

Indie View: BookBar

Chrissy Ryan

Opinion - Bookselling Monday, 26th July 2021

BookBar owner Chrissy Ryan: 'I wanted to reach people who wouldn't usually visit physical bookshops, so by combining the bookshop with a wine bar I hoped to attract both aspiring and avid readers'



I've heard it said that there is nothing better than curling up with a good book. I disagree. There is nothing better than sharing a good book, preferably over a glass of wine or coffee.

It's this social side of reading that inspired BookBar, a bookshop, wine bar events and social space in London. I've spent my whole career in bookshops, first as a bookseller, and then in publishing, selling books to bookshops around the country and then around the world. My experience selling books taught me that reading is all about connection, so I was inspired to create a space that brought people together through books.

I wanted to reach people who wouldn't usually visit physical bookshops, so by combining the bookshop with a wine bar I hoped to attract both aspiring and avid readers. Customers can come for the books and stay for the wine or come for a glass of wine and potentially discover a whole new passion for reading.

We started online, offering our Shelf Medicate service, designed to cure any literary ailment. Our Shelf Medicate Prescriptions are a bundle of books, based on a feeling or mood. Customers can choose from The Gin and Tonic for the Soul - a selection of the most uplifting reads - to the Armchair Traveller, the most transportative books. Each bundle is completely bespoke and chosen especially for that reader, and customers can give us a little bit of information about books they've enjoyed to inform our selections.

"The pandemic meant that I had to see each setback as an opportunity to grow in a different direction"

We also have an even more bespoke monthly subscription service, which is like having your own literary matchmaker on speed dial. So many people find choosing a book to be a barrier to reading, and although the algorithm is an attempt to solve that problem, it lacks the emotional intelligence that allows booksellers



to understand what it is a customer wants to feel when they read. I knew we could do better.



I often get told I'm very brave to open a bookshop during a pandemic. It made things much more unpredictable, but it also meant I had to see each setback as an opportunity to grow in a different direction. For example, a big part of the vision for BookBar had always been to host live, in-person events. It was clear that these were going to be off the cards for the foreseeable future, but I was keen to find a way to communicate the social element to BookBar, so I launched the BookBar BookClub in the middle of lockdown. Subscribers receive a book each month with time to read it before attending a virtual event in which we interview the author.

Since April we've hosted four blockbusting authors - Curtis Sittenfeld, Brit Bennett, Ingrid Persaud and Clare Chambers; sent out more than 1,000 books; and built a community of 200 monthly subscribers.

Starting online felt like an important thing to do to build an audience, and we've worked hard on our social media platform in order to appeal to our demographic. Bookstagram and Booktok have a huge influence and I don't think BookBar would be in the position it's in now without having garnered the support of that community. This week we

hit 10,000 followers, which feels like a big milestone for an indie bookshop that has had its doors open for only three months.

Our stock is, like that of any shop, influenced by our customer base and our own areas of expertise. Our focus is on brilliant contemporary fiction, which we hand sell. Favourites so far have included *Assembly* by Natasha Brown, *Detransition Baby* by Torrey Peters, *Fault Lines* by Emily Itami, *Acts of Desperation* by Megan Nolan, and *Sorrow and Bliss* by Meg Mason, as well as our book club titles - *The Vanishing Half*, *Love After Love*, *Rodham* and *Small Pleasures*. At the moment we can't stop recommending all of those, as well as *Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder - a surreal exploration of motherhood and identity about a mother who believes she is turning into a dog; and *Conversations on Love* by Natasha Lunn - an exquisite examination of the role of different sorts of love in our lives, told through anecdotes and interviews with philosophers, psychologists and writers.

Our social and identity politics sections are our bestselling non-fiction categories, with the focus on world politics, racial identity, feminism and LGBTQ+ stories. We have a big local section, science, arts and a section for children too. Being a wine bar as much as a bookshop, our food and drink section helps to create the ambiance.

Both the book and bar elements of the business are working brilliantly, and it's amazing that so many people have connected with the concept and that the community has grown so quickly. I still have to pinch myself every time I walk up the street and see people sitting outside the front of the shop enjoying a glass of wine or coffee, catching up with a friend or reading a book we've recommended. As a team, we have so many ideas, and this really is only the beginning of our plans to bring people together through books.

Source article: <https://www.bookbrunch.co.uk/page/article-detail/indie-view-bookbar>