



Smashing It

Joerg Meyer, the snappily dressed creator of the Gin Basil Smash, lifts the lid on developing tailor-made bar concepts for 25hours Hotels.

Words: Heleri Rande • Photography: © Martin Haag, Hafencitystudios (unless otherwise stated)

Widely regarded as one of the biggest names in the bar world, Joerg Meyer is also famed in bartending circles for his impeccable dress sense, and today is certainly no exception. One can always spot his well-put-together outfit – suit jacket, statement pocket square, polished shoes – as befits a gentleman who enjoys nothing more than delivering a flawless service to guests at one of the many bars that he has helped create. His kind demeanour and subdued humour is enticing too, making you wonder at times whether he himself might be just another perfectly evoked character from one of the countless vignettes that he paints during our interview.

“I grew up in hospitality,” Meyer begins, when asked how he got into the drinks business in the first place. Cutting his teeth at his parents’ countryside pubs, it did not take him long to yearn for the excitement offered by the big city. So after completing his A levels, he applied to two hotel apprenticeships for waiters in Hamburg and, as luck would have it, got accepted on one.

Working at an Italian fine-dining hotel restaurant in Hamburg, Meyer quickly realised that the bartenders were always in a good mood, something that really made

them stand out from other departments in his eyes. “They would make more money in tips than the hotel manager’s salary, and get phone numbers from the ladies,” chuckles Meyer. “Of course they were in a good mood.” Being the hardworking German that he is, the eager apprentice was only too happy to help those behind the bar polish glasses and clean up long after the Italians serving in the restaurant had left. Moreover, Meyer invested the tips that he made back into his continuing professional development – by drinking at the best places in Hamburg.

“There were two bars I would go to,” he recalls. “The first was run by an old gentleman who knew everything, it was really perfect theatre. The second was Harry’s New York Bar – a big bar with a crazy set-up.” The manager of Harry’s ended up taking the young German with him to his new venture in the mid-90s, which is when Meyer officially became a bartender.

The years that followed saw Meyer run a cinema bar, become partner in a restaurant bar that he subsequently sold, and return to his parents’ side to help his sick father. Upon his return to Hamburg, however, he found himself unable to secure the right spot to realise a dream that had long occupied his thoughts – opening the perfect classic



Joerg Meyer's famous Gin Basil Smash



Sape Bar at 25hours Hotel Terminus Nord in Paris
© Steve Herud

“We created a neighbourhood-driven cosy bar, the best dive bar you can have. But we kept the core values – good-quality spirits, good ice and good service.”

bar. Instead, at the end of 2005, he decided to launch an unlicensed drinks den called Le Bon Lion on the first floor of his business partner Rainer Wendt’s establishment Café Paris, conveniently located in the heart of the city centre.

Le Bon Lion was inspired by American author Ernest Hemingway’s short story *The Good Lion*, a fable about a young lion from a rich family drinking classic cocktails in Venice’s best bars. “We liked the story very much because it was about good cocktails, and being a little bit snobby,” explains Meyer. But Le Bon Lion was no regular bar. Open only two days a week and primarily serving friends due to the missing licence – the ceilings were not high enough by German standards – the place inevitably became a Hamburg institution. “We had a fingerprint reader to limit the number of people who could come,” he remembers. “We took the fingerprints of 50 friends and let them know every week in an email which days we would open. But because of this, word spread very quickly, and we started to be included on many best-bar lists.”

Le Bon Lion was beginning to attract unwanted attention when, in a fortunate turn of events, the team found a space on the opposite side of the street, and the whole operation eventually moved there in 2007. Losing the ‘bon’ from the name, Le Lion became Meyer’s first real bar – classical, with jazz music in the background, and serving an international crowd – just as he had it imagined it years earlier. This was also the birthplace of Meyer’s famous Gin Basil Smash, a herbal take on the old New York classic Whiskey Smash.

Le Lion quickly garnered many accolades and was mentioned in publications around the world, though all this international publicity often came as a surprise to those behind the bar. To illustrate the point, Meyer notes that the number of judges travelling the circuit at the outset of all the best-bar lists was severely limited, hence there were times when Le Lion featured without anyone having actually visited the venue. Nevertheless, he was quick to spot the marketing potential. “I used that information to our advantage, I blogged and posted a lot of photos, and that is how we started to get known,” he says. “Not exactly fair, but that is how it was. Then we ended up in *The World’s 50 Best Bars* list.” Interestingly, however, no German newspapers picked up on the hype, and Le Lion continued to struggle with gaining the local traction needed to ensure its longevity; indeed, the necessity of navigating high rent and labour costs meant that it took the team a full three years to achieve financial success.

The next challenge was finding a location for his second bar, which eventually took the increasingly confident entrepreneur back to his years as an apprentice. In 2012 Meyer and Wendt were offered the opportunity

to buy the venue of the old gentlemen’s bar that had taught both of them valuable lessons in the drinks business. “We decided that we wanted to create the total opposite of Le Lion because it took us three years to make money there, and I could not afford that anymore,” says Meyer, recounting the story behind the first Boilerman Bar. “So we created a very neighbourhood-driven cosy bar, the best dive bar you can have. But we kept the core values – good-quality spirits, good ice and good service. And we simplified and shortened the menus – instead of six tonics like at Le Lion, we only had one.”

The new venue’s name, Boilerman Bar, references the origin of the word ‘highball’, which is also the main type of drink served at the bar. In the mid-19th century, train workers – boilermen amongst them – needed specific signals to tell them whether the locomotive was running on time. If late, a ball was raised to the top of a pole, producing a so-called ‘high ball’.

With Le Lion and Boilerman Bar riding high in the local bar scene, Meyer was rapidly becoming a well-known entrepreneur in Hamburg, and it didn’t take long before a fellow innovator, 25hours Hotels CEO Christoph Hoffmann, approached Meyer and Wendt with an offer to collaborate on developing bar concepts for the group. After cooperating successfully with restaurant operator Neni, Hoffmann felt that he needed a similar partner for its beverage programme as part of a new F&B strategy for the group. “At the beginning, we were a little bit sceptical, but we decided to team up,” says Meyer. “At first, we thought about doing Boilerman Bars all over, but then looking at the plans for the next project they did not fit. Feeling-wise, it was not Boilerman.”

So began a dynamic partnership in which Meyer helps produce different brands that 25hours Hotels’ development team can choose between for new properties, taking into account local factors such as location, environment, design and investor. “We are creating this kind of suitcase with concepts for them,” he notes. “At the moment, it is four brands though we might do more. This will help them expand quicker.”

The first collaboration took place in Hamburg, where the Boilerman Bar concept was adapted to the 25hours Hotel Altes Hafenamt in the harbour. “For me, this worked really well since I could visit every day, get feedback and talk to the team,” he explains. “It was much faster than me constantly flying to Munich or Zurich. The initial stage of our cooperation was very important, and we could test different things to make sure we got them right operationally for the next properties.”

Talking about how the whole project team works together in practice, Meyer does not shy away from admitting that there are challenges. While suggesting that the perfect approach would be for everyone to sit



Boilerman Bar at 25hours Hotel Altes Hafent in Hamburg
© Stephan Lemke

together in a collaborative spirit, he is quick to contrast this with the reality. “The 25hours hotel in Zurich was planned for nine years because they had so many issues with the authorities,” he explains, by way of example. “We came in three years ago, but everything was already nailed down by that time, and we were asked not to touch anything as the approval had finally come through. I had to rethink everything.”

However, there is one key element that forms the basis of all Meyer’s work, regardless of the constraints inherent in individual projects. “Every time, we sit down and write out why we are doing this bar,” he says. “What is the idea? We learn a lot from the past and need to incorporate that into our thinking.” With typical directness, Meyer also admits there are times that he has to argue his corner when dealing with those working on the financial side of the business. “We want to build a brand and be realistic,” he points out. “As a newcomer in an area where there is no normal urban footfall, it is just not feasible to add say 30% to the budget.”

For Meyer, learning the lessons arising from each project is a vital part of building stronger brands and a better concept portfolio for the hotel group. “With Monkey Bar at Bikini Berlin, we learnt that it just gets too crowded and people wait too long, which is not good for the brand,” he admits. “We need to look at organising the setup better so that drinks can go out quicker, and make sure hotel guests can always have access.” With The Paris Club at 25hours Hotel Das Tour in Düsseldorf, meanwhile,

Meyer had a theoretical ideal worked out, but is leaving its execution for the next opening where it may be possible to start from scratch.

From his unique vantage point overseeing a variety of different establishments, Meyer is a firm believer in the value of good hotel bars, and so it is interesting to hear him assert that the industry in general needs to behave better towards staff. In particular, he finds it peculiar that hotels typically do not offer the best pay around, despite the fact that new F&B venues already have a ready-made clientele on their doorstep. Echoing the thoughts of Experimental Group co-founder Romée de Goriainoff, with whom he shared a stage at Sleep + Eat last November, he believes that too many hoteliers fail to appreciate how much of a competitive advantage this can be. “You open the door to a new hotel bar and there are 300 people right outside,” he declares. “I had to wait three years to reach that point.”

With four openings completed over the last 12 months, the latest being Scape Bar at 25hours Hotel Terminus Nord in Paris, he now has almost a year’s break before Dubai and Florence are slated to open. This gives him and the team time to hone the 25hours Hotels offering, learn from the performance of current sites and develop a more sophisticated “concept suitcase” for management. Indeed, one gets the sense from chatting to Meyer that this immaculately dressed entrepreneur still has plenty more tailor-made bar concepts in the suitcase, as it were, just waiting to be revealed when the time is right. ●