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ASIAN

Thai pub has a prescription to mend a broken heart

By KRISTIN BARENSEN
Special Contributor

BANGKOK — In bars the world over, customers blubber into their beer over lost loves. But Bangkok's Lovesick Pub encourages its patrons to do far more.

A haven for the heartbroken, the Lovesick Pub features a crying room, a shouting room and a bottle-throwing room. Here, just-dumped Thais can drop their usual stoicism and vent their heartache.

Owner Tor Somkul explains his concept. "Thai people are always shy. When they have a broken heart, they should release emotions so they can heal. I want to help them do that."

Located in Bangkok's Sukhovit night-life district, the Lovesick Pub opened on Valentine's Day last year. Mr. Tor spent about \$230,000 to design and build the

creation. The space shows it, with its unusual architecture and strong color theme: red, black, white and chrome.

On a recent night, customers and employees were all too ready to talk about their broken hearts.

The first was a pub hostess, who started to lose it while showing me the crying room.

"This room has helped me so much," she said. She told me the tale of her recent breakup while I offered her Kleenex that glowed white in the black light. The size of a walk-in closet, the crying room has floor-to-ceiling mirrors that multiplied our reflections two dozen times. "The mirrors show you you're not alone; you have many friends," she said. "I can cry in here and then come out and smile again."

My next stop was the shouting

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room, a claustrophobic space painted fire-engine red with English epithets jumping from the walls in white and black. You stick your head through a round opening like a ship's window and shout into a cave of gray acoustic foam. Here I was joined by Ilana, an Israeli woman who had just met the love of her life in Sri Lanka. After passionate screams of "I love you!" she leaned against the red wall. "Tell me honestly," she said.

Could it work, she wanted to know, this romance between a 19-year-old Sri Lankan coconut picker and a 27-year-old Israeli professional? Should she just stop now? I said, "I've been there, honey."

Mr. Tor's target customers are Thais in their 20s, although many patrons look older. "At this age, there is much change. People are moving away, going to new schools, new jobs, new loves. They must break up, and they have a broken heart."

Predictably, "Men like the shouting room, and women like the crying room," Mr. Tor said. "But everybody loves the bottles." I followed the sound of breaking glass and shouts of victory to find the bottle room, an open-air carnival booth in which you stand behind a shelf and hurl bottles at a wall about 15 feet away. On the wall is the projected image of a person: your ex, if you wish. If you hit the bulls-eye, an appropriately male or female voice in Thai says, "I'm sorry I broke your heart."

This was the most popular of the emotion-releasing rooms, with a steady stream of bottle-smashers all night. No one had the heart to throw bottles at their ex. Instead, favorite targets were photos of despised football players, unpopular fellow customers, and rather shockingly, a Playboy centerfold.

The crying, shouting and bottle-throwing rooms constitute the "Sick Zone," which also features a mod bar and plush white couches where friends commiserate. Next



KRISTEN BARENSEN/Special Contributor

A customer screams into a cave in the shouting room at the Lovesick Pub in Bangkok, Thailand.

IF YOU GO

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Lovesick Pub, 159/5 Thong Lor Soi 10, off Sukhomvit Soi 55, Wattana, Bangkok. Telephone: 011-66-2-711-4477. Hours: daily from 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. Credit cards accepted.

door is the "Love Zone," a large, oddly shaped building with glass walls and a metal domelike ceiling. Meant as a space to meet "new loves" (read: rebound), the Love Zone serves a full menu with sushi and Thai food, along with provocatively titled mixed drinks.

Here a young, dreamy Thai man sat alone at a red heart-shaped table, smoking and obviously suffering. I grabbed Ilana and dragged her to his table, and we asked if he was heartbroken. He spoke with a heavy accent and a soft voice I could barely hear over the band, so I leaned in close as he told the tale. "It's the most painful thing of my life," he said. I asked if he had used the crying room. He said he hadn't cried in three years, and he couldn't cry now. But his eyes filmed over anyway. If anyone needed a good cry, it was this man, tall and lanky, his chest exposed by his unbuttoned white shirt. He said he had thrown a lot of bottles.

There's no cover charge, and drinks and food are competitively priced, though food service can be

slow. By 11 that Friday night, business was hopping, with probably 150 customers packed into the Love Zone. A live band played covers of Western favorites from Aretha Franklin to the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Some Thai women adopted me and fed me drinks as we danced by the circular bar in the center. At midnight, everyone stopped dancing to watch the bartender stand on the counter and juggle flaming bottles of whiskey. He lost his rhythm with one and it shattered on the floor, luckily missing the nearby customers.

Jack, 30, a Thai lawyer, said, "I think people came originally because of the concept; now they come because it's fun and has good live music." He says Thailand's three royal princesses have been known to throw private parties here, renting half of the Love Zone. Customers stand to show respect when the princesses enter, then return to normal. One princess apparently likes to sing "I Will Survive" with the band.

Mr. Tor would like to franchise his concept, with bars in Chiang Mai and Phuket, Thailand. Eventually he hopes to expand to Korea, Japan and even the United States.

As for what inspired the business, Mr. Tor is circumspect. He smiles and says: "Everybody used to have a broken heart."

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