

Iron Man

ASHLEY SUTTON's exuberantly appointed bars and restaurants are about to storm Hong Kong. PAUL EHRLICH sounds the fanfare

TATTOO-COVERED FORMER iron-ore miner Ashley Sutton is the in-demand designer behind some of Bangkok's most creative theme-based venues. And this month, three of his one-of-a-kind bars and restaurants are set to open here in Hong Kong. Named Iron Fairies, J. Boroski and Ophelia, each venue has its own reality-changing style.

"I've been drawn to this exciting city because I believe my ideas will connect with the people," says Sutton. "I think people will find these places unlike anything else, with everything hand-crafted and unique, not from a computer or mass-produced. These projects have a soul, and I hope the locals will feel this when walking into them."

Iron Fairies, on Wyndham Street, has "an iron-smith factory vibe with live jazz," says Sutton. "I want to make it one of the best jazz bars in Hong Kong, a place where you can chuck peanut shells on the floor

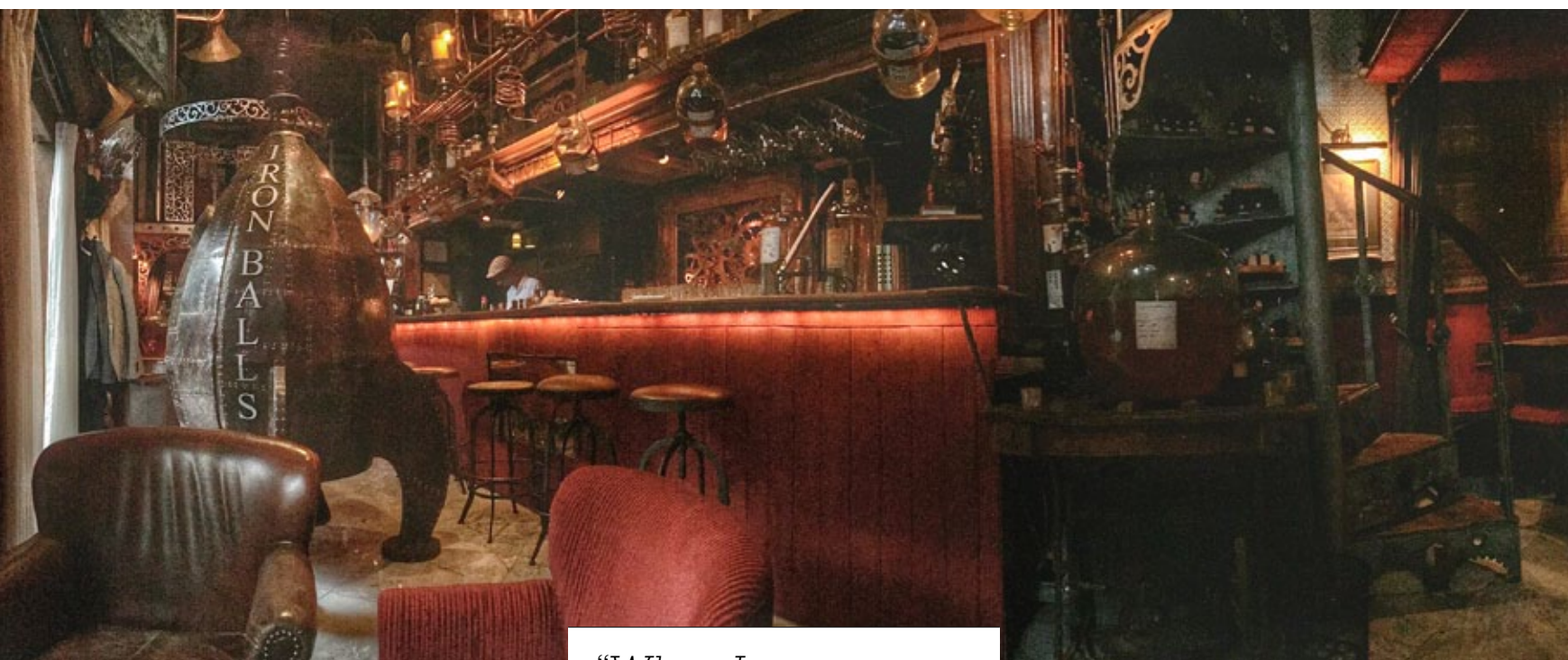
and behave a bit like a dirty coal miner."

It's an expanded version of the dark, factory-themed Iron Fairies in Bangkok, with wrought-iron staircases, exposed pipes, rough timber, raw brick, dark leather seats and hand-cast iron fairies (an entity on which Sutton has written three books). The menu features his renowned hefty burgers and a few other comfort dishes, plus a variety of cocktails and spirits.

Also on the same street is J. Boroski, "a very high-end, sophisticated bar". It, too, is a take on a bar of the same name in Bangkok, which Sutton designed for ex-New Yorker mixologist and pal Joseph Boroski, serving cocktails made from top brands and ingredients sourced from all over the world. "It'll have the same clean lines and modern industrial tastes, but be bigger in scale and even a bit more stylish," he says.

While the final details are still





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being worked out, the centrepiece will be a 14 metre-long bar. He describes the concept as having a “super-modern New York feel, a great spot to hang out in and enjoy”.

Ophelia, a high-end restaurant-bar with a “sexy, lounge-like feel”, opens in Wanchai’s Avenue complex on Lee Tung Street. With a HK\$15 million budget and the largest among the three venues, Ophelia is Sutton’s story-concept of a girl’s fascination with peacocks.

“It’s been like an incredible painting coming together,” he says, “completely customised in every detail, from furniture to outfits. I always wanted to do something with a peacock. It will be feminine with a lot of velvet mixed with handcrafted copper and steel, and be influenced, of course, by the beauty and colour of peacocks, using iridescent greens and cobalt blues.”

While Sutton is coy about the details, expect to see women in a massive birdcage and female waitstaff dressed in revealing peacock-design outfits. Food is

Thai-Indonesian fusion from award-winning chef Will Meyrick, previously of Mama San in Bali, while the drinks menu is extensive, specialising in high-end cocktails.

To get an idea of Sutton’s prodigious creativity, one just has to walk down a wooden staircase into Maggie Choo’s in Bangkok, which recreates a 1930s Shanghai-style cabaret, complete with cheongsam-clad women who sit coyly in upholstered swings, or wink and wave from opium beds above the bar. There are also half-opened steel-vault doors to private rooms with rum-crate tables drenched in decadent red, green and lavender light. Live music plays nightly – jazz, blues, fusion – as well as Chinese magicians and other acts.

Sutton, 41, was born in Perth, Australia and left school at 16, which he says was “one of the best days of my life”. He had no formal training in interior design or architecture. “I just loved to draw and build boats and treehouses as a kid.

I’m good at both and always liked to dream up ideas, I suppose. I’m lucky because I have the knowledge of how to build them because of my background in steel work and the building industry.”

When asked how he works, Sutton says, “I always have two or three great ideas in my head, but when I see a space I’m hired to design, it always gives away its own concepts to me as soon as I walk in. From there, I need a few hours on site alone to think about the basic concept and layout. Then it’s just about budget and time. The fine details come as I’m building the main skeleton.”

Sutton moved to Bangkok a decade ago. He originally came on business trips to source materials for a restaurant he had in New York and, before that, a steel business in Perth. He opened a factory in Bangkok that made iron fairies, a space that was creatively designed for the enjoyment of staff. Word spread and people started dropping in, so Sutton began stocking the

factory with drinks and food from a nearby 7-Eleven. The factory expanded and he started getting commissions for other venues.

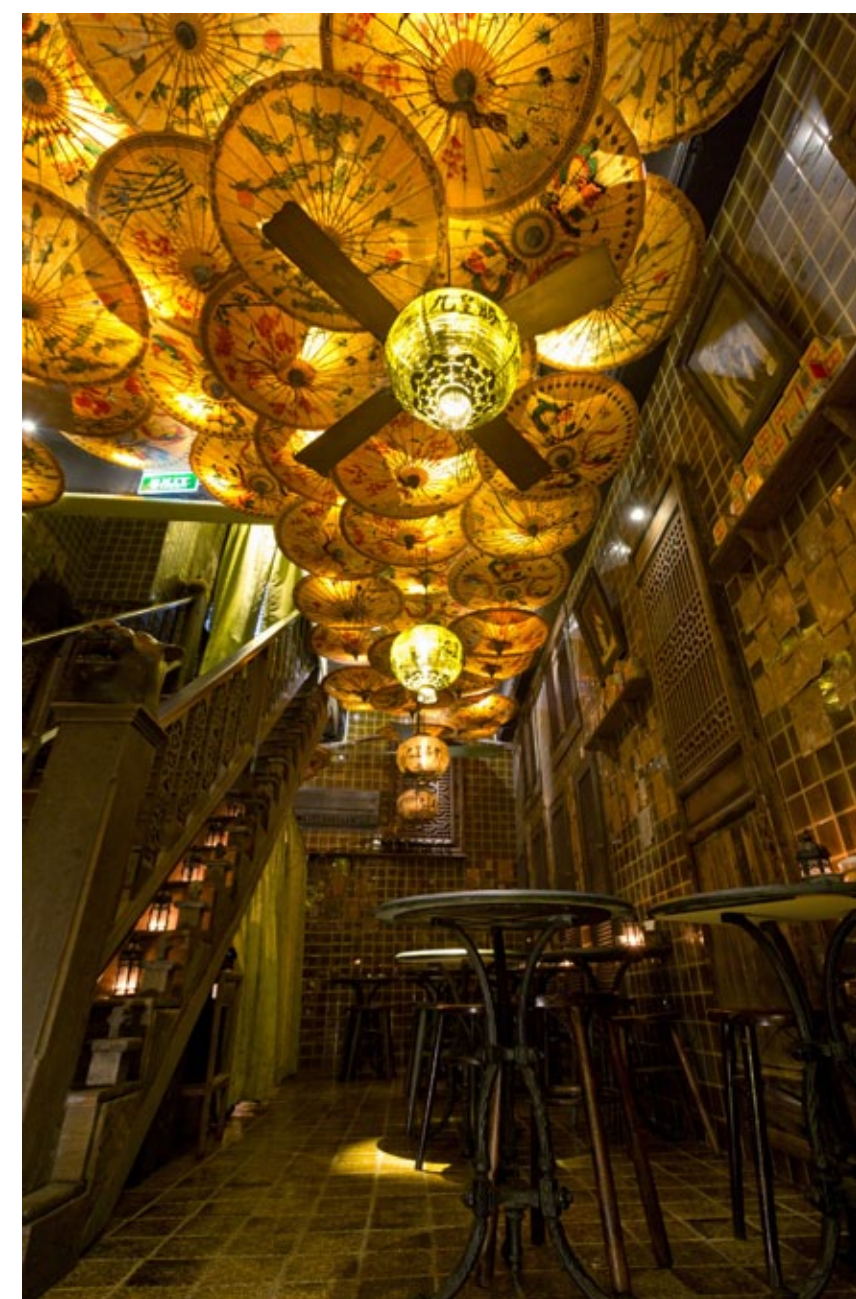
“Before I realised it, several years had gone by. And what I was creating [in Bangkok] would have been too expensive to reproduce in the US or Australia. So I stayed.”

He recently moved to Fremantle, Western Australia, where his design business will be based. “It’s funny but I know no one in the industry knows me in Australia, so unfortunately I don’t have any of my work there. It just became enough living full-time in Thailand and overseeing so many projects. Now I just design and build, so I’m free to live back home.”

What inspires Sutton? Vodka, he says. But also the “boredom of normal experiences in life, which takes my mind into other places. This is easy to do when you don’t have nature around you, and only traffic and shopping malls.”

These flights of fancy are what spur his story-based design concepts, often in a world of fairy tales and make-believe. “I didn’t get those ideas from my parents. They never read me fairy tales when I was a child. But later, working underground in the mines, I’d get bored and just let my mind take me to other places. And so in my free time in the shops, I started making iron fairies and other imaginative things.”

Being in demand, Sutton chooses who he works with. He often turns down clients. “First, I always ask what their budget is, because small



budgets are a nightmare. What also pisses me off is if the client or client’s spouse comes in halfway through construction and complains it’s not what they like. The ideal client should not see the site until I’ve signed off on it. They need to trust me and have an open mind.”

Sutton says his greatest extravagance is boats and maritime antiques, and most of his tattoos – he got his first one when he was 12 – are of ship maps and old charts. “I love the history and romance of shipwrecks. My father worked on the railway, and my mum for a newspaper. But other

members of our family were all fishermen, and I grew up on boats sailing around remote islands north of Perth.”

Despite his success as an interior designer, Sutton refuses to be pigeonholed. “I’m a jack of all trades, master of none. I design and build what I want and am free to do as I please.”

And his best creation? “The one I haven’t come up with yet.” ■

ABOVE: BANGKOK’S A.R. SUTTON ENGINEERS & CO, WIDELY KNOWN AS “IRON BALLS”. OPPOSITE: MAGGIE CHOO’S IN BANGKOK

JIMMY WING