

Called to the bar

Peter Cross explains why he's just put himself forward as a voluntary bar person

I've been a member of the club a few months shy of a decade. During that time there have been five presidents, three managers and hundreds of newsletters. And of the many newsletters I've seen almost all contain a line or two imploring members to help out behind the bar. The hope is to have enough volunteers to have one person for each day of the month. It's a losing battle. Helping out only once a month is the big selling point which to my mind is a bit like urging people to go to the dentist as it doesn't hurt too much.

I read these guilt inducing pleas so often and felt so bad that I did what any sensible person does in the circumstances: I stopped reading the newsletters. But a seed had been planted and I continued to feel awful seeing the same faces smiling at me as I ordered my pints of Mac Gold. Without exception each person is good natured, unfazed, and friendly. I told myself that I'd never be able to master the till: I'm a late adopter and struggle with anything invented since the sundial.

But my aversion to bar work goes back much further to a time in the mid seventies when I worked as a trainee hotel manager in the UK. It's the nearest I've got to slavery. I worked more or less non-stop from six in the morning till one the following day and starting again after a few hours sleep up to 13 days on the trot. My duties included covering the bars when staff took their breaks, changing kegs which invariably led to having a stream of beer squirt up my jacket sleeve and counting the takings after the bar staff had gone home. But it was serving customers I most hated, the pub bores putting the world to rights, watching punters getting progressively drunker as the night went on and having to face down angry guests who felt entitled to having late night drinks as they had booked a room.

And to cap it all is my ignorance about booze. On one occasion someone came along and asked for a screwdriver which struck me as an odd request. I couldn't find one behind the bar and told him so. How they laughed, not just that customer but everyone else and everyone they told. How was I expected to know that a screwdriver was a cocktail? But you learn quickly in such circumstances but the biggest lesson is to never work behind a bar again. Bar persons, it seemed to me are a breed apart. It has been said that a barman is either a frustrated actor or priest. I'm neither; just a frustrated squash player.

But forty summers have come and gone since then and it was time to put that episode behind me. Jacqui threw me in at the deep end putting me alongside Adrian Kjellberg on the five to seven thirty shift on the Saturday of the Auckland Open. I got there early during Dave Gregory's shift and he was kind enough to show me the ropes. When Adrian pitched up I didn't let on that Dave had explained everything so I got two bites of the cherry. Clever or what? God were we busy. Probably as busy as the bar has been since the Cousins Shield

weekend two years ago. The bar took a couple of thousand bucks that Saturday most of it during our shift. Adrian didn't stop and was as busy and effective as he is on court and slowly I got the hang of the till. The punters seemed a lot more forgiving than the ones I remember from Gravesend all those years ago and no one asked for a screwdriver. And the great thing about serving squash and tennis players who've just finished playing is that they are usually too knackered to stand at the bar for more than a few minutes.

I've been impressed at how helpful and supportive Jacqui is. She ensures novices are as prepared as they can be. What I'm saying is that if everyone signed up we'd only have to do one stint a year and at which point I'm going to offer to put my name down for February the 29th. But the bar to mind is the best bar in Auckland and I can't think of a better one anywhere and it's a privilege to be allowed to stand the other side of it for a change. As the Irish say, it's a crack and the more of us that get involved the better.