

# The Lyan of London

Ryan Chetiyawardana, or the nattily nicknamed Mr Lyan, is one of the most prominent bartenders today. We pulled up a stool to discuss concepts, creative control and challenging the status quo.

Words: Harry McKinley

Mr Lyan is one of mixology's disruptors. When he opened White Lyan in London's Shoreditch in 2013 he adopted a revolutionary philosophy and banished perishables - the first cocktail bar in the world to do so. Imagine, no fruit and no ice. Not only was the amount of waste dramatically reduced but it also forced Mr Lyan and his staff to think unconventionally. The emphasis was now on freshness, creativity and fast, effective service. In the following years his reputation has grown, along with interest in his methods, and in an effort to introduce innovation the hotel industry has drawn him in.

It's an unseasonably warm day in London when we meet. His bar, Dandelyan at Mondrian, is busy as punters grapple for a window seat and a view of the tourists shuffling along the Southbank. At a time when many new destination hotel bars sit on rooftops and offer the 'wow' view, there's an immediacy to Dandelyan's ground floor location and proximity to the pavement, which sits just on the other side of floor-to-ceiling windows. It's prime people-watching territory and the counterpoint between well-dressed guests

sipping stylised cocktails inside and visitors with selfie sticks and shopping bags outside is marked.

"This came about quite organically," Lyan tells us. "I was introduced to Alan Philips, the previous CMO of Morgans Hotel Group, by a friend who thought we'd get along. We talked about our creative visions and what we want to achieve in life. It was a lengthy discussion and by the end we'd decided it would be great to collaborate."

It's a collaboration that has proved successful. Dandelyan has already had numerous accolades heaped upon it, including picking up 'Best New International Cocktail Bar' at the Spirited Awards and being shortlisted for an interior design gong at the European Hotel Design Awards. "I met Tom [Dixon] very early on. I had so many ideas in my head that I wanted to see realised in a bar that just fit Tom's vision for the building. It dovetailed nicely," Lyan explains. "It was a big leap of faith for Morgans Hotel Group to partner with a smaller company that does things in a very different way. But despite the difference in size, there's a shared ethos. It's a hotel group that's geared towards



Mr Lyan pictured at Dandelyan at Mondrian, London.

A Place Between the Pines at Dandelyan. Beefeater London Garden, pine cordial, lemon, fino and Martini Extra Dry



creative people and there's an excitement to this bar. It serves drinks that no one else serves. It feels very 'neighbourhood', but in this beautiful setting. London does the classic hotel bar very well, but this isn't one of those. It's an alternative."

It many ways it's Mr Lyan's propensity for breaking the mould and his understanding of the modern guest that have come together to create such a dynamic venue. "I think the idea of being all things to all people is something that needs to be let go of. You have many different clients passing through a hotel and you need to be able to cater to them, but that doesn't mean having everything under the sun. You end up with a wide reaching but mediocre effort. Instead, know what you're good at and be proud of that. It's genuine and that's what people are receptive to now. Here we wanted to show that there are other ways of making cocktails and of operating in the industry without following the norms so dogmatically."

Indeed when one thinks of the 'norms' of the industry they extend beyond simply the

product offering and setting and into service culture and guest experience. The growing popularity of relaxed experiences versus formal ones is something that is precipitating a shift in the global hotel F&B industry and it's something that Mr Lyan is acutely attuned to. "Luxury doesn't need to be opulence. There has been a big movement, especially in fine dining, away from the white gloves, the white linen and the fifteen staff per course. Those principles are changing and people are looking for a different value set," he explains. "For me, guests having fun was what it was all about and this became something of a catchphrase of the industry, but nothing was really set up to focus on that aspect. People would wait half an hour for a drink. There was a little arrogance on the bartender's side. That doesn't connect with having a good time and so it's important that every element aligns. A good bartender checks the lighting, they watch for the water on the table and they orchestrate the whole space."

With an Iberico Sour in hand, a window seat and a view across the now packed Dandelyan

it's hard to imagine how the Mr Lyan brand could be translated into anything other than a living, breathing public space. But as with many of his peers, he is following the path so traditionally carved by celebrity chefs and expanding into the retail sphere, with a line of ready-made cocktails. Commercial enterprise aside, it's an idea that stems from a desire to, "get people drinking better at home and to talk to a wider audience and on a much broader scale." It's a desire that has put him on the shelves of Selfridges, no less. His book - *Good Things to Drink with Mr Lyan and Friends* - is also garnering rave reviews.

So with an expanding empire that now encompasses both hotel and independent bars and a range of consumer retail products, to what does he credit his success? "We've always tried to do things differently. There are amazing bars out there. We don't need to replicate what they're doing. I've drawn on my background and collaborated with others and put something forward that feels authentic. It's strange in places but, I hope, exciting." ●