

MELBOURNE: BARS

STORY ANDREW HARRIS PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE HOTELS

Living the high life

It's a steamy late-November night. Thunderstorms have given way to clear skies. It's t-shirt warm, and me, Naava and our frequent accomplice Jan, have caught the train to Flinders Street Station, and crossed the bridge over the Yarra to Southbank to meet a fourth bar-hopper.

Langham ARIA Bar

I confronted our waiter, David, with a cocktail dilemma – the Langham Bellini ('freshly pressed kaffir lime leaves and lychees, spiked with elderflower cordial, and crowned with sparkling wine') or the Berry Royal ('a sumptuous mix of fresh berries with Chambord royal liqueur, delicately topped with sparkling wine') – what do I need to drink tonight?

It's inconsequential what I put to my lips, because the hotel bar experience is all about the ambience. Geometric screens divide the floorspace into coach-populated corners and alcoves. Lighting is pleasantly low. Soft furnishings muffle the other patrons'

conversation. Crisp-cut guitarist Paul Shirley serenades us with his acoustic, taking a Rolling Stones request from Cez, who we've met up with at the bar. It's all rather civilised.

Good five-star hotels are not the soulless behemoths they often threaten to be. With highly trained staff and a holistic approach to comfort and design, the latest generation of hotel watering holes can hold their own against Melbourne's endlessly diverse bar scene, right outside their revolving doors.

The ARIA's drinks list sports a well-distilled wine list, and a decent selection of whiskies, from Jameson (\$8) to Laphroig (\$11) and Johnnie Walker Blue (\$38), and cognacs, from Hennessy V.S.O.P. (\$13), to Remy Martin XO (\$32) and Hennessy Paradis (\$45). Snackers are well catered for, with mini-pizzas and local cheese platters, among many other sweet and savoury options.

As it happens, tonight, while Cez finishes his Little Creatures Pale Ale (\$8), Naava orders

a caffe latte (\$5), and Jan picks out a glass of Bay of Fires Northern Tasmanian Pinot Noir (\$15) I go for the Langham Bellini (\$17). It arrives in a champagne flute, kaffir lime pulp (no leaves) languishing at the bottom, bubbles rising through the pale yellow cocktail, occasionally clinging to a toothpick, on which a glace cherry, stalk intact, is impaled atop a fat lychee. Jan pronounces it a feminine drink. David had only been working there a week, and this is his first sighting of the Langham Bellini. He leaves us with a grin.

After all the build-up, it's not a bad choice. The sparkling wine threatens to overwhelm the other ingredients in its enthusiastic coronation of mix, but a pleasantly citrus sour and herby bitterness manage to come through, and chowing down on the speared fruit is a juicy pleasure.

Grand Hyatt RU-CO

Bagpipes seem to sound from the darkness under the St Kilda Road bridge, as we wander to a Swanston Street tramstop. The glassy



Take a swish diversion to two top-end hotel bars.

Yarra is painted by the light of the city. We head roughly north to Swanston Street to the newly re-born Grand Hyatt, and its latest alcoholic addition, RU-CO.

We pass a congenial bellboy and a Bvlgari boutique on our way from the hotel's main Collins Street gateway to the bar's separate entrance, and find ourselves in near-darkness. Meekly spot-lit, three giant carved heads stare myopically over the bar, managing to look at once regal, with their aquiline noses, and happily sozzled, with the preponderance of bottled delights below.

We're led to a long table bookended by armchairs and sided by a couch, though we later move to a four-seater table so we can better chat. RU-CO is a versatile sort of place. While it's not as good for business meetings and quiet conversation as the ARIA, it's more of a stand-alone destination for a night out. Smartly dressed couples recede to its darkest

corners; work buddies unwind in brighter spots.

The late-eighties and nineties power-ballad soundtrack eventually gives way to something more subdued. And we settle into our drinks. There's no food on the menu, but the selection, across spirits, wines and beers, is excellent. This is evidenced by the stunning glass-encased wine wall, separating RU-CO from the neighbouring Collins Kitchen, with 2700 tempting bottles prostrate and upright. Passing over the Y'Quen 1986 dessert wine (\$1000), the Penfolds Grange 1996 1500mL (\$2200) and the Krug 'Clos du Mesnil' 1998 vintage champagne (\$2810), Jan goes for a Mt Difficulty Central Otago 'Roaring Meg' Pino Noir (\$17), Naava for a Diet Coke (\$6) and Cez for a Corona (\$10).

After all the talk of berry cocktails, I opt for a Classic Strawberry Margarita (Herradura Reposado, Cointreau, strawberry liqueur

and fresh strawberries, \$18). The sugar-encrusted glass glows pink and purple in the tea-light flame, and, unsurprisingly, yields a fresh, strong flavour of strawberries. It's uncomplicated and strident, with a strongly alcoholic end note and it offers me a sense of closure on the road not taken.

AT A GLANCE . . .

ARIA

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RU-CO

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