



 That's how it's done: Ben Andrews shows Luke Tilse how to pour the "perfect beer" at The Happy Wombat. Picture: Simone De Peak

THERE is nothing Ben Andrews enjoys more than "pulling beers and making coffees" when he steps behind the bar at The Happy Wombat in Newcastle.

And his boss, Luke Tilse, reckons his infectious smile, his enthusiasm and his presence have made the whole joint a warmer, kinder, and softer environment.

Mr Andrews, who has Down syndrome, has been working at the bar and restaurant for the past three years. He said the experience had been rewarding, and he agreed he was probably the "happiest barman in Newcastle".

"I like working a lot," he said.

It was after Mr Andrews completed a Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA) course in Gosford as an NDIS participant that he landed what began as a work experience gig at The Happy Wombat. His support worker had read an article about Mr Tilse, who also has a young son with Down syndrome.



 Coffee is served: Ben Andrews at The Happy Wombat. Picture: Simone De Peak

Now, Mr Andrews does four shifts a week - working the till, the bar and making coffees as part of the front-of-house team.

He shared his experience in the workforce on International Day of People with Disability.

His mother, Winnie Andrews, said it showed what was possible when there was good support and good opportunities for employment.

"When he started working there he was just so happy to have a job... I think it makes him feel like any other person," she said. "He was always pretty shy, but he has a lot more confidence now. We are very proud. And I think he is proud of himself too."

Mr Tilse said Mr Andrews was a highly valued and respected member of their team.

"Ben was a bit nervous at first but once we figured out what he liked doing, he just took to the work and he is now killing it," he said.

"We need him as much as we need any of our staff.

"Most of the time, he is on the till, but he loves stepping in behind the bar to pull beers. He has a laugh with the staff, and a bit of banter with the customers, and he just makes the whole place more calm. It's been good for the customers, it's been good for the staff, and it's good for Ben.

"I'd highly recommend other employers consider doing something like this too."



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