

A change of pace

Victoria Wells talks to global superstar bartender Matt Whiley about foraging, sustainability, and why he wishes he could put his phone down a bit more...

CRICKET'S LOSS was definitely the drinks industry's gain when Matt Whiley swapped his pads to pour pints nearly 15 years ago.

The former English cricket professional (and now globally acclaimed bartender) had played for Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire for five years until injury took him out when he was 24. It was pure chance that when a friend needed help at his Nottingham bar, Matt stepped up to the crease. "I was incredibly useless at bartending but I had a lot of fun so I decided that I wanted to do a few more shifts and see where it took me," he says.

Where it took him was on an entirely new career trajectory that has seen him awarded Europe's Best Mixologist 2019, named one of the 1000 Most Influential Londoners, and a finalist for International Bartender of the Year at the Spirited Awards 2019, among many other accolades. Now based in Sydney, he's the co-owner of award-winning bar Scout London (#28 in the World's Best Bars 2018), where he returns every couple of months, and the recently opened Scout Sydney, which he owns with Sydney restaurateur Maurice Terzini.

Matt consults to bars globally through his businesses Talented Mr Fox, and the newly launched Weapons & Toys, which he runs with Scout London co-owner Rich Woods. He published his first book,



The Modern Cocktail in 2018, and owns award-winning London based gin brand Wolf's Nose.

Matt was getting ready to come to New Zealand for the 'Eat Drink Love Ponsonby' festival, in association with Federal Merchants and William Grant & Sons, when we spoke in late July. He and local bar identity Philip Spector were presenting a five-course cocktail degustation using ingredients the pair had foraged locally – a topic close to Matt's heart.

A foraging philosophy

For Matt, making use of what grows nearby just makes sense. "Definitely seasonal and from within your surroundings is my philosophy," he says. "There's produce that is available to us everywhere. Be that trees, weeds in the grass as you walk along a walkway or things that the council have planted.

And when you pick it and eat it, it tastes better."

That approach to drink making is evident in the new 'Eco Systems' menu at Scout London. "It's about using all the waste from the local businesses that are in our area and immersing ourselves in the city eco-system, and then also the woodlands and forests, and oceans and streams," explains Matt.

He employs a local forager who brings his discoveries into the bar almost daily for the Scout staff to taste and experiment with. "I think for the guys who work for me it's incredibly rewarding and also thought-provoking to come into work and for your boss to tell you it's okay to be creative and to come up with new ideas.

"We try to keep our menu as stable as possible, so we're not wasting paper and card by reprinting all the time, but if something has come into season and

tastes incredible then we'll look to see how we might incorporate it."

Scout Sydney's new menu (due to launch in September) will be different, but Matt says local ingredients are part of what both bars are about. "It might not be intrinsically linked with the PR story of what we're working on, but we'll always forage and pick and source our ingredients locally."

He says these elements of a drink can provide an instant connection between the customer, the neighbourhood and the wider community. "To be able to tell a guest that this ingredient is from this part of Sydney and we went and picked it yesterday, or this is from a farmer called Jack who grew it for us... it's a much better talking point than just mass-produced food that doesn't taste of anything."

Having moved to Australia with his wife in late 2018, Matt has had to get to know a whole new world of wild food. "It's been brilliant for me to immerse myself in a different culture as well as different ingredients and learn a lot more," he says. "There's a different discovery every day."

Sustainable practices

Foraging taps into the sustainability ethos seen increasingly across the drinks industry today. For Matt, addressing waste is something every bar should be looking at as simply good business practice.

"I think our industry is incredibly wasteful; how we go about our ingredients," says Matt. "The population is growing and we can't keep up with production of food so it's something we all have to be mindful of and integrate into every bar so we can live a prosperous future, rather than putting buzz words on a menu to get some press."

"For me, it all starts with the ordering process. If you order too much you're going to be wasteful. Focus on how much you're ordering, order at the right times... really work on how much produce you need in the building."

The social side

Things have certainly come a long way from when Matt started his bartending life with a BlackBerry phone that had no internet capability. Scout has a slick social media presence that is integral to the business – beautifully styled shots of



new drinks, intriguing prep videos and other enticements pop up regularly on Instagram for the London and Sydney bars, as well as on Matt's own Talented Mr Fox account.

"It's a totally different world we live in now, where everything revolves around social media," he says.

"I wish I could spend less time on my phone, but it's kind of a necessity, it's a way of engaging. We do tests with Scout

"If we showcase some prep of what we're making on our Instagram Stories, that cocktail will spike over the next 72 hours..."

social media... if we showcase some prep of what we're making on our Instagram Stories, that cocktail will spike over the next 72 hours. It definitely plays a role in how people drink."

As well as being an essential brand tool, the online world has also opened up bartending to those starting out. "When I started bartending there were probably five cocktail books and if you could find them you could do some research," he laughs. "Now there's so much information available online. Sometimes I meet junior

bartenders who have only been in the industry a year and I'm astonished by their level of knowledge. Our industry is getting so much traction from the information that people have at their fingertips."

Tips from a pro

Matt's advice to those starting out is to seek knowledge and keep asking questions. "I do most of my creativity through research, so my biggest things would be to read books, seek people out, ask and learn every single day."

"And sometimes the younger generation don't really like criticism – but [taking it] it can be one of the most valuable tools that you can have in your arsenal. Actually listen to criticism and take it on board because it's a learning tool for how you can get better."

And as the industry adapts to the growing trend of moderation and mindful drinking, Matt remains confident that bartenders will be a part of whatever comes. "Our role might change a little bit with what we serve people but we've still got a strong role to play – it's still part of the culture of socialising, going out, having food, being in an environment where you're outside your home. We'll always have a role to play in fulfilling the need of every guest that comes through the door."

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