

F & B Special

All Restaurants Lead to Rome



In Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, John Cleese's anti-Roman protagonist asks a room full of comedy insurgents what, if anything, the Romans have ever given the people. Much to Cleese's displeasure, a long list is compiled, covering everything from roads, irrigation and sanitation to law and order, viniculture and so forth. To this list we could add restaurants, which first made an appearance in ancient Rome.

Thermopolia were small tavern-style establishments that served wine and pre-prepared dishes – probably limited to dried foods, though hot meals may also have been available – from L-shaped solid stone counters. These early diners were closer to modern fast-food outlets than sit-down restaurants and catered mainly to the poorer classes who did not have access to a private kitchen, the preserve of the wealthy in Roman society. Thermopolia may also have performed a social function in the manner of village pubs or workingmen's clubs.

The next milestone in the evolution of the restaurant can be found in the Middle Kingdom, or more specifically in Kaifeng, then China's northern capital, where eateries started to flourish during the Song dynasty. These early restaurants served the merchant classes and provided a wide selection of food. For the first time we can see establishments serving different cuisines and catering to different budgets.

By the 16th century dining out was a common occurrence in England, with people of all classes enjoying food, wine, ale and tobacco at city and country taverns, which also served as social centres... for men. In most cases entry for women was prohibited, beginning a long-standing British tradition of gender-segregated establishments.

The next station on our whistle-stop tour of the history of restauranting is, fittingly, 18th-century France where the concept of the restaurant as we know it today emerged. This explains why the gastronomic terminology used in many languages today is derived mainly from French, including the word 'restaurant' itself, which originally meant 'to restore'. By the early 1700s the term was being used to describe a nutritional dish, usually a soup or broth, supposedly with 'restorative' powers. 'Restaurant' later came to refer to places that sold these bouillons, before evolving into the generic meaning it has today.

In 1782 *La Grande Taverne de Londres* opened in Paris (not London), and was the first establishment to have menus and private tables for diners – laying down the blueprint of the modern restaurant. The establishment's owner, Antoine Beauvilliers, would go on to write a cookbook that defined French cuisine as we know it.

The late 1800s saw the first cafeterias begin operations in the US. These large self-service restaurants, the Big Apple's Exchange Buffet being amongst the earliest incarnations, catered to the growing workforces in the industrial heartlands of New York, Chicago and beyond.

The last century saw the restaurant given a modern twist, with the drive-in making its first appearance in – surprise, surprise – California circa 1936; by the 1950s the first of the now-ubiquitous fast-food franchises had hit the high streets. And since then we have seen the emergence of just about every kind of eatery imaginable, catering to all possible tastes, budgets and themes.



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Today, with a plethora of restaurants catering to our every whim, design is often the key factor for diners when choosing one establishment over another. There are a number of trends that seem popular at present: there's Boiler Room Chic – utilitarian, architectural, exposed brickwork, etc; there's the Lady Parlour – sumptuous cocktail lounges with a kaleidoscope of colour; we have the Gentleman's Club – ivy on the outside, antiques on the inside; the Boy's Club – a youthful version of the Gentleman's Club, ie with newer furniture, more colour and a pool table; there's Retro – pick a theme, a decade, a style, and go overboard; there's the uber cool minimalist approach; the IKEA fit – for the austere times in which we live... we could go on. One particular design approach that's gaining traction at the moment is the 'let's-show-the-customer-everything' concept, part of the broader 'let's-give-the-punters-something-to-look-at' masterplan. Watch the chefs cooking behind a glass wall... or in some cases, right in the middle of the restaurant. Come see our fancy wine rack! Look at our walls, which we haven't even painted... or look at our walls, on which we've drawn pretty/cool pictures. Yes, restaurant design is a creative battlefield where successful establishments make the glossy pages of architectural mags, whilst others put up 'closing down' signs in less time than it takes to make a good cheese. So, now let *hinge* introduce a smattering of the former.

BRIO downtown, New York

tonychi and associates

This interior by tonychi and associates gets filed under Lady Parlour, with its colourful statement furniture, mix-and-match patterns and sumptuous trimmings. The project is something of a reunion for designer and client as two decades earlier Tony Chi and Brio founder Massimo Scodetti had teamed up to create the restaurateur's first establishment. For the design of the new downtown branch, next generation Scodetti family member Damien enlisted the help of tonychi senior associate Johnny Marsh.

The latest Brio is situated in New York's Flatiron neighbourhood, and diners are greeted first by a cast-iron facade, and then by a 20ft-high ceiling with windows to match. Once inside this 70-seat restaurant, one notices the distinct black-and-white geometrically patterned floor tiles that feature throughout. The dining tables are classically clothed and accompanied by high, curved-back upholstered chairs. There are elongated dining booths and large Venetian-style mirrors adorn the back wall. Polished liquor towers dot the edges of the space – their glass shelves lined with crystal and bottles of wine and cognac – whilst three tall, green, lacquered service cabinets stand beside the unusually large floor-to-ceiling windows. A curved dark wood bar with plush brown leather stools provides a focal point... or rather, another focal point to an interior with many.

This is an eye-catching interior for what is essentially a family-run Italian restaurant. Traditional, home-cooked-style food and fancy décor. Win-win. A bottle of red, please.





Concrete Blonde, Sydney

Dreamtime Australia Design

Photography by Paul Gosney

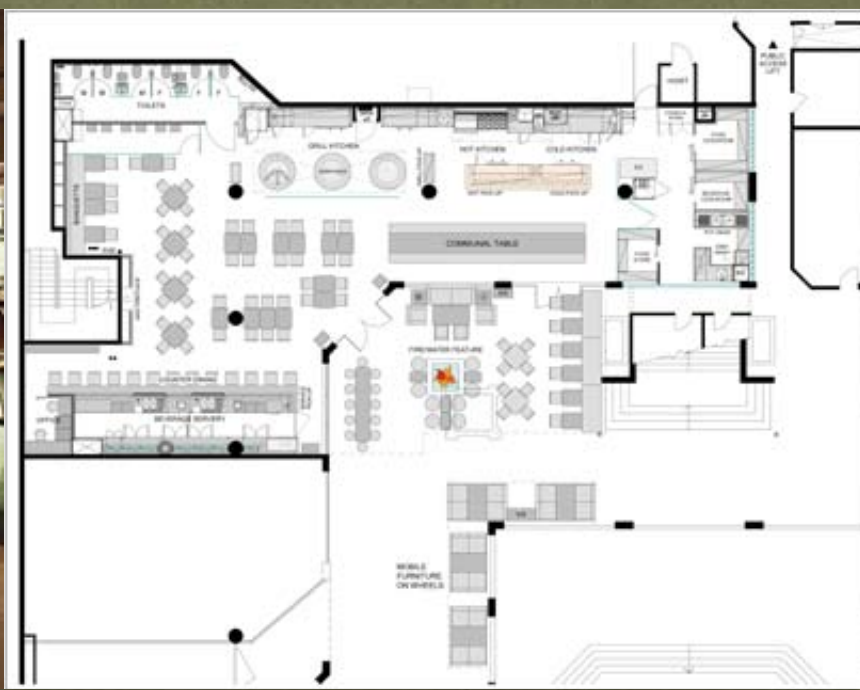


The Kings Cross district of Sydney has a bit of everything: riotous bars, dodgy nightclubs, and fashionable art galleries. It's sleazy, it's bohemian... but above all, it's hip. The upmarket establishments found in nearby Potts Point have long been spilling over into this eclectic neighbourhood, which now has yet another cool eatery. Concrete Blonde targets the trendy after-work-drinks crowd and is the creation of local studio Dreamtime Australia Design. The Sydney practice had turned down an earlier commission by the client on the grounds that a Portuguese chicken shop-cum-bar had little future. Dreamtime has a policy of rejecting projects that the firm feels won't be financially successful. Perhaps impressed by this rare display of willpower, the client returned some time later with a proposal that gave the design studio carte blanche in creating a new dining concept for a subterranean Bayswater Road space that formerly housed a gym.

The result meshes together architectural cool, industrial design and pop art. Untreated wood, bare concrete and polished metal surfaces create a 'boiler room chic' interior. There's an 8m-long communal dining table with bench seating, an open wood-fire rotisserie, a gas fireplace, wall-mounted tubular stainless steel slots for storing firewood, a cow-hide covered wall, 'saw-teeth' metal lights by Terzani, an open kitchen, a glass-encased air-conditioned wine cellar, and enough timber tables and seating to accommodate 100 thirsty Sydneysiders with empty stomachs. The floor is covered with American oak planks. And should you look up from your Cloudy Bay, you might notice graffiti scrolled on the ceiling courtesy of local artist Sally Spratt, who also provided the retro-cartoon design for the mosaic mural that adorns one of the walls. Aluminium spheres have been cut in half and attached to the bar facade, lending the space a slightly futuristic vibe. The wood wall behind the bar has been 'decorated' with thousands of metal nails that come all the way from the US. Why this was done, or why the nails had to be American, is not apparent, but the display does add edge to the interior.

Rustic but still urban, bohemian yet upmarket... this eatery is not easily pigeonholed. And that is probably a good thing.





SushiCafé, Lisbon

Saraiva + Associates

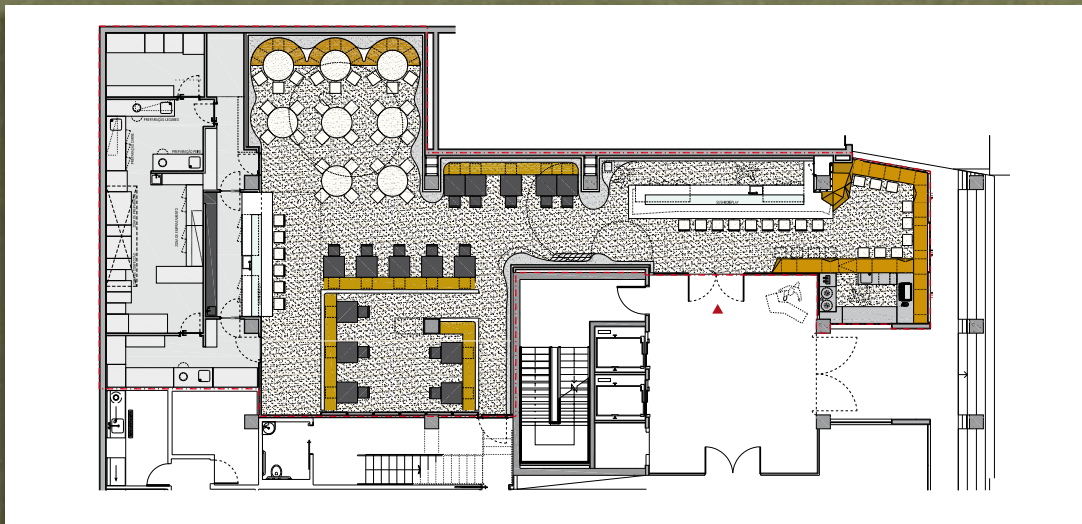
Photography by Fernando Guerra

SushiCafé is not a restaurant. It is a hallucinogenic experience. It's a cheese dream of shapes and form. It's a world where patrons are as likely to feed their heads as their stomachs. This is no ordinary restaurant.

Designed by Saraiva + Associates, this Rising Sun eatery in Lisbon is composed of four distinct zones: Bar, Sushi Bar, Dining Area and Japanese Spot. In the world of interior design, walls maketh an architectural statement. They are the things that define a restaurant's identity... as well as hold up the ceiling, which is also helpful. And the walls of SushiCafé are best described as funky. Actually, no, they would best be described as comprising rows of curvaceous horizontal Corian fins that snake around the space, emitting a purple glow from backlights positioned in the narrow gaps between the white strips. But they are funky. So funky in fact, that in one section the wall-blades morph into steps that lead to an elevated built-into-the-wall platform for a disc jockey.

Each zone within the restaurant is distinguishable by virtue of having slightly different furnishings, and thus a different vibe... or variations on the central vibe. This is one funky sushi bar.





Inbi, Messina

MKV Design

Photography by Robert Miller

MKV Design recently completed a new destination for pan-Asian cuisine at Navarino Dunes, a luxury resort along the coast of Messina in Greece. Called Inbi, the extraordinary space combines two separate buildings with an enclosed courtyard in between and a large patio overlooking the idyllic coastline. The restaurant is designed as a modern interpretation of an ancient Greek temple, with an imposing timber-clad ceiling. Bronze fretwork adorns the walls whilst contemporary chandeliers are deliberately assembled to cast shadows on the centrally located bar. To the front, the restaurant offers a stylish lounge setting. Stools surround oversized combination sofas and the cocoon chairs hanging from the ceiling add a playful note.

The courtyard, an intermediate area between the restaurant and lounge bar, where guests can eat, drink or simply soak up the atmosphere, is at the heart of Inbi. The neutral palette and white upholstered furniture set off the widely used timber and stone. The final stop in the spatial sequence is the patio – a secluded, secret garden-type area comprising multiple levels that cascade towards the bar. On the elevated decks sit clusters of organic-shaped stools, rattan armchairs, informal banquettes, sun beds and, right in the middle of everything, an elegant Japanese-inspired water sculpture.

A refreshing collection of indoor and outdoor spaces, to say the least.





Mezban, Kerala

Collaborative Architecture

Photography by Robert Miller

Mezban is a new multi-cuisine restaurant in Hotel Asma Tower, Kerala. Mumbai-based design practice Collaborative Architecture was tasked with creating a brand new identity for the eatery, albeit on a very tight budget. The brief called for a flexible layout that offered greater efficiency, even though this meant cutting down the seating capacity in favour of 2- and 4-seater tables. A vibrant waiting lounge has been carved out from the space to showcase the goings-on on the floor. The dining area is casual yet sophisticated, with black-and-white seating combinations, several corner booths, a kids' playroom, plus live cooking and dedicated buffet areas.

Structural columns help organise the layout, and the use of customised 'drop down' lights illuminate the whole space. The architects also installed a series of LED lights along the exterior wall (described as 'Thousand Moons') to enhance the façade.





Ma. Velous, San Francisco

Adeeni Design Group

In designing hybrid coffee/wine bar Ma.Velous in San Francisco's Civic Center, much attention was paid to creating a 'green' design that celebrates local creative talent. The long and narrow cafe is divided into a bar, cafe seating, small library section and lounge area. The chic, eco-friendly space is made up of repurposed vintage pieces, including a mid-century sofa, antique barber chairs, tabletops derived from a single walnut tree, custom benches made from recycled aluminium and light fixtures crafted from reclaimed materials. Eco floor tiles and low-VOC paints were used on the ceiling and the original wood wainscot was stained with a dark espresso eco-finish. The cafe's proximity to the War Memorial Opera House, the San Francisco Ballet and Davies Symphony Hall also inspired Adeeni, the designers, to pay homage to the arts. A 50ft-long mural by local street artist Eddie Colla commands the space above the wainscoting on one side of the cafe.

Ma.Velous' singular art piece and environment-friendly materials and practices adequately reflect the hip, up-and-coming vibe of the bar and its Civic Centre location.





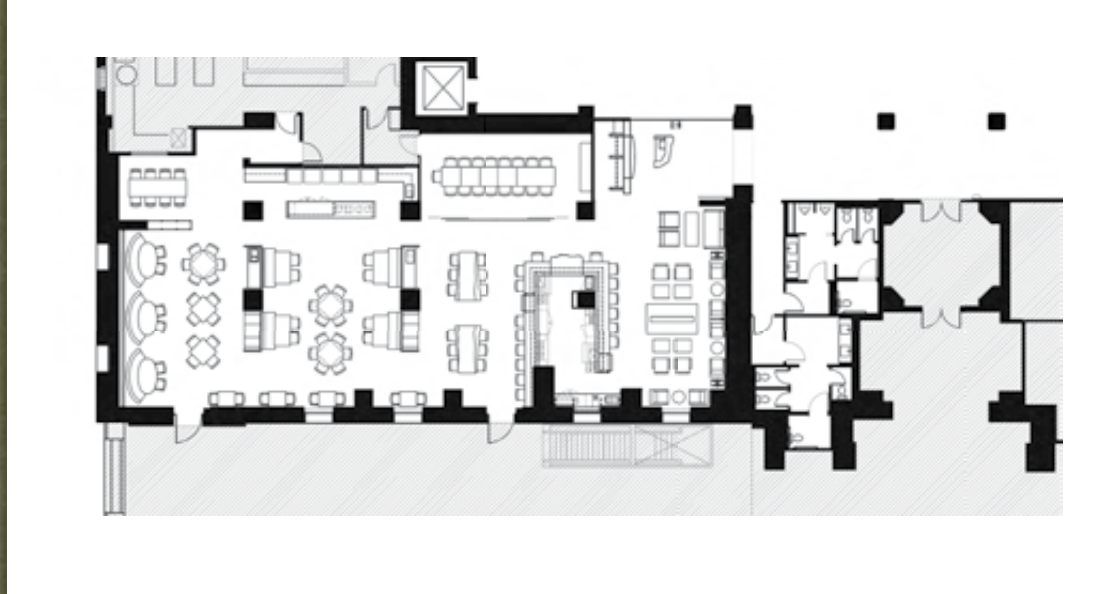
Parallel 37, San Francisco

EDG Interior Architecture + Design

Parallel 37 at The Ritz-Carlton, San Francisco, has been transformed into a warm, elegantly relaxed environment. EDG Interior Architecture + Design took a minimalist, less formal approach, basing their design on California's countryside and the dynamic food culture of the Bay Area.

The design contrasts with the hotel's neoclassical structure. Clean lines and modern glass wall treatments combine with natural materials, including an abundance of reclaimed West Coast wood and rough-edged limestone to further modernise the space. The intimate dining spots are built with elements such as wood tabletops and plaid-embossed leather seating. The bar and lounge, once a separate space, now opens into the dining room to create a relaxed and more convivial experience. A private Chef's Table allows the only glimpse into the kitchen, and a semi-private room partially hides behind an etched-glass swinging door. Along the rear wall of the dining room is the most prominent design element: a glowing glass photo panel of California oaks that imparts an immediate sense of place.





The Kitchen Cat, Melbourne

Woods Bagot

Situated just off Collins Street in the heart of Melbourne's CBD, The Kitchen Cat boasts communal lounge and dining areas ideal for all occasions. The 345sq m basement space is predominantly white concrete, with exposed pipes and little plants hanging in glass bowls from the ceiling. It was essential that the design of the Italian restaurant created a new identity within a space formerly associated with another eatery. "Exposing the red brick which was previously covered and the introduction of tactile materials such as recycled timber and leather upholstery enabled a dramatic physical change to the existing environment," explains Trish Turner, Associate at Woods Bagot.

The simple design has several key features that were essential in creating a unique atmosphere. A new meet and greet station inspired by a butcher's chopping block welcomes patrons upon their arrival, and a large antique Chef's Table is placed directly in front of the kitchen, with a one-of-a-kind rotisserie for patrons to admire.





The Tastings Room, Singapore

Studio SKLIM

Photography by Jeremy San

This new addition to Singapore's Marina Square introduces to the city a refreshing view on wine and food culture. The Tastings Room is a combination of French and Italian bistro cuisine and wine cellar. Crafted black volumes are positioned between the exposed ceiling and concrete screed floor to merge the traditionally opposing aesthetics of sophistication and affordability. Studio SKLIM divided the 137sq m area into a U-shaped band of programmes considering circulation, flexibility, entrances and exits. The bar sits firmly in the middle to negotiate the needs of all areas.

Drawing inspiration from dark wine bottles and woven wine-basket holders, the outer skin of the black volumes adopts a series of black diagonal tiles in stark contrast with the rest of the interiors which feature singular hues (like the 'hidden' flavours of wine) such as the amber kitchen and the black-and-white private function rooms. However, the main highlight here is the red 'cabinet of curiosities', ie the wine cellar at the back of the restaurant, which houses a vast collection of new and old world wines, along with its accessories (decanters, glasses and other preservation devices) stored on curved shelving to encourage comparisons and sampling.





Nobu, Beijing

Rockwell Group

Photography by Eric Gregory Powell

Nobu Beijing has landed in an upscale strip of the Chaoyang CBD, where it continues the rich, nature-accented aesthetic the famed Japanese restaurant chain is known for. Occupying an entire level and with a private entrance off the main lobby of the JW Marriot, the 437sq m area features a massive sculpture made of 150 bronze twigs hanging above a sinuous black-walnut bar and handwoven abaca screens in the main dining room. Also in this space are five custom-designed bronze chandeliers bearing a laser-cut cherry blossom pattern, all clustered together in allusion to the Chinese folk art of decorative knots. The myriad textures and intricate detailing never seem to end: Two private dining rooms have bespoke, 3D-swirl wallcoverings, and suspended cast bronze flowers with LED lights appear to crawl up the walls and ceilings.

Rockwell's exacting attention to detail and the dramatic, Chinese-inspired design elements clearly seek to wow even the most jaded. And in the nation's capital city, there are plenty of those.





Union Jacks, London

Blacksheep

Just opened with a first location in London, Union Jacks is the latest concept restaurant from celebrity chef Jamie Oliver. A distinct retro flair is at work here, with a diner look and a menu of wood-fired flatbreads and classic British flavours updated with the well-known Oliver twist. Located in the Renzo Piano-designed Central St Giles Building, the new pizzeria has a brightly coloured neon sign inside that is visible through the glazed facade.

The design agency's creative approach was to combine the look and feel of the principal elements of the restaurant (service, food, theatre and ambience) with Oliver's personal values. "When working with Jamie, we tried to capture 'him', not a pastiche of his character or the best bits – simply his genuine spirit, honest approach to food and wider ethical concerns, and that is what is emulated in the design of Union Jacks," says Jo Sampson, Creative Director of Blacksheep. The two-storey restaurant features a cinema listings board that displays the menu and specials, retro-inspired chairs, leather seating booths lit by glass pendant lamps and numerous trinkets collected by Oliver on his many trips abroad. The colour palette combines muted blue, brown, grey and pink with primary brights. Perforated wall panels are used throughout the restaurant, providing places to affix shelves and signage. Diners can even watch the chefs at work via vintage CRT television screens.





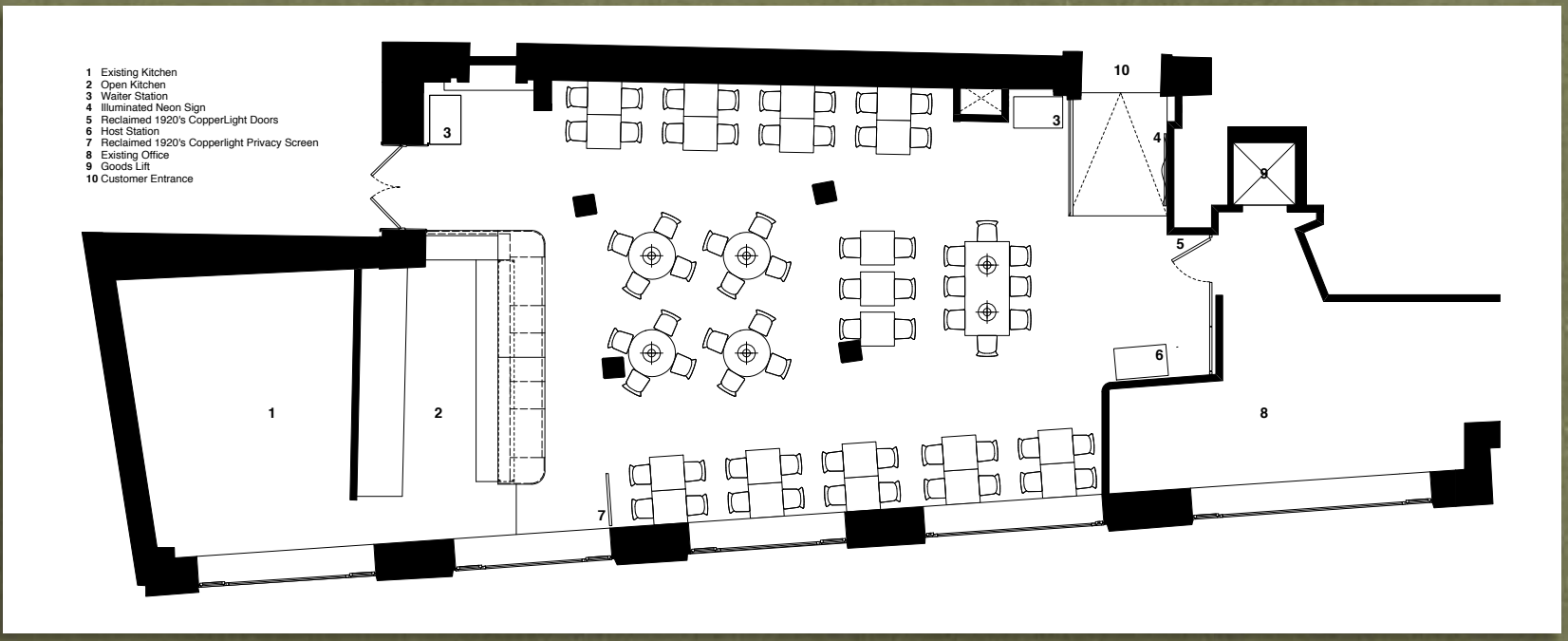
Cafe Liberty, London

SHH

Architecture and design practice SHH has revamped Cafe Liberty, a second-floor restaurant at London's iconic Liberty department store on Regent Street. The place was originally built in 1924 using timbers from two ships: the HMS Impregnable and the HMS Hindustan. It was a tight-budget project made even more difficult considering its location. "Our overall approach was to make the interior look properly integrated with the style and spirit of the original Arts & Crafts building and to introduce striking new elements that were either era-appropriate, highly contemporary or else which evoke the craft and maker spirit of the Arts & Crafts movement," reveals Helen Hughes, lead designer on the project.

Some of the new insertions worth mentioning are the reclaimed doors, a 1920s Arts & Crafts washstand, an old-fashioned reading desk and mahogany cabinet, hand-blocked wallpaper, a series of reclaimed glass lights as well as three neon flying ducks at the entrance of the cafe – all of which are fun ways to attract attention and gives the room a distinctive touch, no doubt.





Star Eight, Wuxi

PANORAMA

A warehouse within a 100-year-old factory compound in the Chinese city of Wuxi is the new home to this swanky steakhouse. The 700sq-m project is the work of Hong Kong interior design studio PANORAMA, and was completed in January.

The restaurant has something of an 'ice cave' vibe... Indeed the whole space feels a little cold, almost ethereal, with electric violet stalactite-esque fibre optics hanging from distant 10m-high ceilings. The host building's original structural features have been maintained and integrated into the new design: the exposed brick facade, the truss roof structure, the interior fair-faced concrete walls, and an angled skylight. To this the designers have added plush, antique-looking, leather-upholstered seating; crisp white tablecloths; partitions composed of rows of upright metal rods; and an impractically tall but impressive stainless steel wine rack.

PANORAMA has also added a mezzanine level, built entirely of steel, to provide an extra dining zone as well as a little interior variety. Here the ambience is slightly warmer: the distance between diner and ceiling is greatly reduced, the tones are darker, there is a touch of wood (starched-linen tablecovers giving way to timber surfaces), and lighting comes courtesy of shaded standing lamps. There is a VIP area that features a distinctive black-and-white bull-patterned ceiling-and-wall section.

Above the main entrance and in the black-mirrored water closets appears a violet figure-eight logo, the form of which is partly made up of star shapes. It is the memorable, if somewhat ambiguous, emblem of the restaurant.

This is not a cosy little Italian eatery with soft lighting and easy charm. This is a cavernous, industrial-design space where the waiters probably need a stepladder to retrieve your wine order from a beanstalk-high metal rack. But then again, familiar little Italian restaurants seldom make the pages of design magazines...





Mezzanine Floor



Ground Floor

Mango Tree, Sushi Ta-ke, Bella Vita, Hong Kong

Steve Leung Designers Ltd

Renowned interior designer Steve Leung is responsible for three restaurants – Mango Tree, Bella Vita and Sushi Ta-ke – in Causeway Bay’s Cubus building. The new venues are tailored to Leung’s “4-D dining concept”, which signifies “dedication, delicious, design and details”. Aside from having gourmet meals, patrons can also expect to see a blend of historical and contemporary design elements at the restaurants.

As one enters Mango Tree, mood lighting and a sculpture of Buddha’s hand hint at mystery and invoke a sense of calm. The use of bronze mirrors, glass and candles creates vivid reflections in the elongated space and mimics the Thai ritual of Buddhist devotees carrying candles into monastery chapels. Across the hallway is a stylish lounge area ideal for an aperitif or cocktail. The combination of arc-shaped sofa seating, stools, round tables and wood-shutter shelves captures the essence of a floating market. Tinted teak flooring distinguishes the main dining area, where a cluster of avant-garde light bulbs hang from black steel mirrored ceilings – reminiscent of the dazzling ambience of the Thai Yeepeng Floating Lantern Festival. The restaurant reflects the aesthetics of traditional Thai style through ethnic chic decor and a Zen-like atmosphere.

MANGO TREE





SUSHI TA-KE



The minimalist design of Sushi Ta-ke takes full advantage of the restaurant's wonderful views over the city and includes one large dining room dominated by a sushi bar, a private dining area, and an outdoor terrace that resembles a Japanese courtyard. Sushi Ta-ke moreover pays homage to bamboo, with a contemporary interpretation of the plant's structure, finish and texture. Two rows of vertical bronze 'pipes', disguised as a bamboo grove, rise on each side of the long corridor that leads guests to the actual dining area. To fully play out the naturalist mood, Leung designed the bamboo grove in hues of brown and black and matched it with black wallpaper, dark grey furnishings and soft lighting throughout the restaurant.



BELLA VITA

Directly downstairs, Bella Vita has a cosy yet elegant vibe and is based on the countryside scenery in Tuscany. Traditional terracotta tiles and antique Italian cabinets line the entrance and a muted beige curtain separates the semi-private dining area from the reception. Inside, a row of wooden shelves display ingredients and cookbooks imported from Italy. The beige tone furniture, handpainted walls and a movable antique mirror give one a sense of eating in an authentic Tuscan home.

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Phantom L'Opera Restaurant, Paris

Odile Decq Benoit Cornette Architectes Urbanistes

French architect Odile Decq designed the spectacular L'Opera Restaurant, located in one of the most famous buildings in opera history, the 1,600-seat L'Opera Garnier, on Place de l'Opera in Paris. The US\$8.2 million, three-year-long project was fraught with strict regulations concerning the venerable character of the building. However, Decq circumvented these by using a glass curtain wall that protects the original stone. The freestanding glass encompasses the interior and isolates the space from the existing shell. The simple facade allows for clear views of the surrounding arrondissement.

To accommodate 90 guests at a time, a mezzanine is deftly integrated to resist touching the existing structure's walls, columns and roof. Narrow columns extend upwards towards a billowing white structure, which spans the area of the ground level and literally floats above the guests. Red carpeting flows down the steps of the main staircase and spreads out into the centre of the dark flooring below. At ground level, red booths and Poltrona Frau chairs are arranged to create a lounge area, and a long black bar snakes around a nearby column.

Somehow, this contemporary, 'phantom-like' addition manages to fit perfectly beneath the classical details of the vaulted stone ceiling without altering the building's unique heritage.





