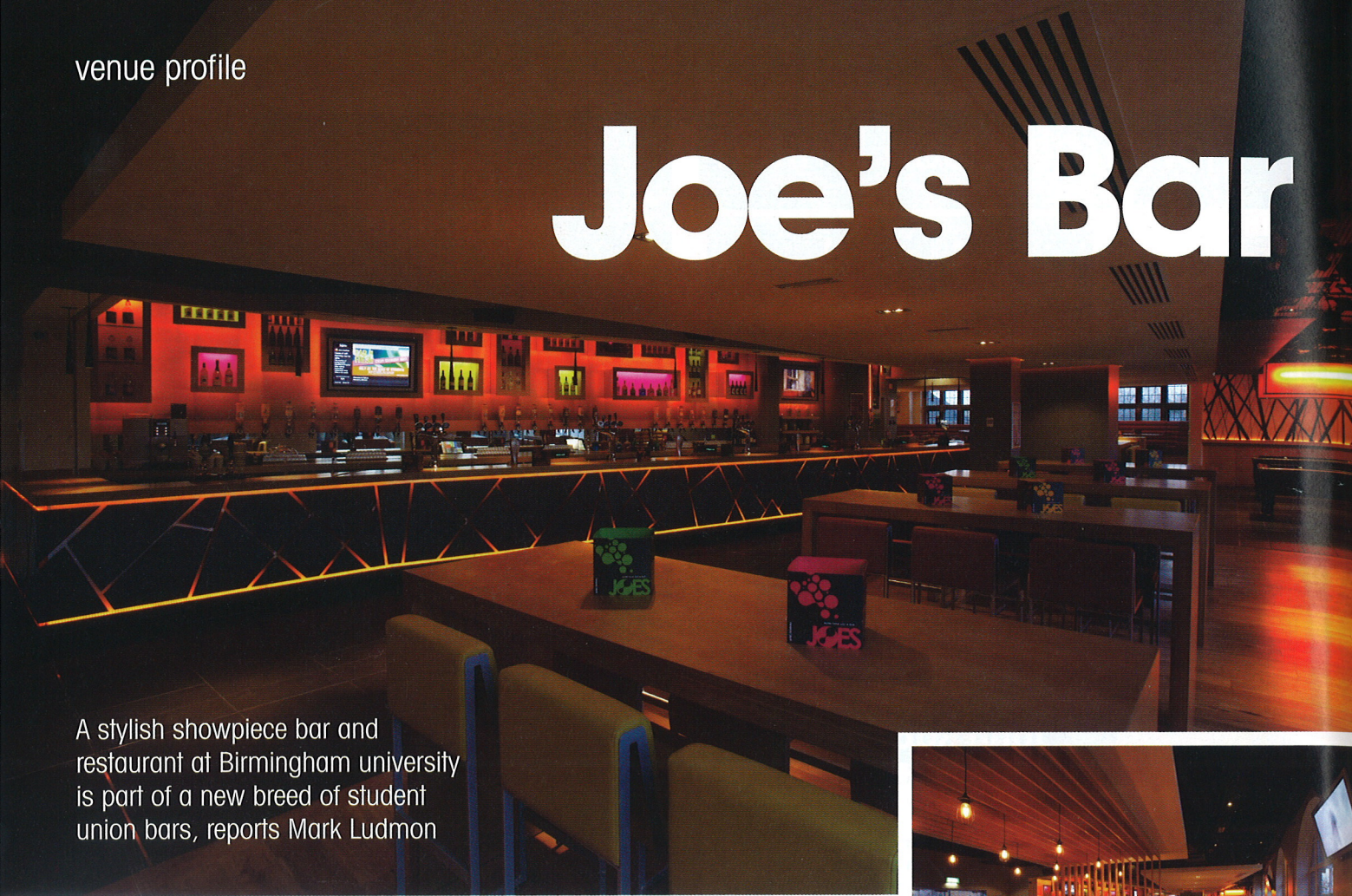


Joe's Bar



A stylish showpiece bar and restaurant at Birmingham university is part of a new breed of student union bars, reports Mark Ludmon

When I went to university a couple of decades ago, the student union bars were not much better than a poorly run boozer – sticky carpets, shabby décor and little else but pints of beer and cider pumping out. With the rise of “young people’s venues” and student pubs in the 1990s, universities in towns and cities had to try much harder to keep their clientele, forcing them to bring high-street values to their union bars. One of the latest examples of this is Joe’s Bar at the University of Birmingham’s Guild of Students, a students’ union for over 28,000 students.

The contemporary, stylish new venue has been created out of redundant retail space as part of a £4million redevelopment project funded by the university and the Guild. The objective was to reflect today’s student and avoid it being a stereotypical student bar. It also needed to function as both a bar-restaurant in the daytime and a club at night. They turned to experienced bar and restaurant designers Rob Matthews and Nick Mee of practice MatthewsMee, who were briefed to develop a new showpiece bar and European-style 100-cover restaurant.

It is a long, slim space but this has been broken up by using tile and oak flooring which is reflected by the floating ceiling rafts set on a dynamic angle for dramatic effect. Various zones have been anchored into the space with the introduction of raised dining “cabins” formed from slatted birch plywood, with added warmth from amber

mood lighting. To allow the venue to become a club at night, the seating and tables retract to create space for a dance floor and more people to stand. The lighting can be adjusted to suit a night-time club environment.

With floor-to-ceiling windows, the bar opens out onto a long slim colonnade terrace which is finished in an all-weather steel and glass roof. At the opposite end, it looks out onto the central Mermaid Square courtyard, where MatthewsMee has added raised dining areas, with edge-lit glass, steel and timber, centred around the existing mermaid statue and fountain. With a good standard range of drinks behind the bar, it has a food menu chiefly made up of pizzas and pasta dishes, with desserts a speciality.

While the venue may be new, the name is not: the previous Joe’s Bar was located in another part of the building. However, students voted to retain the old name out of respect for its heritage, especially as it was named after Joseph Chamberlain, the university’s first chancellor. The new Joe’s was also based on research into what students wanted and market analysis. “The new Joe’s Bar is fantastic and the response and feedback we’ve had from students is extremely positive,” Guild president Fabian Neuner says. “The atmosphere is amazing and Joe’s is now attracting students and customers who have never come to the Guild before. Change can sometimes be met with hostility, but our students have embraced the new Joe’s.”



Where to find it

University of Birmingham Guild of Students
Edgbaston Park Road, Edgbaston,
Birmingham B15 2TU
Tel: 0121 251 2300
www.guildofstudents.com

Who did it

Designer: MatthewsMee
Contractor: WFC Interior Consultants & Contractors
Loose furniture: Satelliet-Browns, MRF
Timber decking: John Brash & Co
Catering and bar supplier: Francis Catering
Decorative lighting: Premier Lighting Supplies
Floor tiles: Solus Ceramics
Carpets: Gaskell Mackay
Timber flooring: Priory Hardwoods
Wallpaper: Tektura
Glass and steel canopy: Broxap
Electrical consultant: Couch, Perry & Wilkes (CPW)
Upholstery: Abbey Fabrics, Sunbury Fabrics
Electrical contractor: Manstal