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Time to say goodbye to a 'little piece of Paris on Beaufort Street' as Must Winebar's finale looms

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November 27, 2020 – 9.03am



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Must Winebar has always been a class act, and now, the show is coming to a close.

While Must maintained its reputation through Russell Blaikie's on-point technique in the kitchen, its name was first built on an elaborate, elongated wine list of titles from across the globe, and a polished line-up of cocktails that never failed to tease or please.

More often than not the main action was found at the long front bar that greeted entrants, such was the demand for and curiosity about the Must drinks offering.



It's time for a holiday, Russell Blaikie says.

What new concoctions had Must's mixologists conjured for the cocktail list this month? Which new wine had the bar's sommeliers managed to get by the glass this time around?

Must's approach to its wine list was remarkable given it was 2001 and there was not much competition by comparison. There was depth and value, back vintages and bar advice and clearly much passion behind the picks. The list was so involved and engaging it made Must a bar first, restaurant second to many, with wine aficionados often perched at the front bar, discussing the latest arrival of German riesling or French burgundy by the glass with an eager sommelier.

It set the bar very high and at a very early age, a benchmark many still strive for today. In its heyday, the wine list covered the globe with its emphasis always on Australian reds and much sought-after champagne, and that's not even mentioning the impressive cellar list, where back vintages of some of Australia and the world's great wines were exclusively available.

Wait staff knew the wine list back to front and could recommend what variety to pair with your food, although most dishes on the Must menu came with a wine pairing recommendation.



The magic often happened at the long bar.

And above the bustling bistro was Must's Champagne Lounge, its interior decked in gold, brocade fabrics and giant chandeliers, and some of the rarest champagnes in the world. It also served as a cocktail/lounge function area and wine tasting room, often hosting visiting vigneronns from across Australia and the world.

With its name taken from the wine term that refers to grape juice being unfermented, including the pips, skins and stalks, it's no wonder Must was a must for wine lovers.

Russell Blaikie's Beaufort Street French-style bistro will be remembered as a trailblazer.

He calls it "a little bit of Paris on Beaufort Street".

The food matched the standards set at the bar, with Blaikie one of the first in Perth to pay attention to his producers, valuing their input and championing their efforts.

"When I found a product that was good, I got very excited about it and I wanted to

have it on my menus and make a champion of that product and producers," Blaikie says.

"To see producers bloom and blossom and grow who I've been there right at the ground floor with, that's really rewarding, a huge buzz."

Those relationships, with the farmers, last a lifetime, not just the life of a restaurant.

Blaikie says his success can be put down to persistence and being a bit pig-headed. This nature allowed him to offer "hospitality with a capital H".

"If you know something is good, you've got to stick to your guns," Blaikie says.

"When we first opened a wine bar, that was unique to WA. There was nothing like it. That's a scary place to be in. We had to educate people about the new experience.

"Have a glass of wine at the bar, a charcuterie. It was a drop in place. And when people discovered that, Must became this space that so many people have cherished over the last 20 years. They've got some great memories, and sometimes a lack of memories about the night afterwards."

As former manager Lachlan Howarth puts it, the standard of the drinks and dishes alone weren't the reasons why people would come back and back again, and blow \$300 on a masterful bottle of wine.

It was the relationships between staff and their customer, the friendly chat, the personalisation of service that made diners and drinkers alike true fans of what has been a standout in Perth's hospitality scene for 19 years.

"For me the biggest thing was when it was at its peak, the environment they created for everybody, customers and staff, it was all friends there," he says.

"That's the thing that stands out for me, the relationship between the staff, and then staff and customers was incredible."

Howarth came over as a bartender from Sydney thinking he knew everything, but he said Blaikie and his team soon



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beat that cocktail wankery out of him.

“It doesn’t matter how good your drink is, it’s how many customers are coming back to be served by you,” he said. He learned that philosophy at Must and continues to teach it as general manager of Sneakers & Jeans, which runs Varnish, Flour Factory, Hadiqua and more.

“You can get a good meal and nice glass of wine anywhere but the thing that takes it to the next level is the way the staff make you feel.”

Emma Farrelly, now Director of Wine for the State Buildings, remembers learning the wine list ropes at Must Winebar, and thanks Blaikie for the freedom to buy whatever wines she thought she could sell.

She said the regulars that would go there when she worked at Must years ago still go there now.

"It was like a home for so many people in that neighbourhood. I haven’t seen that in lots of places. They’re very loyal," she said.

On Tuesday night former staff members gathered at the bar to raise a toast to Blaikie and his team. Sounds of joyful comradere echoed through the dining room as fans of the restaurant lucky enough to score a booking before last drinks on December 19 dined on fabulous parfait, tartare, steak béarnaise and angel hair crab pasta. At least, that’s what we ate.

They cheered loudly for Blaikie as he walked into the group, enveloping him in hugs, taking photos to remember the occasion.

Because Must Winebar is worth remembering.

It was one of the first places you could enjoy a good glass of wine without having to order a meal. One of the first bars to go smoke free. One of the first to host special event dinners, like duck and pinot nights, or shin, shank and cheek nights paired with big South Australian reds.

Blaikie isn’t taking his foot off the pedal until the last customer leaves, focused on excellence until the end.

"I’m actually more concerned about leaving a lasting impression in this last four to six weeks than ever. I’m too focused on that," he says.

“Right now, I’m running a business. And I’m really looking forward to a holiday.”



Chef Russell Blaikie with Must Margaret River's head chef Chris Cheong.



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