

Called to the bar

Former tax consultant Matthew Bax has figured out that it can pay to follow your heart

Fiona Low

Australian bartender Matthew Bax never intended to have a career in the food and beverage industry. An accountant by training and an artist at heart, it was an unexpected twist of fate that led him to open a bar, Der Raum, in Melbourne seven years ago.

Tired of work as a tax consultant, he thought of setting up his own business to supplement his income as an artist.

However, he soon began to enjoy working behind the bar. Moreover, his "baby" grew to world acclaim, with publications such as National Geographic magazine lauding it as one of the world's best watering holes.

This attracted the attention of Singapore's Spa Esprit founder, Ms Cynthia Chua, who promptly wooed him here to set up the fine dining restaurant, Tippling Club.

Together with Ryan Clift, former chef of the famed Vue de Monde restaurant in Melbourne, the three currently co-own the establishment in Dempsey Hill.

Nonetheless, art remains his first love, says Mr Bax, 35, who is currently based in Singapore. He still finds the time to paint every day, and will hold an art show at Fost Gallery in April.

In the meantime, he continues to wow his customers with unusual cocktail creations, including one served in a syringe and another named Kopi-O, inspired by local black coffee.

But not all his creations turn out well, he admits. "I was mad about infusions many years ago and I came up with a sun-dried tomato gin infusion. Let's just say it was not one of my best!"

Have you ever created a cocktail specially for someone?

I have a cocktail called the Jack Bax, which is dedicated to my late grandfather. It's a really nice digestive drink with cognacs, port wine, infused maple and a nitre cranberry meringue.

Which was the most memorable cocktail you have had?

A Bellini at Harry's Bar in Venice. It was memorable because it was at a historic bar and I was with my girlfriend after a few months apart.

What is the most unusual cocktail that you have created?

I have used lots of non-traditional products and even more unusual service devices such as bottles, tubes, bags and



Matthew Bax tends bar at night and creates cocktails to go with the food his chef partner creates, but still finds time to paint every day. PHOTO: TIPPLING CLUB

cans, so it is hard to narrow it down.

But I guess The Imperialist on the menu at Tippling Club is relatively "out there" in terms of flavours. It was inspired by the ingredients of the dish, Imperial Chicken. So it has dates, wolfberries and smoked dang gui (angelica root), but obviously no chicken.

What is the process behind pairing your cocktails with the food that Chef Ryan creates?

Ryan and I work for a few hours each day, developing new dishes and drinks.

Sometimes the dish comes first, and then I need to put on my thinking cap and produce a drink to match it. At other times, I'll create the cocktail first and then it's Ryan's challenge to create a dish that will complement the flavours. Generally, we assist each other and most things are developed in tandem.

What is the inspiration for your unique cocktails?

Influences and ideas come from all sorts of places. I study the developments in haute cuisine very closely. I also love to use street food concepts in my drinks.

Take my "Kopi-O", for instance. It is a concoction of aged dark rum, tobacco maple and espresso.

Art also plays a role. I have a cocktail that is a tribute to British artist Damien Hirst called Pharmacy, which is based on his room-sized installation of the same name and contains pear and roasted capsicum gin, sweetened bitters and a citrus pill.

Then there is another cocktail called Local Call, which is a tribute to artist Joseph Beuys and was made with aged tequila, tart cherry and pineapple. It was inspired by his sculpture called "Telephone T-----R".



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Which is your favourite bar in Singapore?

I must confess I don't have the time to go to many bars. But I think Camp Bar at House on Dempsey Hill is a great place to hang out after work. I also enjoy Majestic Bar in Bukit Pasoh and Klee in Portsdown Road.

What is your ultimate comfort food?

A good pizza is hard to beat. I try not to eat it too often, but I really like Da Paolo's Pizza Rucola, which has Parma ham, parmesan and arugula.

What do you think of Singaporean cuisine?

I think Singaporean cuisine has a really good energy to it and it is definitely an upcoming food scene that deserves to be watched.

What is your favourite local dish?

Barbecued stingray, for its interesting texture and robust charcoal flavour.

What is your signature cocktail?

After almost 10 years of doing this, it would be unkind to single one out. But my favourite at the moment would be Chamomile Chroming (left) with chamomile-charged vermouth and elderberry.



What is the best part about working behind a bar?

Seeing people enjoy my new creations. Often, when you have a fun crowd, it doesn't feel like work at all.

fionalow@sph.com.sg

WHAT WOULD YOUR LAST DRINK BE?

It would probably be a bottle of my favourite wine, Rockford's Basket Press Shiraz.

From now till Feb 28 next year, Citibank cardmembers can enjoy either 15 per cent off the full tasting menu or 10 per cent off their total bill at Tippling Club.