

Barnett On Business Travel: Berlin hotel bar is an inviting saloon with a historic view

by *Chris_Barnett*

BERLIN - Tyranny rules at many hotel bars, where the cocktail list is a bore concocted to trim "pour" costs and fatten the owner's profits. But not at Sir Rocco Forte's Bebel Bar in the ubermodern, steel and glass Hotel de Rome, fashioned out of the circa-1889, grim and gray former Dresdner Bank head office.

Steps away from the Brandenburg Gate in once-walled-off East Berlin, you can sit at the bar and look out on Albert Einstein's alma mater, Humboldt University, the Berlin Opera House and sip a shockingly original plum and basil daiquiri.

It's ironic, since Sir Rocco, a handsome dead ringer for a young Marcello Mastroianni, who owns luxury hotels throughout Europe, doesn't care all that much for cocktails himself. He likes an Americano, a classic, "refreshing" aperitif with the bitterness of the Campari and the sweetness of vermouth, plus lots of soda so it lasts longer.

"And every so often," he says, "I'll order a Bellini (fresh peach juice and champagne)." But what's important, he adds, "is a barman with a good personality, who talks with his customers, creates a nice atmosphere and makes the bar a meeting place."

Anze "Angel" Pilcher, manager of the Bebel Bar (Behrenstrasse 37; www.roccofortehotels.com; 49-30-4-60-6090) fits that bill. Tall, lanky, with the congeniality and confidence of a seasoned pro at just 26, he's a daring mixologist with theories Einstein might have savored.

His best creation - the plum and basil daiquiri - showcases his style.

"Proper blue plums are not easy to get, so I muddle half a big prune with six basil leaves, add an ounce of sugar cane syrup, Mirabelle plum liqueur and 1 ounce of Pampero Anejo dark rum from Venezuela, shake it vigorously and double strain it into a daiquiri glass."

It is 12.50 euros or \$16 at current exchange rates.

The talihito, his version of the now-trite mojito, would have pleased thrill-seeking Papa Hemingway, an incurable flavor addict. Into a shaker goes fresh mint, strawberries, balsamic vinegar, black pepper, lime juice and dark rum - stirred, not shaken - double strained over the rocks, \$16.50.

Berliners, historically, are beer drinkers, not cocktail connoisseurs, explains Pilcher. He carries Andechs, a bold Bavarian wheat beer brewed in monasteries.

"I mix it with banana juice, Sprite or cherry juice. Berliners drink it with raspberry syrup. Very popular with women." About \$9.

The Bebel Bar is Berlin's hottest libational oasis at the moment, where you may rub shoulders with a cast of characters. Tom Cruise has been filming here, Brad and Angelina own an apartment nearby, Bobby De Niro and Sharon Stone stop by when in town, as do actors Matt Damon and Ryan Phillippe. But in the East, which is bursting with style and spirit, more likely it's the artists, creatives, designers, music industry moguls and global deal makers who flock here.

It may be a hot spot, but the bar's ambience is coolly contemporary, almost stark. Done up in shades of brown and black, it is masculine but very welcoming to women. The ceilings are high, floors are planked in wood and the lighting can be harsh. Hardly a hideaway for a romantic rendezvous.

The 30-foot wood-topped bar, with nine stools, is softened with a giant spray of fresh flowers anchoring one end. Pilcher's spirits bottles float over the bar, perched on two metal shelves suspended from the ceiling. Beyond it, three oversize windows have a stunning view of Bebel Square, deemed the heart of historical Berlin.

For comfort seekers and conversationalists, a dozen black, leather armchairs orbit coffee tables in an area in front of the bar. More intimate is a lounge just outside the bar with a clubby living room feel. There is live music nightly ranging from a sultry chanteuse to upbeat American bands favoring '80s pop (think "Girl from Ipanema"), but the decibels are under control, so you can think, talk and hear.

For snugglers and discreet wheeler-dealers, there's a classy, artsy velvet lounge just off the bar entered through French doors. Walls are draped in a sensuous brown velvet, there are a few soft couches and chairs as well as another picture window. In a sizzling New York or Los Angeles bar, this would be a private VIP room, but Sir Rocco and Pilcher don't fawn over self-anointed elitists.

"Anyone can sit down in there and we're honored to serve you," says the barman.

I love to know what a skilled barman mixes for his own pleasure - off hours of course. Pilcher has a 24-page bar menu festooned with inventive cocktails and fine spirits meant to sipped neat; however, he is a purist and

loves (and mixes) the timeless gin martini with his own flair. He "coats" the glass in Noilly Pratt dry, 3 ounces of ice-chilled Plymouth or Millers gin, stirred until ice crusts on the sterling shaker and double strained.

"I don't like pieces of ice floating in my martini - waters them down," he says.

He pares the zest from the lemon twist and "lets the lemon oil trickle down into the glass." Purity comes at a price, 15 euros or \$19.

A radical departure is his Gilroy garlic gin martini, named in honor of the California hamlet that grows and worships garlic. He starts by crushing a garlic clove, rimming the glass with garlic and garnishing with a half of a clove.

"Odd, but garlic complements gin." At least werewolves won't accost you.

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and hassle.

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