bar, FOH and the kitchen."

Importantly, the drinks offering doesn't sideline non-drinkers. A considered mocktail list sits alongside the cocktails, built with the same intent. "There are so many reasons someone might not be drinking, and they still deserve something



thoughtful and delicious in their glass," says Pritchard. "A good drink should make you feel included in the moment."

The result is a venue where the lines between bar and restaurant blur. "Some guests will come in for a quick glass of wine or cocktail and end up staying for dinner," she says. "Others might settle in for a long meal and discover a drink that makes the experience even more memorable."

Visually and atmospherically, Bar Cooper's leans into its "moodier" positioning, a darker, more intimate counterpoint to its neighbours, without tipping into exclusivity. As the seasons shift, that identity sharpens.



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The Long Pour.

Rum

Rum: From commodity to connoisseurship

Just as single malt whisky transitioned from a few fervent aficionados 20 years ago, to a global premium spirits powerhouse today, rum is following a similar trajectory. Rum Tribe co-founder, Brad Wright looks at its maturing reputation.



Words by Brad Wright
Photography by Chris Pearce
Venue, cocktails at Old Loves

As one of the Single Malt Whisky Club founders, for more than 20 years, I've witnessed its rise in Australia. With Rum Tribe, we are witnessing a similar maturing of rum's reputation and production in the local market. Similar forces are behind the development – education, scarcity, authenticity, and a hunger for flavour diversity.

Classification

Rum has one of the loosest definitions of any spirit category. Its categorisation as 'pure single rum' – its equivalent to whisky's 'single malt whisky' definition – was only coined in 2015 as part of the Gargano Classification. Luca Gargano from Italian distributor, Valier, and Foursquare's Richard Seale developed

ester levels, and regional traditions (Jamaican funk versus Spanish column versus Martinique agricole). And just as it was back in the mid noughties, the independent bottlers are leading this charge by offering a range of styles, maturation, and finishes.

Just as Signatory, Gordon & MacPhail, and Cadenhead's shaped whisky's early geek culture, bottlers like Velier, La Maison du Rhum, Dead Reckoning, and Rum Nation are shaping rums.

This early enthusiast stage has also seen transparency become a battleground, with additives, dosage, and provenance now hot topics, mirroring single malt whisky's earlier push for age statements, cask disclosure, and distillery identity. This is the moment when a category stops being 'dark spirit, tastes sweet' and becomes 'tell me the still, the ester count, the cask, the distillery, the harvest'.



In a category historically embedded in a world of loose definitions, flexible labelling, and marketing-led storytelling, the label becomes the contract between producer and drinker, and that contract must be truthful and transparent.



the classification to "distinguish craft rums – rich in different substances besides alcohol – from industrial rums, which mainly contain ethanol".

The Gargano system has allowed early enthusiasts to really start talking about rum, which has resulted in an acceleration in education.

Rum is now where whisky was when geeks were just starting to differentiate distilleries, cask types, and production methods. In the early-mid 2000s Australia's whisky geeks were learning about age statements, cask disclosure, and distillery identity.

Rum drinkers are currently learning about fermentation times, still types,

Pushing boundaries

Producers are pushing boundaries with cask experimentation becoming rife: ex-sherry, port, sauternes, mizunara, stout, IPA, ginger beer, and even Grand Marnier cask matured rums are snapped up by rum collectors and drinkers alike.

Fermentation innovation (and rediscovery) is becoming a big thing too – long ferments, dunder and muck, exotic and wild yeasts and high ester marques (like our own Killik and Nil Desperandum) are becoming more sought after by enthusiasts.

With this comes the inevitable search for terroir and origin storytelling. Hand in hand with that search is the rise of

the micro-distillery. Just as world whisky boomed, small craft rum distilleries are appearing in Australia, the US, UK, and Europe, with demand for these low-output rarities growing exponentially. Rum is no longer just Caribbean and Latin America, it's global, diverse, and proudly weird.

Premiumisation is also accelerating, just as it did with single malt whisky in the 2000s. Limited editions sell out instantly – Velier, Foursquare ECS, Hampden, and small indie single cask bottlings behave like early Ardbeg Committee releases.

Age is no longer the only marker of quality – provenance, fermentation, and distillery character matter as much if not more. And just as whisky moved beyond 'older = better', collectors and investors are arriving – auction prices for Caroni, early Foursquare, and rare Demeraras mirror early Macallan and Port Ellen behaviour. The vultures are circling!

Have no doubt, rum is shifting from cheap mixer to serious premium spirit in the eyes of the mainstream.

Question of identity

Another similarity between whisky then, and rum now, is what I call 'the identity crisis' phase. With whisky it was blends versus single malts, NAS versus age statements, chill filtration, caramel colouring.

Rum is now wrestling with its own identity questions, with purity at the centre. The debate over dosing rum – adding sugar to the final product – is as old as rum itself.

Whisky has an ongoing debate about the use of E150a (spirit caramel) to artificially darken whisky, primarily within the Scotch and Irish whisky industries, since its use was permitted in the 1880 Spirits Act.

While caramel colouring is used to ensure colour consistency in whisky, adding sugar to rum is used to make sub-par spirits palatable.

In 2021, the European Union passed the EU Spirits Act, which was the first to regulate the amount of sugar allowable in rum (20g/l). A big step considering some rums were showing levels as high as 100g/l.

Today, people want to know the

distillery, the still, the cask, the age, the dosage. And they deserve to know if anything has been added to their bottle.

In a category historically embedded in a world of loose definitions, flexible labelling, and marketing-led storytelling, the label becomes the contract between producer and drinker, and that contract must be truthful and transparent.

Setting standards

There are other signs the market is maturing. Historically, rum has always been shaped by colonial heritage, production methods, and local agricultural practices. For decades, rum was marketed as a single, blurry category – dark rum, white rum, spiced rum, and premium rum.

Now, we are seeing a renaissance of those identities. Geographical style definitions are being reasserted and reinterpreted. Regulatory tightening is happening – Barbados, Jamaica, and Martinique are pushing for stricter definitions, just as Scotland did for whisky decades earlier.

Barbados is pushing for a legal GI (Geographical Indication) that would define what Barbados Rum means. Proposed rules include no additives (sugar, E150a), minimum aging on the island, traditional still types (pot and column) and transparency in labelling.

Jamaican regulations (already strict by world standards) are also being tightened – no additives, fermentation and dunder/muck practices protected, pot-still heritage.

Martinique's Appellation d'Origine Controlée (AOC) is considered the world's gold standard in rum regulation. Cane varieties, harvest windows, fermentation times, distillation proof, ageing requirements as well as geographic boundaries are all regulated under Martinique's AOC.

Looking ahead

If rum continues to follow whisky's timeline, expect more single distillery bottlings, more transparency, and more geek culture.

There will be more experimentation, festivals and premium pricing, but most importantly, more mainstream recognition of the incredible diversity and complexity of good rum. 🍹



A TOAST TO TRADITION

Rum and the navy have a long history together, with sailors being issued a daily ‘tot’ of rum until 1970. Honour tradition this ANZAC day with a Pusser’s Ginger Seadog.

Rum has an established tradition with the Commonwealth navies including Britain’s Royal Navy and the Australian and New Zealand navies.

The sailors were issued a daily ‘tot’ of rum on board ship, rationed out by the ship’s Purser (known as ‘Pusser’ to the sailors) a beloved tradition that continued for over 300 years until the Admiralty ended the daily rum ration on 31 July 1970, now known as Black Tot Day.

In 1979, American entrepreneur Charles Tobias reached an agreement with the Royal Navy and secured the recipe to produce “navy rum”, and Pusser’s Rum was born.

Each of the rums in the Pusser’s core range are different blends of rums in accordance with the Admiralty’s specifications. Rich, powerful and full-bodied, these robust rums offer a substantial palate, weight and texture.

As we celebrate our servicemen and women this ANZAC Day, toast with a Pusser’s Ginger Seadog – a nod to history and tradition.



Pusser’s Ginger Seadog

Combine Pusser’s Blue Label, ginger beer, bitters and lime. It is both nostalgic and modern at once. Cheers.

Pusser’s Blue Label 40% ABV

Aged for a minimum of three years, it is rich and full-bodied, with an unsurpassed smoothness due to its wooden “pot stillled” lineage. Pusser’s Rum Navy Blue Label Rum offers a bold taste profile with notes of molasses, dried fruits, and a hint

of spice. Make Pusser’s Ginger Seadog, a classic Painkiller or enjoy it neat to appreciate its full depth.

Pusser’s Gunpowder Proof 54.4% ABV

Crafted to meet the original Admiralty strength, this rum offers a bold taste that honours its maritime heritage. A high-proof, molasses-based aged spirit with notes of treacle, toffee, and spice. Full-bodied with a more enhanced flavour profile than the lower proof Blue Label. Make robust cocktails like Nelson’s Punch or Grog or enjoy it over ice.

Pusser’s 15YO 40% ABV

Known as the “Single Malt of Rum” this limited release uses traditional wooden pot stills and aged for 15 years offering a complex, dark amber and full-bodied profile with notes of molasses, caramel, oak, and dried fruits. An assertive and beautifully aged expression combining heft, body, fruit and oak in a poised balance. Enjoy neat, on the rocks or with a splash of water.

Pusser’s 151 75.5% ABV

Inspired by the historic British Navy rum tradition, this full-strength expression pays homage to centuries of maritime courage and camaraderie. On the palate, it’s intense and full-bodied, unfolding with layers of caramel, roasted coffee, and brown sugar. Ideal for high-proof tiki cocktails like the Zombie, Jet Pilot, Hurricane, and Nuclear Daiquiri. 🍹



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Whisky

From Teacher's to Taketsuru: Learning to love whisky

Owner of Adelaide's Ralph Louis Frederick and Hains & Co, Marcus Motteram, reflects on his whisky situationship - from bravado and dislike to curiosity and appreciation.



Words by Marcus Motteram
Photography by Jon Wah

Ralph Louis Frederick, Adelaide
@ralph_louis_frederick
Hains & Co, Adelaide
@hainsco

If you'd told 18-year-old me that one day I'd run a luxury whisky bar, I'd have laughed you out of the room – probably while nursing a hangover from a bottle of Teacher's Scotch.

My relationship with whisky started badly. Like many rookies, my first experience wasn't about nuance, terroir or cask influence. It was about bravado. A rough introduction to Scotch at 18

left me convinced whisky simply wasn't for me. I wrote it off as harsh, medicinal and entirely unnecessary when rum and gin existed.

Fast forward to 2003. I'd just been voted ALIA Bartender of the Year and felt like a complete imposter. How could I accept that accolade when I didn't even like whisky – arguably one of the most important spirits in our craft? At the time I was working at Chaise Lounge, a basement cocktail bar on Little Collins Street in Melbourne. Vodka dominated the back bar – we had 30 variants – while whisky occupied a small but serious corner.

The “in-the-know” guests ordered Lagavulin or Laphroaig. So one night, determined to educate myself, I poured





a dram of Laphroaig 10 Year Old into a wine glass and spent 30 minutes dissecting it. I found sea air, peat smoke, iodine, bandages, hospital corridors. My honest thought? Who in their right mind drinks this stuff?

But here's the lesson for rookie bartenders: don't let your first impression be your final word.

Training your palate (even when you don't like it)

Whisky appreciation isn't about forcing yourself to enjoy something immediately. It's about curiosity.

When peat felt like too much, I changed tack. I started with a Rusty Nail – Chivas Regal and Drambuie – and slowly reduced the sweetness over time. Before long, I was drinking Chivas straight. From there, I moved into Speyside territory with Glenfiddich 12. Softer fruit, malt sweetness, and a gentler profile.

I wasn't in love yet, but I understood more. And understanding breeds appreciation. For young bartenders wanting to grow:

1. Start where you are, not where you think you should be

If Islay peat feels like a bonfire in your mouth, don't force it. Try a lighter Speyside or an Irish whiskey. Ease your way in.

2. Change the format

Neat isn't the only way. Add a few drops of water. Try it over ice. Build a classic like an Old Fashioned to understand how structure works.

3. Taste slowly and with purpose

Use a tulip or wine glass. Nose gently. Keep your mouth slightly open as you smell, so the nostrils don't burn like hell.

Take a small sip and let it coat your palate. Notice texture – is it oily? Dry? Creamy? Then search for flavours: fruit, spice, smoke, cereal, chocolate. There's no wrong answer – only your perception.

The Old Fashioned epiphany

Years later, when I co-owned the Melbourne bar Ffour, I was introduced properly to the Old Fashioned. Around the same time, I secured a deal on Blanton's Special Reserve Bourbon.

That bourbon changed everything.

The caramel, vanilla and spice from new American oak – balanced with bitters and a touch of sugar – showed me whisky in context. It wasn't about bravado. It was about balance. Structure. Texture.

If you want to understand whisky as a bartender, classics are your classroom – an Old Fashioned shows you base spirit integrity, a Manhattan teaches harmony between whisky and fortified wine, and a Highball demonstrates how dilution and carbonation can elevate, not diminish.



For rookies, taste side by side. Compare a Speyside Scotch with an Australian single malt, try a Kentucky bourbon next to a Japanese whisky. Context builds understanding.



Old World vs New World

As my knowledge grew, so did my curiosity about where whisky comes from.

Old World whisky – think Scotland and Ireland – is typically rooted in tradition. Scotch must be aged in oak for a minimum of three years and is often matured in ex-bourbon or sherry casks. Regional styles matter: Islay's peat, Speyside's fruit, the Highlands' breadth.

New World whisky – Australia, Japan (arguably both traditional and modern), the US craft scene — often pushes boundaries. Different grains, experimental casks, climate-driven maturation. Australian whisky, for example, matures rapidly due to our heat, leading to bold oak influence in younger spirits.

Neither is "better". They simply tell different stories.

For rookies, taste side by side.

Compare a Speyside Scotch with an Australian single malt, try a Kentucky bourbon next to a Japanese whisky. Context builds understanding.

Falling in love (properly)

When I opened Hains & Co in Adelaide, whisky still wasn't the centrepiece. That changed when Cody Deatker joined the team. He introduced me deeply to Japanese whisky – precision, elegance, balance. In return, I shared my love of rum.

We began curating our back bar differently. Instead of simply restocking what sold, we sought independent bottlings, higher ABVs, different peat levels, different countries. We wanted breadth. We wanted conversation.

As staff knowledge grew, so did guest interest. Whisky stopped being intimidating and became inviting.

We visited some of Australia's great whisky bars – Whisky & Alement, Elysian, Eau de Vie – and saw what was possible when passion meets curation. That was the seed for building Ralph Louis Frederick, our upstairs whisky bar in Adelaide.

The process took seven years. Heritage overlays. Council negotiations. Redesigns. A balcony saga that nearly broke my spirit. But through those years, we kept tasting. Judging spirit competitions. Expanding our palates. Collecting bottles with intent.

When Ralph Louis Frederick finally opened, it wasn't just a bar. It was the physical manifestation of a relationship that had taken decades to mature.

What I love about whisky now

Whisky is patience in a bottle. It's geography. It's time. It's wood and climate and craft.

But more than that, it's a reminder that your palate evolves.

I didn't fall in love overnight. I trained for it. I stayed curious. I let go of ego. And somewhere between a Rusty Nail and a cask-strength bourbon, something shifted.

To every rookie bartender reading this: you don't have to love every spirit immediately. But you owe it to yourself – and to your craft – to understand it.

Your first sip doesn't define you. Your willingness to learn does. 🍷



A lavish living history

Down a flight of steps from George Street, beneath the Hilton Sydney, sits one of the most lavish rooms in the country, Marble Bar. We pay it a visit and chat with bartender Aman Karma.

Words by Kim Berry
Aman Karma photo by
Chris Pearce

Marble Bar, Hilton Sydney
 @marblebarsyd

In a city that demolished most of its Victorian past, the survival of Hilton Sydney's Marble Bar (now 133 years old) is a small miracle – and a testament to what happens when a room is built with genuine ambition.

While the room is testament to craftsmanship and a bygone era, today's opulent bar, live music and DJs five nights a week ensure it is as relevant and modern as it was when first built.

George Adams, the hotelier and lottery magnate who commissioned it in 1893, wanted something that would be noticed around the world. He engaged architect Varney Parkes – son of the 'father of Federation' Sir Henry Parkes – to design a bar unlike anything else in the colony.

What Parkes delivered cost £32,000 and drew on 35 varieties of marble from Italy, Belgium and Africa, carved joinery in American walnut, mosaics, stained glass, and decoration described at the time as being "carried out in the fullest and richest style of the fifteenth century Italian Renaissance".

Artist Julian Ashton spent two years painting 14 works for the room, visiting Adams monthly as he worked. Adams' verdict, every time was "First rate".

The bar has survived two demolitions. When Adams's Pitt Street hotel was razed in 1969 to make way for the original Hilton, every section was numbered, X-rayed, dismantled, documented,

crated and stored. It was painstakingly reconstructed within the new building, reopening in 1973.

It survived again when that Hilton was replaced by the current Johnson Pilton Walker-designed building in 2005. In 2025, it had a refresh – new lighting, carpeting and a state-of-the-art sound system – designed to sharpen the live music experience without touching what makes it irreplaceable.

It is into this room, behind the bar, that Aman Karma arrived two months ago. Growing up in Nepal, Karma chose to study hospitality straight out of high school, drawn to an industry built on human connection.

"I've always enjoyed helping and having fun with others. That connection is what hospitality is about," he says. It took six years of working hotels and venues before he found his footing behind the bar.



"That bug never left me. Once I was behind the bar, that was it."

Before joining the Hilton Sydney, he worked with The Mucho Group at Herbs Taverne, then took on the challenge of setting up a bar from scratch on Sydney's Northern Beaches – an opportunity, he says, that shaped how he thinks about leadership.

"When you get that opportunity and commit to learning, that's when you know it is either what you want to do, or you want to stay bartending. Both choices are valid and require commitment, but it has to be a considered decision."

Karma came to Marble Bar as a deliberate challenge. He explains the unique and to learn the skills needed in a hotel bar setting.

"I took the job here because I want to conquer my apprehension about working in a hotel environment. Guests' high expectations can be amplified by cultural expectations, frayed nerves, or language barriers and require exceptional interpersonal skills. I want to make myself stronger."

The Marble Bar's team is relatively fresh but made up of largely experienced operators just new to the venue. Karma has stepped into an informal leadership role alongside his seniors, overseeing prep and keeping an eye on the floor.

His philosophy is straightforward. "Sometimes you need to find opportunities yourself. Be forward. Be willing to be taught. Don't be shy to say that you don't know, that's often when the most rewarding opportunities come along. Just keep asking questions."

Marble Bar is open Monday to Saturday from 4pm, with live music Monday to Friday from 7.30pm. 📍



1

Classic Amaretto Sour

- 60ml Disaronno
 - 30ml lemon juice
 - 20ml Aquafab
 - 2 dashes Angostura bitters
- Optional: 5ml simple syrup

1. Dry shake, then shake with ice
2. Double strain into a rocks glass
3. Garnish with an orange slice + cherry



Three Disaronno Sours

Disaronno's signature almond profile lends itself to a well-built sour - and with Aquafab in the mix, these three takes deliver flavour and texture without compromise.

2

Disaronno 1525

- 30ml Disaronno
- 30ml Creme de cacao
- 15ml cherry juice
- 15ml lemon juice
- 25ml Aquafab

1. Dry shake, then shake with ice
2. Double strain into a coupette
3. Garnish with three drops of choc bitters



3

Disaronno DaVinci

- 40ml Disaronno
- 20ml Select Aperitivo
- 20ml cranberry juice
- 20ml lemon juice
- 20ml Aquafab

1. Dry shake, then shake with ice
2. Double strain into a rocks glass
3. Add 2-3 drops of orange bitters
4. Garnish with edible flowers



Classic

Manhattan

Aromatic, sweet, and spiced - this classic is as sophisticated as it is spirit forward.



Manhattan

- 60ml rye whiskey
- 30ml sweet red vermouth
- 1-2 dashes of Angostura Bitters

1. Add the whiskey, vermouth, and bitters into a mixing glass with ice, stir well until chilled
2. Strain into a chilled coupe
3. Garnish with a maraschino cherry



BARTENDER



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Dylan Howarth

Alexandra Zinghini sits down with the 2025 Australian Bar Awards Host of the Year, Dylan Howarth, as we gear up for the 25th Annual Bar Awards.

For nearly two decades, Fortunate Son's Dylan Howarth has been quietly championing something that doesn't always get top billing in hospitality: the guest experience. So, when he was named Host of the Year at the 2025 Australian Bar Awards, the recognition landed – even if the moment itself moved fast.

"I was really excited," he says. "I was thrilled to be nominated and to win was amazing. I was also relieved that I wrote down the people to thank, just in case."

It's a typically grounded response from someone who has spent years focusing less on accolades and more on what happens in the room. For Howarth, hosting isn't a side role or a stepping stone – it's the engine. "I have spent close to 20 years training bartenders about the importance of a positive guest experience," he says. "This element is my passion and to be acknowledged by my peers with this award is very cool."

That philosophy was sharpened during one of the industry's toughest resets. Coming out of lockdowns, Howarth saw a clear gap – not just in trade, but in connection. "We needed to rebuild a sense of community and belonging," he explains. "Our guests are the lifeblood of our venues. Our bars don't work without people." His response was deliberate: raise the bar on hospitality itself. "I knew I wanted to bring an unexpectedly high level of hospitality to the people who choose to spend time in our venues."

It's a role he didn't always set out to own. Like many, he started behind the bar – and still holds a soft spot for it. But over time, and through the realities of running venues, the shift happened. "As

a small business owner, you wear many if not all the hats and hosting became my role more often than not," he says. "Once I committed to hosting, I realised just how much influence a host has on the experience of everyone in the room and I love that opportunity."

That influence is something he takes seriously. Hosting, in his view, sits somewhere between instinct and craft. "Strong communication skills and personability are essential non-negotiables," he says. "I think I may have had a little of that, but I certainly honed those skills behind the bar." The comparison he lands on is simple: "Great hosting is very much like great bartending – you just don't need to know the origins of the semi dry triple shake when you are on the floor."

His entry into hospitality, though, was far less philosophical. "I needed to pay my rent 25 years ago," he says. "Bartending is way cooler than labouring." What's kept him in it is something else entirely. "The people". "The space doesn't change too much but the people change every day and the adventures and memories you share with the team and the guests within the venue over time are life changing."

Front-of-house can demand patience, resilience, and a thick skin. "Sometimes people just don't want to be hosted. You need to know it's not personal." His approach is measured: stay calm, stay professional, and focus on what you can control. "Play the long game... never get caught in the moment or go to battle with tricky guests."

"Bring your focus back to all the amazing guests in venue who value you in the role", said Howarth. 🍷



**BARTENDER
OF THE YEAR**



**BARTENDER
OF THE YEAR**

The call of the bar

As The Odd Culture Group embarks on opening its two latest venues, CEO Rebecca Lines reflects on the industry that has had a hold on her for more than two decades.

Words by Kim Berry
Photography by Ethan Smart

Odd Culture Group CEO, Rebecca Lines, has spent the better part of three decades working in bars and restaurants, starting behind a bar in New Zealand with a slight deviation into architecture and interior design, before the siren call of hospitality pulled her back.

“There’s just always so much connection going on,” Lines says. “Any time I’d go and do something else, I’d be like, where is the energy and vibrancy. The feeling of being part of a team and achieving something every day wasn’t there.”

It was owning restaurants with her husband that finally settled it. She realised that having full control over the bigger picture of a venue – its structure, design and strategy – was where she belonged.

Now, as CEO of Odd Culture Group, Lines is preparing to open two new Sydney CBD venues within four weeks of each other. Razz Room opens on York Street in mid-April, followed by a neighbourhood restaurant in the same building about a month later.

Two venues, one building

The site, Lines says, made the decision for them. The footprint simply did not work as one space. Street-level and underground, the two floors lent themselves to completely different things.

Razz Room sits below ground: a warm cocktail bar with an upper lounge, a bar area, and a sunken floor that doubles as

a stage and dance floor. Lines describes it as geared towards the CBD after-work crowd, with a dual-purpose space that shifts across the night.

The restaurant upstairs carries a different philosophy entirely. Lines is calling it a neighbourhood venue, a place people can drop in for coffee, a burger at the bar, or a full dinner, without the formality of a lunch-and-dinner service model.

“It has to be a community,” she says. “I don’t want to open just another restaurant. It has to be a place where people feel like they can drop in, where we know who’s coming through the door.”

The timing is deliberate, albeit nerve-racking, with the bar scene on York Street moving quickly – but Lines says that momentum is part of the draw.

The pressure underneath

Lines is frank about the challenges of the industry. Wages are running above 40 per cent of revenue for many operators. Rent can be crippling – in Sydney we’ve seen Double Deuce and Kittyhawk had to close due to crippling rent increases. And payroll tax, she says, remains a particular frustration.

“Imposing a tax on people who employ more people doesn’t make sense in an industry with very small margins,” she says. “And then the idea is that because we employ more people, you should give us another tax. It just makes no sense.”

She is candid about the shift she is seeing across the industry: pubs are performing as restaurants feel the

pressure as people downscale their entertainment budget. In a tighter economy, the no-split-bill, order-your-own model of pub dining suits the moment.

For Lines, the answer is venues that have their own clear identity and a genuine relationship with their community. Diversity in a group portfolio, like Odd Culture, is not just a creative choice right now; it is a practical one.

The hospo type

Ask Lines why people stay in hospitality and she comes back to the same thing: the daily deadline, the daily payoff, and the kind of people the industry attracts.

“Both failure and reward are daily, you’re constantly dealing with both. That speed is what draws people in and what keeps them,” she says.

She would like to see hospitality taken more seriously as a career path from the outside. Inside the industry, the perception has shifted. But she is not convinced it has filtered through yet to schools, parents, or policy makers.

“We need to see it as a career in Australia. The transferable skills are enormous. Learning to read people, navigate different personalities, work in diverse teams. For any student, it is completely transferable.”

For Lines, it took studying architecture, a stint in interiors, and a few years in restaurants before the industry finally had her full attention. As she leads Odd Culture Group on its latest expansion, her commitment and passion is as robust as ever. 🍷





Postcard

Winter in Paris

As the Hôtel Lancaster Paris and its CopperBay bar celebrate 100 years of welcoming guests, its bar operations manager, Aurélie Panhelleux, shares her favourite places to eat and drink in the city of love.

Words by Aurélie Panhelleux

CopperBay, Hôtel Lancaster Paris
@copperbay_lancaster

I'm lucky to live in the vibrant working-class 10th arrondissement, where there are so many food and drink gems. I often start my day with a pain au chocolat at Mamiche when I have time before work or on weekends, and a coffee at dreamin'man or white.

If the weather is nice, I head to Canal Saint-Martin, just 10 minutes away, for a walk along the water and a visit to a bookstore I love, Artazart. Then I'll stop at Bao Family for lunch or head back to my neighbourhood for the best döner in Paris at Ozlem. I also very often go to Le Réveil du 10ème my headquarter and the one from most of the people of the hood. Comfort food, French classics and the loveliest hospitality.

If I have time I head in the 11th to one of my happy places, a Greek restaurant called Marias (the owner's name and cutest lady) and get all the mezze.

In the afternoon, I love going to exhibitions. I'm particularly a fan of the Bourse de Commerce near Châtelet – its currently preparing an exhibition on clair obscur that I can't wait to see.

In a different style, I also love La Galerie Dior, which showcases dresses from all of Dior's collections over the years – such inspiring craftsmanship. We also have many art galleries in Paris, so strolling is always the best option to discover new gems.



In the evening, it all depends on whether I'm in a cozy mood for a night at home, or to go out with friends – but I can never say no to a good wine bar with beautiful small plates. My favourite spots are Elementerre in the 10th, Chop Chop Love that has chef residencies, Juveniles near the Louvre, and Le Verre Volé. You cannot go wrong with any of them. I also love a good African restaurant like BMK Paris Bamako, their Mafé is amazing.

I'm always happy to end the night with a cocktail. Right now, I really like Superfine in the Bastille area, Mesures in the Marais, or Abstract on Rue Montorgueil – and finish at Harmony in Pigalle with a highball in hand. 🍷

Bitter Tales

The birth of bitterness

In the first of a series, Claudio Bedini looks at the genesis of bitter ingredients and the role they play.



Words by Claudio Bedini

@bitter_tales_

Photography by Chris Pearce

Bitterness is rarely the first flavour we fall in love with. It's something the palate learns over time, an acquired taste that reveals its depth slowly. Yet behind that sharp edge lies a long story... one that runs through the history of drinks, from old remedies to the drinks we share today.

Long before it found its place in a glass, bitterness lived in plants.

Roots, barks, herbs and peels were gathered, dried and infused for their medicinal properties. Botanists, physicians and apothecaries studied these ingredients, observing how they stimulate appetite, aid digestion and restore balance to the body.

As time passed, those same infusions slowly moved from remedy to ritual.

What began as medicine gradually found its way into everyday life, poured before meals to awaken the appetite, or afterwards to help settle the stomach.

Bitterness, once prescribed, became something people came to appreciate and share.

This column is an invitation to explore that world.

Through Bitter Tales we'll look at the many forms bitterness takes: bitters, aperitifs, amari and the countless regional expressions that sit between them. We'll explore how these products are made: from the botanicals that shape their character to the traditions that define their style.

We'll also take time to tell the stories behind them: the producers, the places, the history and the small details that make each category distinct.

Because bitterness is not just a flavour. It belongs to those moments around the table: the drink before a meal, the glass that lingers afterwards, drawing people together in conversation.

Behind these bottles lies a craft built on plants, knowledge and tradition. Understanding where that bitterness comes from, and how it's shaped, opens the door to a much richer world of flavour. 🍷



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AI at the pass

More than a quarter of Australian hospitality venues say they could not run their business without AI-powered tools. Lightspeed APAC managing director, Nicole Buisson, argues the technology is not replacing the human touch but giving operators the time and data to sharpen it.



Hospitality has always been built on great service, creativity and strong connections with customers. The fundamentals don't change, even when the industry evolves.

As someone who works closely with operators every day, what stands out most is not just what the industry has had to absorb but how thoughtfully operators are responding.

The world is seeing rapid AI adoption across multiple industries – hospitality included. This represents new challenges, and exciting opportunities for the sector.

Across Australia, more venues are adopting these new digital tools to better understand their business, improve efficiency, and deliver memorable experiences for their guests.

New findings from Lightspeed's *State of the Hospitality Industry Report 2026* show just how quickly this shift is taking place. Today, more than a quarter (27 per cent) of venues surveyed say that they could not run their business without AI-powered tools.

But this does not mean hospitality is becoming less personal.

More time to focus on guests

Running a hospitality venue means managing multiple moving parts. Reservations, staffing, inventory, menus and financial reporting all demand attention, often simultaneously.

Technology, particularly AI, is helping operators stay on top of these responsibilities more seamlessly.

According to our research, almost three in five venues say they save more than an hour a day using tools such as booking platforms (58 per cent), reporting systems (57 per cent) and forecasting and optimisation tools (56 per cent).

For busy venue owners and managers, reclaiming hours from administrative tasks delivers real returns in an industry with already tight margins.

It frees teams, allowing them to focus



more energy on supporting staff, refining their offering and leaving a lasting impression with their diners.

Forecasting tools are also playing an integral role in helping venues plan ahead with greater confidence.

By analysing past sales patterns, reservations and seasonal trends, operators can make more informed decisions about staffing levels, stock purchasing and menu planning.

These measurable and trackable data trends provide concrete support for the existing instincts of seasoned hospitality professionals, converting a 'feeling' into verifiable data.

What this means is that venues are empowered with the tools and knowledge to consistently deliver precise, high-quality experiences that not only meet but exceed expectations, ultimately fostering strong loyalty and encouraging customers to return frequently.

Smarter decisions

Another trend we are seeing across the industry is a growing use of data to guide everyday decisions.

The adoption rate of technology specifically designed to generate business insights has grown dramatically in recent years.

In 2023, for instance, just over three in ten venues reported utilising such technology. However, the industry's rapid embrace of AI tools saw that figure surge to more than half of all venues by 2025.

Fifty-one per cent of venues say technology has improved customer service by freeing up staff time. That figure has grown significantly from 33 per cent in 2023.

This rapid acceleration underscores the perceived value and increasing necessity of these systems.

Access to real time information gives operators a clearer view of how their venue is performing. They can see which menu items are popular, how sales are trending and, perhaps most importantly, where there may be opportunities to grow and improve.

A positive outlook

Hospitality, at its core, will always be a people-centric industry, focused on

creating memorable experiences and fostering genuine connections.

Nearly half of venues say improving customer engagement and experience is their top priority for growth in the next 12 months, because at the end of the day, it's the human connection that remains at the heart of the sector.

Technology, therefore, is not a replacement but rather a powerful enabler. It is simply helping venues run more efficiently and giving operators the insights they need to keep their businesses thriving in an increasingly competitive landscape.

The integration of advanced technologies, such as AI and sophisticated point-of-sale systems, is transforming the operational backbone of the hospitality sector.

By automating routine tasks, from inventory management and staff rostering to order processing and table allocation, operators can free up their teams to focus on high-value, customer-facing activities. This shift ensures that the human element remains at the heart of every great venue. 🍷

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Shady Pines



Death & Co

Bartender Quiz

The Bar Exam

Test your knowledge of bar and cocktail history and culture. It's also a handy tool for anyone entering this year's Bartender of the Year, sponsored by Spirits Platform's Spirits Academy.



1. What whisky-producing region of Scotland is most famous for its 'peaty' single malts?
2. What is an early Slavic translation of the word vodka?
3. What does the term 'louching' refer to?
4. What style of beer is a pilsner?
5. What ABV is considered 'mid strength' in Australia?
6. What is the definition of a natural wine?
7. Name three classic cocktails created in New Orleans.
8. What are the ingredients in an East 8 Hold Up cocktail?
9. Who created the Naked & Famous and what are the ingredients?
10. In what city was the Japanese Slipper created?

Islay; 2. 'Little Water'; 3. The phenomenon where a clear, alcoholic spirit turns cloudy, milky, or opaque upon the addition of water because of high levels of essential oils from dried botanicals; 4. Lager; 5. 35%ABV; 6. Natural wine is wine made from organically or biodynamically grown grapes with minimal intervention in the winery, including native fermentation and little or no added sulphur, fining, or filtration; 7. Ramos gin fizz, Hurricane, Vieux Carre, Sazerac, Grasshopper; 8. Vodka, Aperol, Pineapple Juice, Lime Juice, Simple Syrup, Passionfruit Syrup; 9. Joaquin Simo (Death & Co, NYC, 2011); 10. Melbourne

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