

By Margaux Salcedo

Design as Death or Divinity

The modern diner seeks not only a memorable menu but a memorable venue as well. Restaurant design has never been as influential as it is today

RESTAURANTS are no longer a purely gustatory experience. Today's diner seeks not just a memorable menu but a memorable venue as well. Design now plays such an important role in the restaurant industry that it can spell the difference between a P500 and a \$500 meal. And in some cases, design may cause the death or divinity of a restaurant, menu aside.

One of the most praised restaurants in the United States is The French Laundry in Napa Valley, California, of Chef Thomas Keller. Keller has been named Best Chef by several audiences, judges and publications, including the panel of the James Beard Awards, Time Magazine, Reader's Digest, and London's Restaurant Magazine.

In 2004, when the Time Warner Center opened on New York's Upper West Side, Keller opened Per Se, which has since received rave reviews and for which one now needs a six-month advance reservation. Like The French Laundry, it has been voted one of The World's 50 Best Restaurants by Restaurant Magazine and has received four stars from the New York Times, a remarkable feat, considering that hardly any restaurant ever receives four stars from their harsh and brutal critics.

Per Se boasts a nine-course tasting menu that should be worth the six-month wait. The price? I hear it now runs at \$250 (around P12,500). Crazy? Sounds like. But two years after it opened, Per Se continues to receive the same amazing reviews and the



Per Se's classy designs can accommodate off-venue events like this one for a Vuitton affair

wait list is getting even longer, so there really must be something enchanting about this restaurant. The consensus is that it is the overall extraordinary experience: aside from the menu that is consistently impeccable, the critics have given equal credit to the restaurant's design. Frank Bruni of The New York Times, wrote:

"...With its brown tones, dark woods and shimmering metal surfaces, it looks like a gilded corporate boardroom, not just touched but kissed by Midas. It offers opulence in place of hominess: an appropriate adjustment, I would argue, from Napa to Manhattan. "It also feels blissfully indulgent. The space between tables—only 16 of

them—is vast, and every table has a view of (Central Park) and the grand buildings that skirt it. If you can wangle a reservation that puts you in Per Se around dusk and allows you to watch the light fade over Manhattan, do it. The reward is a profound sense of peace that very few of this frenetic city's restaurants can offer."

I am proud to share that the project architect for Per Se is a Filipina. A UP graduate who took her master's degree in architecture at Columbia University, Liza Morales-Crespo handled The Restaurants at the Time Warner mall. The Restaurants include Per Se, for which she had extensive discussions with Keller himself, V Steakhouse of Jean-Georges Vongerichten (not there anymore), and Stone Rose, a bar/lounge by Randy Gerber (husband of Cindy Crawford) of W Bar fame (the W Hotel was where they shot "Two Weeks Notice" with Sandra Bullock and Hugh Grant).

For The Restaurants, Liza coordinated everything from the schematic design phases to construction. Now an associate of the firm Brennan Beer Gorman Monk Interiors, Liza was involved in the restaurants' conceptual design, design development, sourcing, and construction. She admits that doing the architecture for a restaurant is far more taxing than for other projects, especially if your client is as detailed as Thomas Keller. "It was challenging because Keller was very 'down to the details,' aside from the fact that when you work on a restaurant, you necessarily get more involved because the requirements are



Per Se's project architect Liza Morales-Crespo

far more specific, although it helped that Keller knew from the beginning what he wanted, down to the tablecloth."

To prepare for the project, Liza read Keller's "The French Laundry" to get acquainted with his style of cooking, his tastes and philosophy. She also coordinated with numerous consultants to get every detail of the restaurant right, including an acoustics consultant, to make sure that sound levels within the kitchen don't bother the guests; a food service consultant, who told her specifically what stoves and other equipment to purchase; a mechanical consultant for air-conditioning and other such concerns; an electrical consultant; a plumbing consultant; a sprinklers consultant; a fire protection consultant; a low-voltage consultant, who made sure that everything requiring Web access would work smoothly, and, of course, the interior designer, Adam Tihany, who made sure that elements of The French Laundry were present at Per Se. (Whew!) Liza shares that Per Se was especially nerve-racking because Keller wanted a satellite hook-up with The French Laundry in Napa Valley, plus he insisted on something called a "display kitchen" where you can watch what's going on as they prepare your meal if you

choose to, requiring what they call the back-of-house to be as well-maintained as the front-of-house.

So there is much more to design and architecture than just drawing up a plan; you need a project architect to make sure that the transition from concept to construction goes smoothly. Liza advises that when you design a restaurant, your architect or designer should also get acquainted with the chef's way of cooking: from the ingredients (Keller, unlike other restaurants, did not require a storage facility for vegetables because he gets everything fresh, sometimes even flown in from Napa Valley); to the procedures employed (Keller prioritizes his *garde manger* or pantry chef); and other such intricacies. "I learned about how complicated running a restaurant is, from the sequence of food preparation to the specific equipment that needs to be used; everything has to be systematic and organized."

Tootsie Gancayco (Pratt Institute, Masters in Communication Design) and Grace Zapata (Columbia University, MBA) of the brand management firm Push Associates

explain the value of design to Per Se's or any other restaurant's or brand's success. Says Tootsie, "Design is a way to communicate. Unconsciously, the visual concept communicates [to your guest] what your message is and who you are." Grace adds that design may even dictate a restaurant's price. "Take for example Antonio's in Tagaytay. It's so far and quite pricey but people go there for the experience."

The good news is, as the world gets smaller and the players more exposed to international standards, our restaurants are getting as competitive with their interiors as they are with their flavors. It can only be a good thing for the customer, who is also learning to become more discerning and more demanding of better tastes, textures and ambiance.

Of course, if after all the effort with a fancy wall relief structure and the display kitchen, the steak tastes like rubber and the fish sub par, well then, by all means ask for your money back. A restaurant must obviously be more than what meets the eye. At the end of the day, it still is, literally, a matter of taste. •



Per Se's Private Dining Room West

Figure It Out

636 square kilometers: Total area of Metro Manila

9.9 million: Population of Metro Manila

15,617 people per square kilometer: Population density of Metro Manila

12.9 percent: Percentage of Philippine population residing in Metro Manila

16,467: Population of Batanes, the least populated province in the Philippines

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