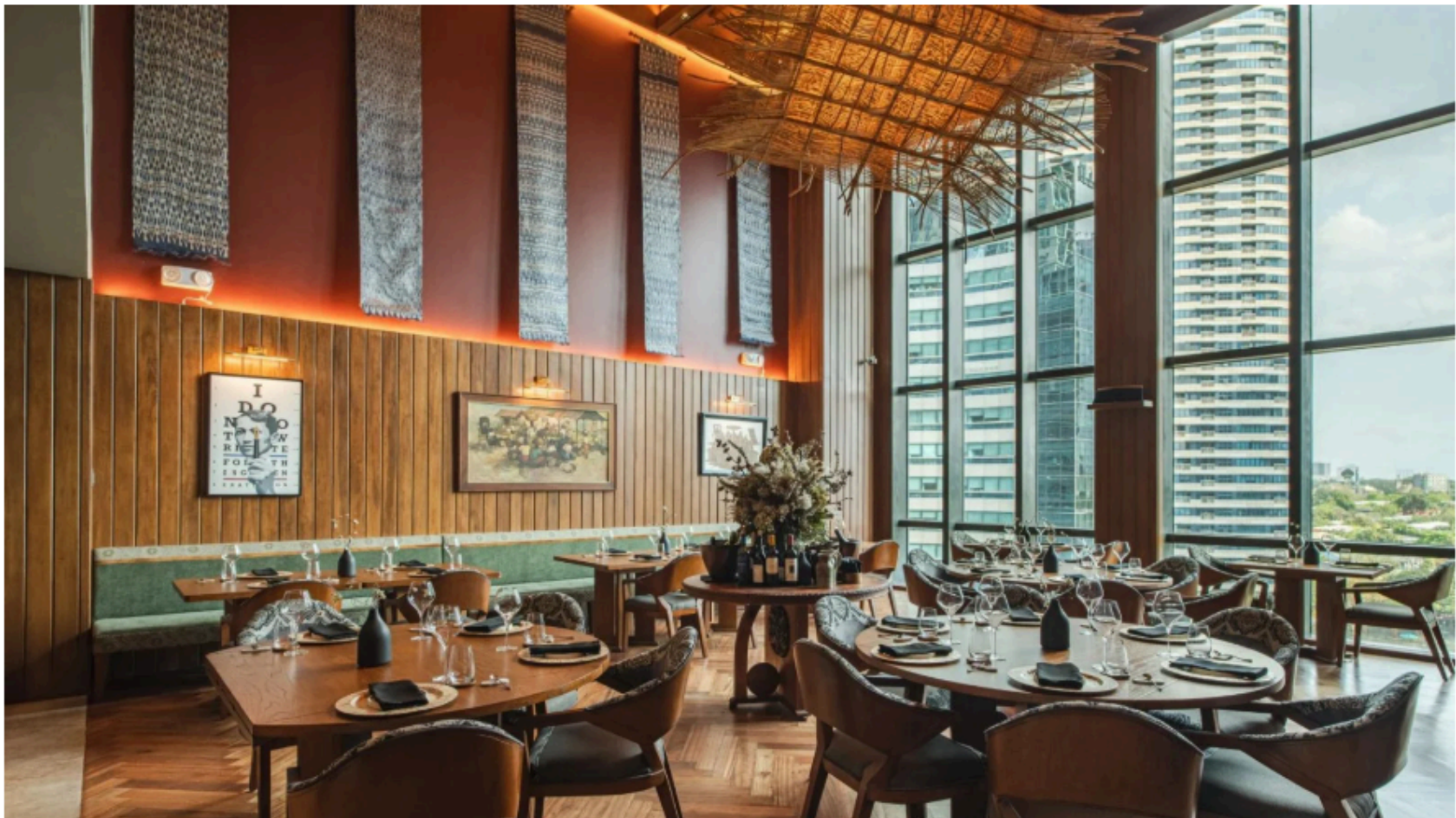


DINING | FOOD

Top chefs speak up: restaurant design is just as important as its food

By Jaclyn Clemente Koppe | Aug 11, 2025



COVER Restaurant design is just as important as its food, according to top chefs (Photo: Justin De Jesus for Tatler Dining)

While a chef's food is the metaphorical pearl that stuns and beguiles with its brilliance, the restaurant is its oyster—a showcase and reflection of its authentic beauty. A creatively designed space is sure to capture the admiration of its beholder, but there is more to restaurant design than aesthetics. In a highly competitive local fine-dining market, restaurant design is not only a promise of the kind of culinary experience on offer, but also speaks volumes about the team behind the establishment. It is a reflection of their tastes, their personal experiences, and ultimately, their dedication to their craft.

Restaurants Helm, Celera and Hapag are designed not only to impress, but also meant to be reflections of the level of talent in their kitchens and the distinctive cuisines they create

"It is probably the most important component (when opening a restaurant), especially these days," says chef Nicco Santos, when asked why chefs like himself put a lot of care and thought into the design of their restaurants. With Celera, the restaurant he runs with chef Quenee Vilar, his partner in creating food that he describes as "open to interpretation," experience guided him to work closely with a designer he respects and is creatively and professionally compatible with. "We've always gravitated towards working with immense talent, and our past experience with (interior designer) JJ Acuña left a lasting mark. So when it came time to build Celera, it had to be JJ. The process was seamless—we came to him with no fixed brief, just a desire to be authentically expressed through design, much like how we approach food," he shared.

See also: Late-night eats: 10 restaurants from the Tatler Best Philippines Guide 2025



ABOVE Photo by Justin De Jesus for Tatler Dining



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For chefs Thirdy Dolatre and Kevin Navoa of Hapag, their sparkling gem of a restaurant on the seventh floor of Balmori, Rockwell is a reflection of how far they have come—from their humble start in private dining, serving guests in their homes, to their meteoric rise as two of the most prominent culinary talents in modern Filipino cuisine. “Hapag may have transformed from a rebellious child to a refined gentleman, but one thing stays true: our dedication to honouring Filipino cuisine and culture will always be at the heart of everything we do,” explains Dolatre.

They, along with their business partners, want to immerse their guests in the rich tapestry of Filipino heritage from the moment they enter Hapag’s intricate doors. “Our vision for Hapag was to curate an experience transcending simply dining. It is a journey that immerses guests in the essence of Filipino culture and culinary excellence,” explains Liza Morales of Ecotecture Design, architect and interior designer of Hapag. Morales and her team at Ecotecture spearheaded the design direction and concept, creating a space that resonates with Hapag’s culinary philosophy. In collaboration with the Ecotecture team, Isabel Lozano and her team from Decorum by MIL focused on the furniture, finishes and equipment design elements.



ABOVE Photo: courtesy of Ember



ABOVE Photo by Justin De Jesus for Tatler Dining

Santos, too, underlines the importance of good lighting and explains the magnetism of open spaces. “Lighting was considered from day one to ensure the mood enhanced the meal. The open kitchen adds transparency and a sense of welcome – the feeling of being part of something unfolding,” he says. At Hapag, art and music are essential elements of a memorable dining experience. The Hapag team, working closely with their design partners, selected numerous pieces from restaurant partners Ricky and Bubu Andres’s Filipino art collection, then narrowed them down to the works proudly displayed around the restaurant. “We felt elevated Filipino dining must showcase the best of Philippine art,” says Bubu. “Filipino artists are unique, yet very few can show their craft to the world. We wanted Hapag to be a platform to showcase Filipino talent in every way,” she continues.



ABOVE Photo: courtesy of Helm

In contrast, chef Josh Boutwood's flagship establishment Helm at Ayala Triangle Gardens is an archetype of minimalist modernity, reflecting Boutwood's culinary style that refuses to be constrained by a particular genre or cuisine. "I wanted a space that was relatively simple and appeared as if a kitchen had simply been dropped into it, leaving the bare concrete walls and flooring," explains Boutwood, "yet at the same time creating a connection to Ember, the previous restaurant opening. Ember contains some of my photography work with subjects that are all broken; to create the cohesive connection for Helm, we took inspiration from the Japanese art of kintsugi to create the illusion of repairing something broken and making it more beautiful." Design firm Headroom created a sleek, minimalist space featuring black, copper and grey tones enhanced by dramatic lighting against the starkness of cement and the openness of the kitchen.

Boutwood stresses that the design, more than anything else, should be an authentic representation of the cuisine and the people behind it. "It should be a reflection of personalities – from the chefs and the food they create, to the concept in general. I believe very strongly that the restaurant should feel at ease and homely, which in turn makes guests feel like they have stepped into the mind of the chef and surrendered to the creativity of the space."

Santos adds a piece of advice: "Design from the inside out. Be honest about who you are, and let your space reflect that without compromise. Authenticity resonates more deeply than trend. Design your space like you would a dish – with care, purpose and a clear sense of self."

In contrast, Boutwood's minimalist world is all about functional design, where every component, like in his food, serves a purpose. "The idea from the get-go was to have the kitchen centre stage, and it had to look a particular way so it wasn't in the way but purposeful. So we chose a powder coating that would balance the cement and limit the amount of contrasting colours. Also, the orientation of the kitchen needed to be balanced so we, as cooks, didn't appear out of balance," he says.

While designing one's dream restaurant does take a fair amount of thought and collateral, these chefs and their collaborators attest that it is a necessary expense in putting their best foot forward. "Design is the first sensory release that showcases a restaurant. It sets the expectation of the kind of food and service to be had," shares Lozano. "If interiors are well thought out, considering service flow that positively impacts both guests and service staff, then successful design goes beyond aesthetics and greatly contributes to the dining experience."