

REPUBLIC OF BEER

A new brew pub for the burbs.

Story: Christopher Holder

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| BEER REPUBLIC - BREWED ON SITE | | PINT | PINT |
|--------------------------------|--|------|------|
| LAGER - 5.0% | | 0.5 | 0.5 |
| PACIFIC PALE ALE - 6.0% | | 0.5 | 0.5 |
| WILD BEER - 5.5% | | 0.5 | 0.5 |
| WILD PA - 8.5% | | 0.5 | 0.5 |
| BLIND BANGS TRIST - 5% | | 0.5 | 0.5 |
| TRIPLE DRY - 6.5% | | 0.5 | 0.5 |
| PALE ALE TRIST - 5% | | 0.5 | 0.5 |
| RAIPURRY TRIST - 4.0% | | 0.5 | 0.5 |
| WHITE PLAGUE TRIST - 4.0% | | 0.5 | 0.5 |



They're called 'growth corridors'. In Melbourne, they stretch like tendrils to all points of the compass. Epping is 'ground zero' of the northern growth corridor.

The recently launched Mantra Epping Hotel stands on a busy trunk road in an industrial estate. But far from being a soulless tilt slab dormitory, the hotel is a gleaming, glorious edifice that feels like it's accidentally apparated in from a glamorous waterside locale.

Apart from the 4.5-star hotel, there's also a big new brew pub: Republic Tavern. Way more than a suburban beer barn, it's a classy fitout with an amazing PA, cut-above food and beer brewed on site.

But why? Who's it all for? Surely it's overkill for the local market?

Not according to the man behind the development, Ian Wilson. For Ian, it's *all* about the local market.

PUB ORIGINS

Ian fell in love with hotels and hospitality from a young age. His prodigious sporting talent regularly took him out of his small hometown in South Australia, when he and his dad would find lodgings in pub accommodation around the country.

He determined early on that he would one day be a pub owner.

After going to hotel school in Adelaide he ran a successful hospitality staffing agency for some 14 years before selling it while it was going gangbusters — employing some 140 staff, and supplying a range of services to significant hospitality startups in the Asia Pac region and Gulf States.

After selling his business, Ian moved his family to Melbourne to focus on hospitality development opportunities. Sydney has its obvious charms but he was confronted by city's property constraints. Melbourne, on the other hand — unfettered by topographical impediments such as a glittering harbour and the Great Dividing Range — has more land to handle expansion. And that's where Ian saw his best chance of building a hospitality empire: quality offerings to growth areas that are otherwise starved of options.

"I've spoken to our regulars and they'll come to Republic Tavern for a meal or a night out when they might have otherwise travelled into the city," observes Ian Wilson.

\$80M PLAY

The \$80m hotel and pub development has Ian Wilson's fingerprints all over it. After years of being intimately involved with so many hospitality startups — not just onboarding staff but in design and operations — his 'spidey' senses for what works and what doesn't were all highly attuned.

This was especially true of the Republic Tavern. More than a play-it-safe companion venue to the hotel, Ian Wilson sees Beer Republic as the first iteration of a chain of such brew pubs.

"Most people when they're building accommodation hotels, they don't want to touch food and beverage. For them the risks are too great. The hotel and accommodation is an easier model to manage.

"Meanwhile, my background is in hospitality; my first love is restaurants, pubs and bars; and my previous company was a supplier to that industry.

"The first point about food and beverage, whatever you do, you have to tackle it with confidence. If you go in with hesitation, then it'll show."

There's no half measures in Ian's approach to tooling up for Beer Republic. The kitchen has some of the best equipment — refrigeration, rotisserie, Henny Penny fryer, Montague grill... they're all top notch. The key is to ensure your venue can be really efficient when things are rocking. Ian Wilson explains: "You can't have a place like this, in a location like this, being full all day, every day. But those three or four times a week when you are full, you need the venue to be making money. When it's busy, you need to be able to keep up with the demand."

SOUNDS OF THE REPUBLIC

"Nothing's more annoying than walking into a great venue and hearing a tinny sound system!"

Sound was high on Ian Wilson's design agenda. Beer Republic sounds great.

Key to the superior AV install was the appointment of Zelo as the audio visual design and integration partner. Ian Wilson engaged Zelo (née Urban Intelligence) after discovering it was behind the AV of a rival hotel's events spaces — "I wanted the same capabilities, only better!"

The brew pub's audio is extra special. Ian's brief was for something big, warm and enveloping. But here's the kicker: none of the sound could afford to leak upstairs into the guest rooms. Zelo's Stephen

AN ODE TO FRESH BEER

Ian Wilson: Once I'd decided on a modern Australian brewpub concept I went looking for the most automated way to brew beer in a venue. What I quickly discovered was a brewery's biggest cost is in the packaging and freight. If you take those elements away, such that you're making and selling the beer in the venue, then it can be a viable part of your business. Of course, you have to do your sums — you only want to make as much beer as your venue can handle. As soon as you start kegging and storing beer your costs go up.

I ended up meeting a master brewer in New Zealand called Brian Watson. His brewery in New Zealand is called Good George Brewing, which is in the top three from a literature perspective in New Zealand. In the last 15 years or so he's been installing breweries outside of the US for a Canadian company called DME — DME is actually the largest manufacturer of commercial brewing equipment to the US market but Brian was taking DME to other international markets. So in Australia, Brian's installed DME equipment into the likes of Little Creatures, Stone & Wood, Four Pines, Two Birds and others.

He's since developed a concept called SmartBrew. It's his own initiative in partnership with the owner of DME. Some 90 percent of the SmartBrew brewing process happens in New Zealand at his brewery. Then it's shipped in boxes to clients while the ingredients are still at the point of being a food product. Then the SmartBrew client plugs it into the tank, fills it up with water, hops and yeast; presses the button; and two to three weeks later, they've got fresh beer.

When I approached Brian about SmartBrew he was unwilling to go ahead because it wasn't worth his while to install only one system in Australia. He told me he'd need half a dozen installations to make it viable. So I took the system on. We sold and installed a dozen SmartBrew systems into brewpubs around the country, including ours. It's been an interesting side project, but now it's a distraction so we handed distribution back to SmartBrew. That said, we'll be using SmartBrew in future Beer Republic brewpub venues. What I've also learned, is to maintain the integrity of the beer's flavour profile you have to keep it cold. There's no better way of maintaining a beer's freshness than when you're piping it straight from the tank — which is what we're doing here.

We're only selling craft beer here. We've got 20 taps, 10 are our own. The staples are your classic lager, pale ale, pilsner, IPA. Then we've got a fruit range, which we're calling Twist Brewing. It's one base beer with fruit twists — in this current batch, it's a kolsch base. At any given time we'll have two cocktails on tap. And then the other taps showcase a spread of other local craft brewers in Melbourne — normally styles of beer we're not brewing at that point. We've only got six tanks so there's only so much variety we can generate. And for a lot of craft breweries, it's very difficult for them to get taps now.

Next challenge is to get the distiller functioning. It's all in place and we're waiting on final approvals. Any waste beer product will be used as the base for our whiskies. There's even conduit under the venue that goes straight from the tanks to the still. Next year we'll have barrels dotted around the pub as we age the whisky. While that's happening, we'll do our own gin.



Sokolowski picks up the story:

"Zelo was tasked to design and deliver a venue audio solution capable of not only high quality high SPL audio, but extremely low levels of acoustic energy transference into the structure or between floors."

Ceilings were completely off limits, with acoustic and vibration control the significant design priorities. Stephen explains:

"Zelo produced an acoustic design which utilised many forms of control. Two key control measures included using more speakers to maximise coverage density and consistency, and mounting subwoofers with a custom spring isolation mount to minimise vibration transference into the building structure."

"The EAW PA can go hard," commented Ian Wilson. "We've tested the system with it turned up and you can't hear it upstairs at all. It's quite miraculous!"

"Each EAW SB120zp sub is connected to its own Powersoft amplifier channel, while a pair of EAW VFR69i full-range loudspeakers share an amp channel," noted Stephen Sokolowski. "This approach greatly improves acoustic control and venue coverage. All Powersoft amps have DSP on board, allowing each sub and pair of VFR69s to be optimally 'tuned' and delayed, where applicable."

The other hero of the audio installation is the acoustic treatment. Thanks to large areas of Autex foam on the ceiling, the venue sounds very 'controlled' — you don't get anything like the same level of echoing that prevents the loudspeakers from sounding as good they've been designed to. It's a thoroughly pleasant experience regardless of how busy the space is.

The other thing on the AV front: no TVs. It's a big decision to make, but the only TV you'll find in the pub is in the smokers' terrace. Elsewhere, large dropdown Screen Technics screens and Epson projectors fill the breach come Melbourne Cup day or similar.


The music is expertly curated by Nightlife, which also provides a music video option if desired.

MORE TO COME

Ian Wilson has already secured land in the corresponding nodes in the south, east and west growth corridors, for similar developments. It's a big play and it's all relying on local trade. Even the hotel events trade has a big regional flavour. The hotel launched with a three-week conference for Ford. Dig a little deeper and you'll notice that Mantra Epping is probably the closest quality hotel and events option for the Ford Broadmeadows R&D office. It just goes to show: big business and events bookers might need world-class facilities but aren't always in need of the downtown hassles (or added cost) of urban events centres.

Ian Wilson again: "It's a locals venue. It's not trying to be a city venue. But there's nothing about the quality of the fitout or the level of the amenity to suggest it's 'just' a suburban venue.

"If the hotel had a club lounge we could legitimately classify ourselves as a 5-star hotel — that's the level of quality and amenity on offer. But a 5-star rating wouldn't be any use to us anyway. Most corporate travellers aren't allowed to book 5-star hotels.

"It's about providing a 5-star level of comfort and quality without the inflated prices or fanfare. And locals are responding." 

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