

The Jefferson – a new era in the spirit world

• AUCKLAND •

THE JEFFERSON

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It's so good when experienced, talented hospitality professionals who've been working overseas – honing their passion for their craft and enhancing their business smarts – come back home and set up their own gig.

And with the return of Kiwi Ofir Yudilevich, who has spent the past 20 years as an executive chef mostly overseas with top international hotel brands – this is a good thing indeed.

Mostly known locally for the six years Yudilevich spent at The Langham in Auckland; his most recent roles have been at the InterContinental Fiji and the Radisson Blu Hotel, Cebu, in the Philippines. When he realised though, after years of hard work in gorgeous resorts, the tourists were having way more fun than he was, it was time to come home and change tack.

Happily back on these shores, when he and his friends struggled to think of a place to meet for drinks though, there was his business opportunity right there: a bar in Auckland's CBD. But not just any bar, it had to be special.

"Carrying out my research I discovered that bourbon is the biggest growth segment in the liquor market. It's especially popular with women aged 30 to 35 and internationally whiskey cocktails are really taking centre stage," says Yudilevich.

With the theme set, planning followed, then the site was found – a basement space in the historic, moody Imperial Building in Fort Lane. And finally breathing life into the dream, The Jefferson opened last month as part stylish American speakeasy, part-Mad Men with a Kiwi twist, and where table service is very much part of the hospitality offering.

The 320sqm of very cool space has an easy vibe with no pretension, "We want people to feel they're visiting someone's home, where they chat with knowledgeable staff eager to impart knowledge on bourbon's delights, or simply pour a drink."

Yudilevich felt that bourbon, that's American whiskey, lent itself to a more boutique, bespoke vibe and the 500 bottles on



**The best stocked bar in
New Zealand with over
500 bottles of whiskey and
bourbon in place**

offer are all individually labelled. Looking closely we saw one reading 'Bottle number 13 of a limited release of 26.' Now that's impressive.

It's not all bourbon though, there are approximately 100 other spirits available, as well as twenty wines, all by the glass too for the same price you'd pay for one from a bottle. And there's a select number of quality craft beers by the bottle and on tap.

While bourbon and ribs sure sounds American, these ribs aren't. "At The Jefferson we love ribs but ours don't come with a twang. American rib cuts aren't available here but we also wanted a more local food offering. We use the finest local, tender cuts of meat and slow cook them overnight with individually-prepared delicious sticky sauces – the meat simply comes away from the bone."

The ribs are pork with spicy barbecue sauce; beef short ribs with Bourbon glaze; and lamb with spiced house rub, marinated in apple cider. There are three Speak Easy specials too

which change frequently. For those not in the mood to "tuck in" smaller tasting plates such as Beef rib hash, Pork rub bag sliders and drunken prawn cocktail are ideal to share, as are the sides. And for dessert, Apple cinnamon pie with bourbon ice cream, anyone?

Bar manager and mixologist supremo Ian Riley moved back from Melbourne to set up the bar. Refreshingly brief, the cocktail list has five creations dedicated to the Rat Pack and friends, and bar staff are of course adept at mixing customers favourites.

Deep blue velvet upholstered booths and table seating, teal walls, dark oak panelling and sophisticated lighting create an alluring place to meet and enjoy exceptional food with well-crafted drinks. There's a private room available for hire as well, taking 20 to 30 people depending on the style of function.

While it was tempting to go with the industrial chic aesthetic happening in the rest of the building, Yudilevich says, "We wanted The Jefferson to be more intimate. We've turned the negatives of a basement space into positives and lowered the ceiling to make the space feel even cosier. Whether there are 20 or 200 people, you'll always find a quiet corner."