



Sydney wine bar scene heats up

With relaxed liquor laws in place, the city's nightlife gets a big boost. Edwin Soon singles out the coolest addresses.



THE IVY





Until a few years ago, the bar scene in Sydney was limited to beer and more beer in pubs. Wine was only consumed in restaurants, at home, at picnics and if it was found at the bar, it was usually at the annex, in the 'bottleshop'.

Today, the scene mirrors the vibrancy of the city's food, fashion and shopping culture. Was it the 2010 Olympics that ushered in a more grown up and international Sydney? The Sydney Morning Herald International Food Festival is a showcase of the cosmopolitan, diverse, charged, yet easygoing city. And for bar hoppers, it's many rounds of rejoicing. After all, not too long ago, the 2007 Liquor Act heralded in a new era for bars. Sydney bars no longer need to sell food whilst serving alcohol. Small businesses and enterprising sole proprietors began opening and owning bars—in the past, highly priced licenses were only given to hotel bars and also clubs with poker machines.

To get around Sydney's coolest bars, I enlisted the help of Scott Wright, who for 17 years ran the now defunct Harbourside Brasserie, a legendary watering hole in its time, and once home to jazz and alternative music acts. There could be no better man for the job.

THE BARMAN'S FAVE

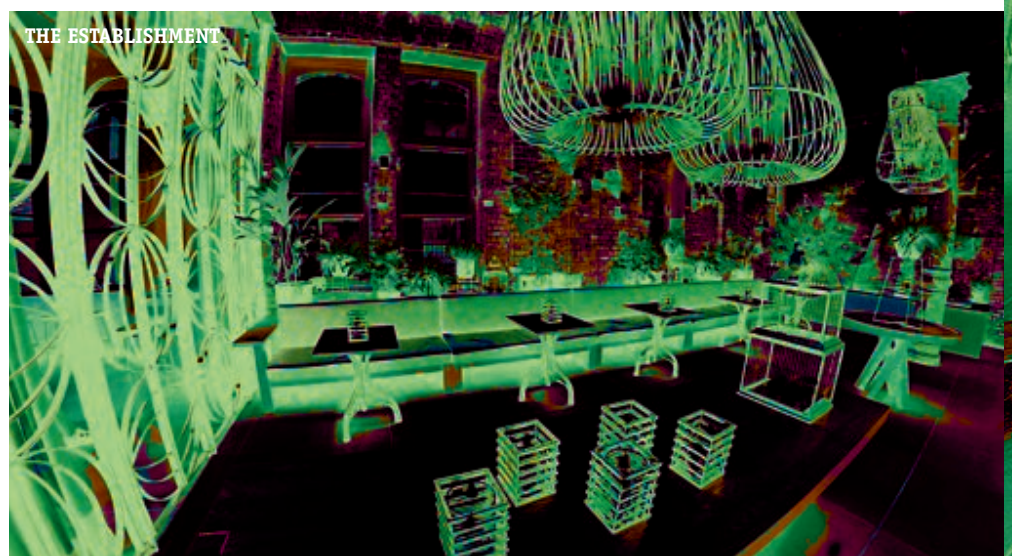
A short stroll down from Kings Cross into Potts Point, one autumn's evening, ducking a falling leaf, I stepped through the double doors of the Bayswater Brasserie. Inside and on the terrace, diners were finishing their desserts. Wright ushered me inside. That's when I stepped back in time. I had waltzed into a 1950's Parisian bar with muted lighting, octagonal white mosaic tiles bearing the patina of time, and a long zinc bar top.

I settled into my stool as barman, Mark Wiley, a dead ringer for the young Viggo Mortensen, stood ready to mix. Like so much of Sydney, Mark is a transplant from Canada and now counts the city as his home. What drew this affable young man to work at The Bayswater Brasserie? "Why, it's the sheer reputation of course" he laughs. This is where all barmen come for a drink and exchange stories and recipes. It was voted by *Bartender Magazine* as one of The Top Six Bars of The World, ahead of Star Bar Ginza, Harry's New York and Hemmingway Bar at the Ritz, Paris. The wine

list proffered a breadth of choices—twelve wines by the glass—champagne and sparkling wine even. And seventy wines by the bottle—ranging from German Riesling and Italian Soave to Provence Grenache and Spanish Rioja. The bar is undergoing a renovation soon and will reopen at the end of the year. So where will our handsome bartender be off to in the meantime? Mark smiled and told us he was already offered a job at The Ivy, one of Sydney's newest bar venues and already a pre-designated stop for our evening.

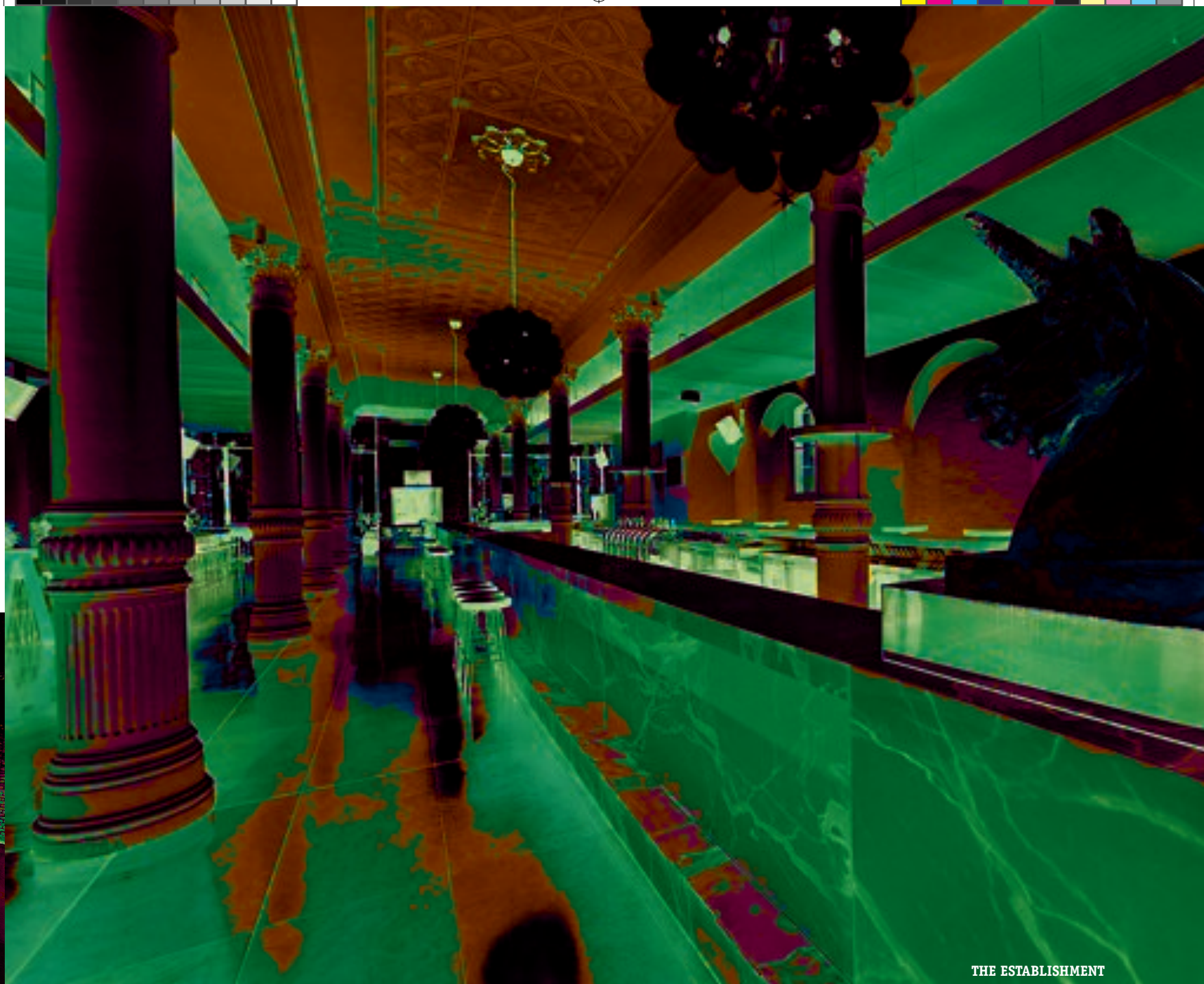
THE 'IT' FLAVOURS

"Next up, something new and trendy" said Scott as he ferried me in his politically correct ecological-friendly Prius to the Water Bar at the boutique hotel, BLUE Sydney. Perfectly located on the Wharf at Woolloomooloo, in the huge cavernous lobby bar, I nursed my drink hoping to catch a glimpse of this bar's regular—Russell Crowe; who failed to materialise on



a packed Saturday evening. Not that that mattered though—this Bar of The Year had its fair share of beautiful people dressed to impress. So did the menu for the matter—from the canapés of *bhel puri* and taleggio cheese to penne *rigate* tossed with light vodka, flamed cream tomato sauce and prawns. Cocktail fans will be spoilt for choice at the Water Bar—there are literally hundreds to choose from.

Next we headed downtown, past very tall bouncers into The Establishment—with its iconic 42-metre-long marble bar, 'one of the longest in the Southern hemisphere,' quipped Scott. A favourite of the movers and shakers working in the CBD, the vibe was very much big boys (and girls) at play after work. Packed out at the end of the bar between commanding cast iron



THE ESTABLISHMENT

columns were patrons all getting into their Salsa lesson, drinks in hand.

CLASSY AND EXCLUSIVE

Time for something quieter. We headed for the lift, which ferried us to the fourth floor to Hemisphere. Here was yet another bar—more like a European club with chandeliers, classy leather armchairs and comfy sofas. Think of it as a mix of Los Angeles cool and old school style—an inner sanctum from the spacious downstairs. It even boasts a collection of Cognacs, Armagnacs and a Dom Perignon Bar. Peckish patrons can even order sushi from the partitioned part of the bar called Sushi E reputed to the city's best sushi bar.

Seeing that I was visibly impressed, Scott confided

that the owner is no other than Justin Hemmes, also the man at the helm of hotspots like Tank and The Ivy. The Hemmes family are a Sydney hotel institution and Justin, the man about town, counts Nicole and Baz as some of his best mates. Oh, and did I mention that young Justin spent A\$300 million (S\$3.6 million) on these two bars and the building?

Next we set off down the road to see Justin's latest creation, The Ivy, which took seven years to complete. What we stumbled into was a massive multi-purpose venue of bars, cocktail lounge, live music venue, three restaurants and a boutique hotel of two very exclusive rooms.

We have entered into bar heaven.

It's a lofty architectural space, with a combination >



Think small

Can't get enough of bar hopping? Here are other cosy back street wonders that Sydneysiders love.

VINI

Enoteca with a hit list of wines from regions such as Sardinia, Lazio, Campania, Val d'Aosta and more. Passitos, Proseccos and Pinot Grigios by the glass for less than A\$9. 3/118 Devonshire St, Surry Hills. Tel: +61 (02) 9698 5131

CHING-A-LINGS

House wine is served in tumblers. Sport a pixie haircut to blend in. There's also no phone number, no signboard, and no bouncers so navigate a few doors down from the Columbian Hotel. 1/133 Oxford Street, Darlinghurst.

TIME TO VINO

Tiny wine bar offering 'Lazy wine education nights' where you select any three glasses (100ml) of vino from over 30 available and pay just A\$15. 66 Stanley Street, Darlinghurst. Tel: +61 (02) 9380 4525

FIX ST. JAMES

Order the Quick Fix—a fixed price menu of five dishes to share; 30 wines by the glass. 111 Elizabeth Street, Sydney. Tel: +61 (02) 9232 2767

THE SMALL BAR

The first to open, following licensing law changes. Claims a lack of TV's, draught beer and gambling. Weird and wonderful wines like Bon Bon Rosé, Lucador Shiraz, Totara Sauvignon, Nanny Goat Pinot and Luc Mader Pinot Gris. 48 Erskine Street Sydney. Tel: +61 (02) 9279 0782



of old-world brickworks and bright-white furnishings for the beautiful people who head here. First we shuffled our way past the bouncers, down the outdoor corridor of a huge cellar, and then past more door staff who glanced our way as we went up the stairs. Finally we arrived at a 25-metre turquoise rooftop pool complete with chic private cabanas filled with yellow Thonet chairs and cushions and palm trees. We had arrived at the Pool Club. Nowhere in the centre of town, or Sydney could there be a more stylish spot to enjoy a glass of wine by the glass—Prosecco, Clicquot and even Henschke. And for thirsty drinkers, it's by the bottle wines from Solaia and Sassicaia to Clerico and Conterno, but also Paulettes Riesling for just A\$45 (\$54.50)—all served to complement the Roman food at the adjacent Uccello restaurant.

Where

BAYSWATER BRASSERIE

32 Bayswater Road, Kings Cross. Tel: +61 (02) 9357 2177
www.bayswaterbrasserie.com.au

WATER BAR

The Wharf at Woolloomooloo. 6 Cowper Wharf Road. Tel: +61 (02) 9331 9000
<http://www.tajhotels.com/sydney>

THE ESTABLISHMENT AND HEMISPHERE

252 George Street. Tel: +61 (02) 9240 3000
www.merivale.com/#/establishment/mainbar

THE IVY POOL CLUB

Level 4, 320 George Street. Tel: +61 (02) 9240 3000
www.merivale.com/#/ivy/poolclub

THE BASEMENT

29 Reiby Place, Circular Quay 2000. Tel: +61 (02) 9251 2797
www.thebasement.com.au

DRINKING TO THE BLUES

Our last stop for the evening and our guide Scott wanted this to be an altogether different vibe. A short drive away to Circular Quay and we were ushered into The Basement, home of blues, jazz, rock and Sydney's music mecca. Real folk with an appreciation for live music flock here and lines start early before the acts come on. I was introduced to a quiet, dynamic man with dark glasses at the bar—Chris Richards, the owner of this legendary club. He explained that the club was designed with the band in mind. Over the years, they have seen many class acts—Keith Urban, Nigel Kennedy, Dizzy Gillespie amongst them. Even his purple highness, Prince has dropped by to this small, dark but atmospheric venue. Tonight was no different from any other night and packed to the brim with reverential devotees. As I celebrated with a glass of Leo Buring Riesling and another of Rothbury Shiraz-Cab, (this isn't the place for flowery cocktails) I was transported back to my student days when such wines were *de rigueur* in Sydney. I knew Scott had saved the best for last. **e**