



In the pink: Mix has proved a hit with staff (above right) and customers (below right) alike



The X-factor

In the final instalment of the Imbibe start-up story, **Richard Woodard** finds out how Mix, Reading, has fared since its opening in July 2007

There were delays, wrangles with the landlord and bureaucratic battles with the council. Questions were asked about location, decor and the potential clientele. To serve pints or not to serve pints... But in true Hollywood style, it all came right on the night for Mix, Reading, when our fledgling bar finally spread its wings and took its first tentative flight last July.

A few months down the road, it's time for a catch-up with owner Tristan Ransley, partner Laura and the Mix bar staff.

But first, a quick recap. For those of you who have missed the earlier episodes of our *Bars in their Eyes* reality-show-meets-soap-opera, here's the set-up: the Ransleys, successful owners of Mix, Winchester and PourHouse in Hartley Wintney, Hampshire, are expanding the Mix concept with the opening of a new bar at The Walk by The Oracle, Reading.

This vision in 'tarty Baroque' was supposed to become a reality in mid-May 2007, but was delayed by two months for a variety of reasons: financial negotiations

ESSENTIALS

What: Mix

Where: The Walk by the Oracle, Reading

Owners: Tristan & Laura Ransley

Capacity: 160

Decor: 'Tarty baroque'

Target market: Ladies who lunch and students by day; 20- and 30-somethings and the pink pound by night

Menu: cocktails (£5-8), naturopathic teas and fresh juices (£3-5), imported beers (£3), premium spirits (£3-6/shot), wine (£4.95/glass) and bar snacks

Building commenced: April 16, 2007

Opened: July 20, 2007

Previous openings: PourHouse, Hartley Wintney, Hampshire (2002); Mix, Winchester (2006)

with the landlord, issues with Reading Council and all the inevitable unforeseen hassles. If there's one overriding lesson for wannabe bar-owners it's to expect the unexpected and roll with the punches.

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

Fast-forward to November and Tristan's sounding a tad smug now that all the pre-opening angst has dissolved. 'I was waiting

Very rarely do we touch a spirit bottle for anything other than a cocktail – **Tristan Ransley**

UNDER INTERROGATION

In an effort to find out 'the truth' behind the birth of Mix, Reading, *Imbibe* sat owner Tristan Ransley down in a not-very-comfy chair, shone bright lights in his eyes and threatened to say some really jolly unpleasant things to him if he didn't spill the beans. Come on Ransley, no porkies now...

So how's it going? And how far over budget did you go?

Everything has worked out better than expected – and on budget. In my opinion, Mix, Reading has been a runaway success.

One *Imbibe* writer nearly died of thirst trying to find Mix. Location been a problem?

Our customers are very diverse, ranging from first-year students at Reading University to retired couples. To my knowledge, local awareness is not an issue.

The decor is very, er, pink. Fine for the gay/metrosexual market, but what about unreconstructed males not quite so in touch with their feminine side?

The decor has attracted nothing but positive comments and, as for putting blokes off, we still get our fair share of gents – a little excitable normally, following the large number of female customers we have...

What's wrong with the place, then? There have to be some glitches, surely?

On our top nights it can be difficult to move freely around the bar area, to meet and greet guests and to clear tables. However, this is more a people problem than a design flaw. Ask any bartender about their customers' ability to stand or sit in the most difficult places!

for the crowds and queues to die down after three months as the 'new bar' honeymoon period is over,' he admits. 'However, we have actually grown in numbers through the door and top-line sales.'

But it can't have all been hunky-dory, surely? However Tristan insists that only the food menu needed a re-think. 'We felt that due to space restrictions and the success of our drinks menu, more of our kitchen was required to accommodate fresh fruit and juices, etc, and due to this, we have made our food menu more along the lines of quality finger food, rather than sandwiches and salads,' he says.

Space – or the lack of it – is a regular theme when discussing Mix, Reading, which is, partly at least, a compliment to

the success of the place. The VIP area has been a big hit for private and corporate customers, and Tristan admits that it would help to extend the bar to create a curtained-off area for larger groups.

DRINKING-UP TIME

But for every rammed Friday night, there's a damp Monday afternoon. Step forward a happy hour by any other name: Mix Bliss, covering the 5pm-8pm period Monday to

Friday, when selected cocktails, wines and beers are offered at discounted rates. And, contrary to earlier reports, they do serve draught beer, with the introduction of Kirin, the venue's exclusive draught brew.

Drinks-wise, champagne sales have been higher than expected, and Tristan describes daytime smoothies and super-juices as 'well-received', although he admits they are routinely outsold by beer and wine. 'The biggest sellers are our long drinks, mainly the ever-popular Mojito and our Tiki cocktails, all served in clay Tiki mugs imported from California,' says Tristan. 'Very rarely do we touch a spirit bottle for anything other than a cocktail... We have also introduced a more seasonal range of drinks, as well as more classic cocktails from the 1930s and 1940s.'

But we can't close without asking about that decor. The grown-up Barbie colour scheme has been a huge hit, insists Tristan – even at the laddish end of the spectrum (although their acceptance of the interior design may have more to do with the large numbers of young females adorning the bar). 'We are proud to be a venue of choice for our flamboyant regulars from the gay community,' he adds. 'I think this is testament that all find Mix a comfortable, safe bar environment, but then so is any nice-looking cocktail lounge bar that doesn't serve Stella or have fruit machines!' 🍹

COMING TO A HIGH STREET NEAR YOU?

Today Reading – tomorrow the world, south of Watford.

Now that the Berkshire town has joined Winchester in succumbing to the charms of the Mix concept, Tristan's plans for global domination – well, the home counties, at least – are continuing apace.

But turning a two-bar chain into a regional brand needs, to be blunt, pots of cash. So what are the prospects? According

to Tristan, the company is set to make a profit in 2007, and he's hopeful that the success of the initial Mix ventures, combined with good PR and winning awards, will send a posse of minted investors beating a path to his door.

For now, the funding is in place for another Mix bar, but the location is as yet a closely-guarded secret (although Brighton and Soho have been

mentioned in the past).

Anyway, that future had better be bright – not least because Tristan has just been named as one of Britain's 'top talents', in the drinks section of *The Observer* and Courvoisier's Future 500: a rundown of up-and-coming individuals which is not so much a Rich List, more a Most-likely-to-get-rich List.

No pressure then, guys...

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