

# Cocktail king

This shy guy from the Czech Republic is causing a stir on the Sydney bar scene. BY LAURA ECKSTEIN

**GEORGE NEMEC HAS** cancelled our interview. It was scheduled for a Monday morning, but an hour before, he calls to explain he is severely lacking sleep, having worked the night before at the ARIA after-party.

So we meet on Tuesday. But instead of letting our conversation slip into a gossip fest about the scandalous behaviour of certain music industry personalities, Nemeč is quick to turn the conversation back to the matter at hand.

He has recently won the 2004 *Australian Bartender Magazine* Barman of the Year, arguably the most prestigious and coveted award among Australian bartenders. But despite the accolade, Nemeč is modest, perhaps even a little surprised.

"The same person won the last three years in a row," he says in a thick Czech accent. "He has travelled the world and worked in many bars, he is very experienced and very good. It blew me away to win, to be considered in his league."

Nemeč, a bartender by trade, migrated from Prague three years ago. And though he had only ever worked in the Czech Republic, he set his

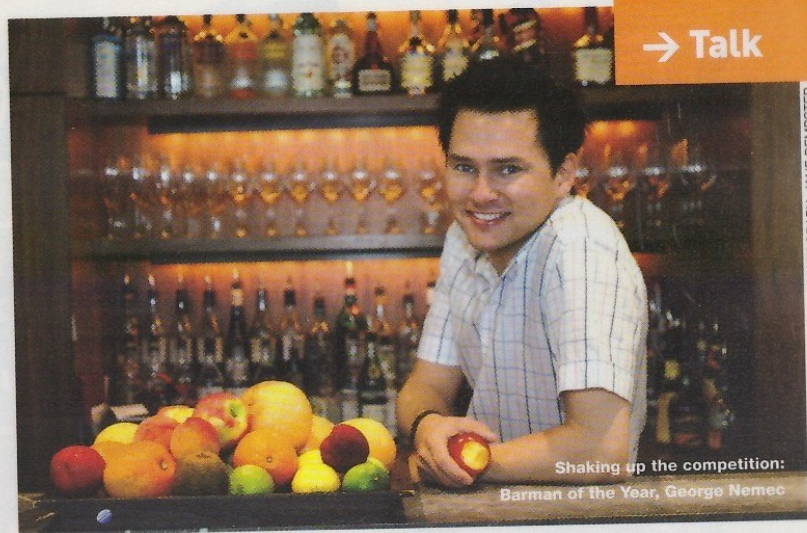
sights on some of Sydney's best bars. He has since worked at Jimmy Licks and Wildfire, and is currently working his magic at Water Bar and Hemmesphere.

Working at such slick night spots, the 28-year-old has caught the attention of some of the biggest players in the bar industry. The competition was not merely a show of cocktail panache but also involved nominations, heats and finals as well as a written exam, a pouring accuracy test and a simulated customer service situation.

But back to the ARIA after party. To his credit, Nemeč keeps tight-lipped about the goings on. Rubbing shoulders with the rich and famous is nothing new to him. Hemmesphere (where the party was held) is home to many celebrity bashes, as is Water Bar in Woolloomooloo.

Nemeč says he hasn't had any problems with the household names that frequent his bars. In his experience, celebrities are very well behaved. Not that he'd recognise the bad seeds anyway.

He rarely watches television and never reads tabloid magazines. That, coupled with his relatively



Shaking up the competition: Barman of the Year, George Nemeč

recent arrival in Australia, means he does not even recognise a lot of the famous people he serves.

"Every now and then someone will say to me, 'you know who that was?' I shrug my shoulders and have no idea. It doesn't really make much difference to me."

It is reassuring that on the often pretentious Sydney bar scene there are still bartenders who will dish up the same service, whether you're Russell Crowe (who almost counts as a regular at Water Bar) or the guy from down the road. Nemeč makes a point of serving all his customers in the same unassuming manner.

"I love meeting different personalities and dealing with them. With every customer you must gauge

what they want, whether they want to chat and when is enough chat. All service is customised."

Nemeč almost blushes when asked whether the chatting ever leads to anything else. At the suggestion of scribbled numbers left on coasters he shakes his head and says the only time he has ever given his number to a customer was when they were offering him a new job.

Nemeč works long hours and late nights but says it is the creative control and instant gratification he gets from his job that makes him really love bartending.

"If you are a creative person you can be creative," he says. "If you do well, people see it. You do your best and you are rewarded."