

Kindred Spirits

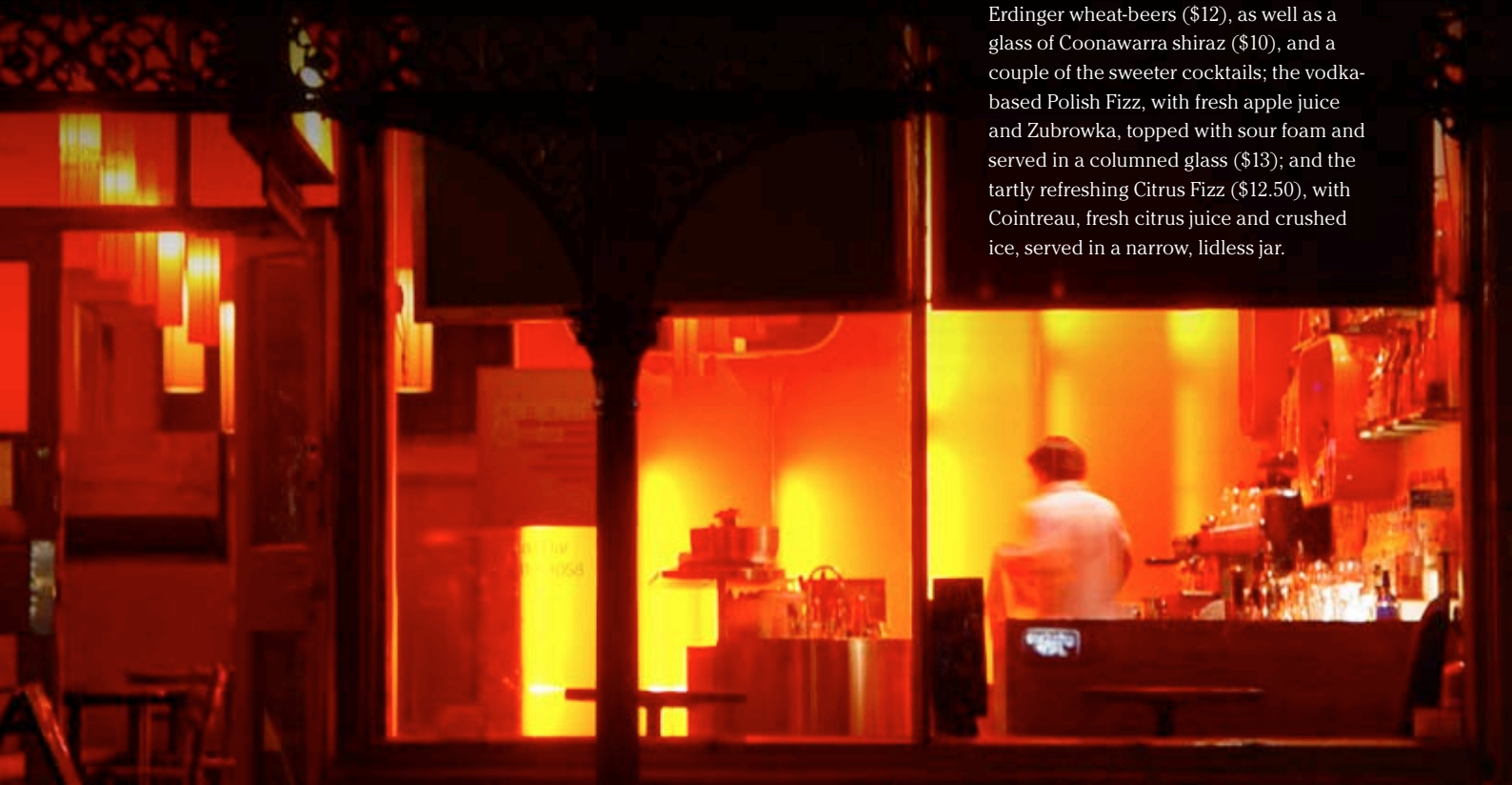
Bar-hopping doesn't have to involve pots and shots at random watering holes.

It can be an occasionally challenging, but always entertaining journey through the bewildering array of flavours of the gourmet cocktail.

Der Raum

It's ten on Saturday night and Richmond's Der Raum ('the room' in German) is fully booked – black and white 'Reserviert' signs litter the low tables and plush leather benches. The comfortably seething crowd, bathed in the muted orange light of the bar, haven't yet put down their handbags.

Our party of five finds some unreserviert space, and we find ourselves just inside the entrance, looking into the darkness of Der Raum. In front and to the left is the DJ (Friday and Saturday only), spinning a salsa set. Warmly backlit, a small team of deft bartenders navigates the dense seaweed tangle of over 300 hanging spirits; unhooking and decanting the bottles with enviable precision. Der Raum is an oft-lauded, multi-award-winning bar, and perhaps that's why I find that their drinks list is attached to the bar by a steel cable. And although the light is barely enough to decipher the list of exclusively German beers chalked on the right-hand wall facing the bar, we opt for a couple of half-litre Erdinger wheat-beers (\$12), as well as a glass of Coonawarra shiraz (\$10), and a couple of the sweeter cocktails; the vodka-based Polish Fizz, with fresh apple juice and Zubrowka, topped with sour foam and served in a columned glass (\$13); and the tartly refreshing Citrus Fizz (\$12.50), with Cointreau, fresh citrus juice and crushed ice, served in a narrow, lidless jar.



With an ever-growing blacklist of proletarian spirits and creamy cocktails deemed unworthy of serving (Midori, Southern Comfort and Malibu, for example), Der Raum is the destination for the cocktail gourmand – especially the regular cocktail gourmand: every night, enjoy two happy hours from six till eight, when two cocktails on the board will be \$10 each, or come on a Thursday night and you can play drink guinea pig, with experimental concoctions for \$11 each. Der Raum is serious, yes, but ever more intriguing.

Ginger

After the precision and focus of Der Raum, we're up for something brighter and spicier. A short drive away, on Brunswick Street in Fitzroy, is Ginger, with long sunny pinkish lamps hanging from a fifteen-foot ceiling, and tables of laid-back guys and dolled-up girls. We're greeted by the owner, Deb, who is managing the small, eager queue at the door. She quickly finds us a table and sorts us out with menus.

Choosing drinks isn't easy; but with marked concentration and explosions of laughter we wade through the lyrical listings. We end up with the soulful Curtis Mayfield, a thick black, challenging concoction featuring squid ink (\$14); the punchy, sour

Pash (\$14); the strawberry-heavy Ghetto Phunk, a creamy dessert cocktail (\$14); the kiwi-fruit-centric Blame it on the Boogie (\$14). My choice was the Bare Butt Bubble Bath, listed as follows: 'If you find yourself walking aimlessly down Brunswick Street at 8 in the morning, with a gaping hole in the butt of your pyjama pants, looking for bubble bath...it's probably safe to assume you've had too many of these cocktails...just ask misty! absinthe, 42 below manuka honey vodka, agavero, poire william, cinnamon & apple juice...hmmm' (\$16).

Moments after our drinks arrive we're offered a cosy, corner booth. We manoeuvre our top-heavy martini glasses and heavy, condensation-slick tumblers to the best people-watching position in the house and pick out some late-night nibbles from the menu: the full-flavoured, traditional ratatouille served warm with garlic flat bread (\$9), as well as the crisp French fries (\$6).

It's after one on Sunday morning and the chilled-out crowd is draped over comfy chairs and leather benches, and everyone's put their handbags well and truly down. Whereas some might consider a cocktail bar a prelude, Ginger is more of a destination in itself. Or perhaps at two stops we're just about done for tonight.



At a glance...

Der Raum

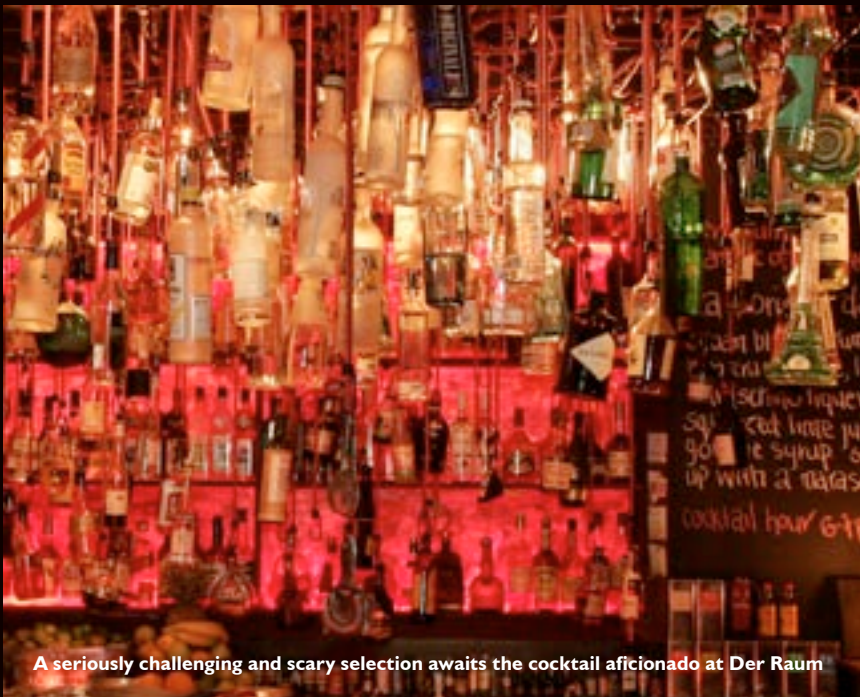
438 Church Street, Richmond
Phone: 03 9428 0055
www.derraum.com.au

Tuesday to Saturday, 5pm till very late;
Sundays, for private functions only

Ginger

272 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy
Phone: (03) 9419 8058
www.ginger.melbourneaustralia.com.au

Sunday to Thursday, 5pm till 1am; Friday
and Saturday, 5pm till 3am; private function
area, but no 18th birthday parties!



A seriously challenging and scary selection awaits the cocktail aficionado at Der Raum



Fire breathing - too many cocktails at Ginger?