

TURN AND FACE THE STRANGE

GERAINT PRICE LOOKS AT THE RECENT CHANGES IN SINGAPORE'S BAR SCENE.

IT'S been a tumultuous time for Singapore's ever-expanding bar scene, which appears to be replicating the stock market in terms of volatility. Ministry of Sound became the most recent casualty with the termination of its licence three years into a contract that was due to run for 15 years. It also hasn't been smooth sailing for Ministry of Sound franchise in its quest to extend the reach of its brand internationally. Clubs in Bangkok, Taipei and New Delhi have been unsuccessful, with the demise of the New Delhi club also attributable to licensing disputes.

More importantly, this is hardly a good sign for LifeBrandz, the local franchise holder, which saw its empire start to crumble this year: shutting down molecular gastronomy restaurant Aurum and Italian eatery Bice in May and June respectively. Then after a restructuring in August, restaurant/bar Barfly was taken over by Lunar, which LifeBrandz still runs along with The Balcony Bar at The Heeren and the Café del Mar franchise at Sentosa.

I must confess to not having been to Ministry of Sound for quite some time, so cannot pass comment on how many punters it was actually attracting. That being said, on the rare occasions when I have made it down to Clarke Quay the whole place appeared to be jumping. Bellini Room, one of the major success stories of St James Power Station, uprooted and moved there, filling the space that lay fallow for months after the demise of the French titty showbar bar, Crazy Horse. Renamed Bellini Grande, it is a much larger operation than before, as the name partly implies. The decor and setting – big, black and white chequered tiles and plush semi-circle booths – lend it the air of a 1970s society club, while the Big Band (12 piece, to be precise) is regularly augmented by a number of local names and foreign import singers (more next month).

Peranakan Place, somewhere that many who've been here for some years will forever associate with Papa Joe's, sees the arrival of Howl At The Moon – the new incarnation of The 1NiteStand (formerly at Clarke Quay). In almost poetic symmetry, The 1NiteStand started as an occasional comedy club at that very location some years before becoming a standalone venue (pun intended).

Over on Circular Road, the bar with the least imaginative name in Singapore – Beers – has been replaced by Turn:Styles, a back-to-basics sports bar and sister to the Holland Village outlet of the same name. It has swiftly made itself a name for unpretentious food, good ales and large plasma screens to watch the sport on. Incidentally, the co-owner, Adrian, will be familiar to many from his previous job running (you guessed it) The 1NiteStand.

I know I've lamented before the demise of real hostelries; rising costs affect all businesses, of course, but the big chain bars seem to be relatively injured to it. For the smaller operators, rising rentals have caused all manner of headaches. Maybe now, with the global economy that way it is we can appreciate that big doesn't always mean beautiful and the smaller operators may get a chance to show us what they can do. I, for one, will raise a glass to that. ■

