

gone are the days when it was enough to simply serve a good meal. now chefs

and designers are creating intimate dining experiences more akin to theater

style & sustenance

BY REBECCA ASCHER-WALSH
PHOTO BY NEAL SLAVIN



It's the meal that matters most (from left):
Chefs Arnaud Berthelier, Fabio Trabocchi,
Craig Strong, Gray Kunz, Eric Ripert,
Jacques Sorci and Dean Fearing.



It's all by design
(from left): Designer
Tony Chi, facilitator
Erich Steinbock,
designer Bill Johnson
(seated), consultant
Carl Bruggemeier,
designers Jennifer
Johanson, Michael
Bagley and Adam D.
Tihany.



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The legendary Le Cirque in New York, designed by Adam D. Tihany, inspired by the playful mobiles of Alexander Calder. Right: An Eric Ripert salmon dish from Blue, his restaurant at The Ritz-Carlton, Grand Cayman.

Not long ago, dining out tended to be limited to two possibilities. You could grab a quick, casual bite, or you could invest an impressive amount of time and money in a formal event. In other words, you could be comforted, or you could be dazzled. Both lovely experiences to be sure, but something was missing: the idea that dinner should be a celebration of a life well lived at the end of every day, not just on special occasions; and that the act of breaking bread might be as stimulating and soul enriching as a wonderful night out at the theater. What was missing was the fun.

Luckily that's changing—and changing fast, thanks to a dining public that has grown increasingly demanding and knowledgeable about food and wine while also becoming more casual in quotidian ways, eschewing expensive custom-made suits for coveted custom-made jeans. Meeting them more than halfway are chefs inspired to keep up with a cultural shift that's making their jobs more delightful—if also more difficult—as they're asked to present guests with experiences that go beyond a perfectly starched white linen tablecloth and an expertly cooked filet. Working alongside the chefs are designers and consultants who agree there has never been a more exciting time to be engaged in the business of satisfying customers.

"I think you have to start with the agreement that people go out to restaurants to have an experience now, and not because they're hungry," says Adam D. Tihany, an architect by training who recognized restaurant design as a niche in the 1980s. Tihany is the talent behind such trendsetting establishments as Manhattan's Le Cirque, Per Se and Jean-Georges. "If you're hungry, you take something out of your refrigerator. Going to a restaurant is an event. And as such," he continues, "the diner's experience is to be transported to another place, to be somebody else for a couple of hours. A restaurant is a theater, but it's a more accessible destination than going to the theater. Provided you can get a reservation, anyone can do it."

These daily performances—much like a matinee at lunch and a dinner show every evening—leave no room for amateurs. "It's absolutely like making a play," agrees Wolfgang Puck, chef and owner of 13 restaurants including Los Angeles' famed Spago, a branch of which will open next year at The Ritz-Carlton, Bachelor Gulch. "But," he adds, "how are you going to manage to get the play from the piece of paper to having people come in every night and applaud?"

With a lot of help—and a lot of inspiration. Let's take a look at what's going on behind the scenes—and on the stage, if you will—of today's most cutting-edge dining experiences.

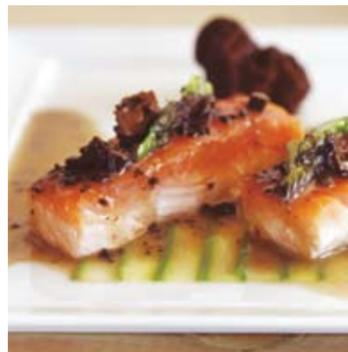
A MORE DEMANDING AUDIENCE

Blame—or thank—the Food Network. Where once the language of cuisine seemed best left to chefs who could parse the subtleties of sweating vs. sautéing vegetables, these days everyone's an armchair cook. Gone are the days when *Gourmet* and *Bon Appétit* were the only game in town. With the explosion of food coverage in periodicals and television, people are becoming more knowledgeable—and more demanding.

One of the demands, notes Erich Steinbock, former vice president of food and beverage for The Ritz-Carlton and now general manager of the St. Louis property, is that the food be of the highest quality. "[Chef] Eric Ripert, when he started the Grand Cayman [location of Le Bernardin restaurant at The Ritz-Carlton], came down and went out with the local fishermen," he says, "and he made a deal with them that when they come back at the end of the day with their catch, their first stop is the Ritz."

It's not simply that diners want better food. As the famous fast-food ad goes, they want that better food served their way—which means expecting four-star food without having to dress up or commit to a three-hour extravaganza. Even establishments like Ripert's Le Bernardin in Manhattan, revered for its elegant dining, is changing its ways: The restaurant's former no-tie/no-entrance policy now requires only that one wears a jacket, and it is now possible to skip the dining room altogether. "Every day people were coming in and asking to eat at the bar, so about a year ago, I said yes," says Ripert. "I love it. It makes it less formal; people don't want to be formal anymore." Says Steinbock, "I have a saying: The more disposable income someone has, the less dressed up they get."

Relaxing the atmosphere doesn't mean a restaurant can't still charge top dollar—and



chef eric ripert goes out with local fishermen in grand cayman to make sure they stop at his restaurant first.

nothing competes
with the food
at café gray
in new york city
—not even priceless
central park views.



get it—while serving exquisite food. Gray Kunz, the talent behind Manhattan's Café Gray in the Time Warner Center, says he follows his instincts, but he also listens to the customer. "I had a bar menu that offered the full menu, and it worked very well. But people were asking for more finger food, and I decided to add that." His newest restaurant, Grayz, will open in Manhattan this fall. Part catering hall, part lounge, it will serve upscale finger food to customers who want their oysters Rockefeller with a hip twist. And Steinbock recently watched customers at one of The Ritz-Carlton's dining rooms, dressed in jeans and T-shirts, order two bottles of wine that totaled more than \$5,000.

As Puck says, "Often young people come in jeans and tennis shoes, and then they order a \$600 bottle of wine. They're interested in food, not a fancy, stuffy environment. They want to have fun, and a restaurant should be fun. It should be like a party."

SETTING THE STAGE

As with any good theater production, what's happening in the background may not be discernible to a diner, but it's crucial to that diner's experience. This means the perfect lighting, a harmonious soundtrack and a stage that's appropriate to the experience of what will unfold. Tony Chi, who is designing Puck's Bachelor Gulch restaurant with his Tony Chi and Associates, says, "The story of dining is about the body and soul. I tell owners and chefs that I will build the body and they will build the soul."

So how does one make a body look beautiful? As anyone who has had his picture taken knows, it all begins with good lighting, an element so crucial to dining out that it's not uncommon for lighting to account for 10 percent of a restaurant's design budget. "In the '80s, no one ever thought about lighting. You put lights in because you needed them," says Ripert. "Now, it's essential. There's no way you'd open a restaurant without a lighting consultant."

That's where someone like Juan Pablo Lira comes in; he is an architect employed by Focus Lighting, which has worked with restaurants like Manhattan's Town and Le Cirque and is designing the lighting for Las

Vegas' Project CityCenter, a complex of residential and retail properties. "You want to be involved from the beginning of the project," says Lira. "You want to sit down with the chef and designer and ask what they want the place to be. Sexy? Corporate?" The only constant: Everyone must look their best, something most easily achieved through side-lighting, which creates a sunset-like hue, or, as Ripert says, "Something that looks like the end of a beautiful day in Provence."

Subtle lighting leaves the "wow" factor where it belongs: In the design of the restaurant itself, which includes everything from how the space is defined to what the waiters are wearing—details taken so seriously that restaurant designers now are often overseeing every element down to the staff's uniforms.

With maitre d's no longer expected to be attired in tuxedos, designers are finding they can send a message to the diner simply by dressing the person who stands at the front door. "What the host or hostess is wearing lets you know what you will be eating," says Tihany. "If the details don't match the food, that's like someone walking on the stage and not knowing their lines. It's a nightmare. For us, the characters are the waiters, the lighting, the furniture. The only thing we don't do is write the lines. That's what the chef does."

Often to a carefully orchestrated back-beat: Sit silently for a moment the next time you spend an evening in a restaurant and you may notice that the music will go from an upbeat tempo and loud decibel at 6 p.m. (when the dining room isn't filled) to a quieter noise level around 8 p.m. (when diners' chatter fills the room) to a slower beat at 11 p.m. (when it's time to wind down).

CHANGING SPACES

If a restaurant's design should match the mood of the chef and reflect his creations, the dining room also has to make the customer comfortable. And as customers' definitions of "comfort" change, restaurant designers are finding new inspiration.

At The Ritz-Carlton, South Beach in Miami, chef David Bouley (chef/owner of the acclaimed Bouley in New York's Tribeca) is bringing a diverse international cuisine to his new David Bouley Evolution in a dramatic art deco space created by famed Parisian

A rendering from chef Dean Fearing's soon-to-open restaurant at The Ritz-Carlton, Dallas, which will contain seven radically different dining spaces. Below left: An asparagus dish created by Gary Kunz of Café Gray in New York.



designer Jacques Garcia. At Dean Fearing's soon-to-open restaurant at The Ritz-Carlton, Dallas, he and designer Bill Johnson began designing something they say neither of them has ever seen: a restaurant with seven different dining spaces, each radically different in tone and décor, from a rattlesnake skin-topped bar area to kitchen-side tables and an outdoor eating space built around a fountain. "I just kept on seeing that people wanted variation," says Fearing. "What I want is to catch someone who's eating in one room looking into the next room and saying, 'I can't wait to eat in that room next time.'"

Johnson and Fearing also concentrated on making the rooms grand in impression, but not necessarily in scale. "You want small rooms so you can close them off," explains Fearing. "People like to be cozy when they're eating and I want energy in these rooms, so even on a slower Sunday night people can walk in a room feeling like they've arrived somewhere."

Jennifer Johanson, a partner in Engstrom Design Group, who has worked on several new

a good tip

Making a reservation for your next visit on your way out helps the host or hostess connect your name to your face. Wolfgang Puck says you might want to consider tipping that person \$20 as well. "I don't believe people should give money when they walk in to buy a table," he says, "but as you're leaving, if someone has gone out of their way to help you, what does it matter if you spent \$220 or \$200?"



Designed by The Johnson Studio, Manhattan's Barbonia draws on drapery, cushions and Mediterranean themes for its dramatic look. Lower right: An American Kobe steak and foie-gras sandwich from the BLT steak menu.

the right table

Inform the person who is taking the reservation what the occasion is so you can be seated properly. Are you on a date? Celebrating a birthday? Signing a deal? "If I am having a business meeting I'd rather sit at a square or rectangular table where there's more distance between people," says Eric Ripert. "But if it's an intimate relationship, I'll ask for a round table." This is also a good time to voice any personal preferences. For example, Ripert says he loathes sitting in the middle of dining rooms, preferring corners—something no host or hostess is going to be able to intuit.

Ritz-Carlton properties, is combining diners' growing desire to be in smaller spaces with their increased interest in wine. "Customers tend to be very savvy about wine," she says, "so we can send a signal that we keep and treat wine the way collectors do—in intimate rooms where people can gather for tastings, or for trying something new."

Another innovative design she is developing: Glass-walled party rooms that allow private diners to see and be seen while not being overheard. "People love to have private dinner parties in restaurants, but they don't want to be hidden away," Johanson explains. "How many times do you plan a private party in your favorite restaurant, but then you're led to a room that has nothing to do with that restaurant? This way, you can have your private party but people can see you and you can still get the buzz of the room."

A STARRING CHEF

Every show needs a star, and in this age

when a chef can inspire the kind of awe formerly reserved for rock stars or Hollywood celebrities, diners will flock to restaurants in hopes of catching a glimpse of someone they've seen on television or read about in magazines. This is surely part of the appeal for the dining room that acclaimed chef Gordon Ramsay will serve at The Ritz-Carlton, Powerscourt, County Wicklow, just outside of Dublin—expected to be one of the premier restaurants in Ireland when it opens this summer. As well: Eric Ripert's new restaurant Harvest at The Ritz-Carlton, Washington D.C. The contemporary restaurant, scheduled to open this spring and emphasizing organic produce and fresh seafood, will include a shielded open kitchen that spills out into the dining room—providing diners a view inside.

"The success of a good restaurant depends upon a personality," says Fearing, who made his reputation at The Mansion on Turtle Creek before leaving to open the restaurant in The Ritz-Carlton, Dallas. "The very first

night I got to The Mansion I was in the dining room shaking hands and meeting people's friends. There's a comfort level when people see me in the dining room, and it can be more important than even the dinner itself."

For those chefs who want to be visible without having to actually press palms, the open kitchen has proved a welcome addition. Although the concept of making the kitchen a part of the dining room became popular in freestanding restaurants after Puck first opened Spago in 1982, it is only now becoming popular in hotel restaurants. Says Puck of his inspiration, "I thought it would be good that if people were bored, or if they didn't know how to talk to each other, they could watch us cook, they could see there was something going on in the restaurant." When chef Fabio Trabocchi began overseeing the dining room at The Ritz-Carlton, Tysons Corner in Virginia six years ago, he immediately requested a show kitchen. "It's a formal dining room, and very traditional," explains Trabocchi, who was recently named Best Chef in the Mid-Atlantic region by the James Beard Foundation. "The restaurant needed drama, so the first thing we did was cut out one section of the restaurant and build the kitchen so there was no separation from the dining area."

It's this space where the kitchen meets the dining room that most excited Johnson. "Since the meal is now itself the evening's entertainment, people are interested in the food, and they're interested in the chefs," he says. "In the area where people can sit on stools facing the kitchen, you can see the cook line and what's going on, and you get a sense of the importance of the kitchen. Talk about theater—it's about the entertainment of being fed. It's such a cool thing."

At Café Gray, Kunz took the chef's entertainment value so seriously he placed his open kitchen directly in front of the priceless views over Central Park, sending an immediate message to diners that not even New York skylines could steal his show.

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Blue, one of two Eric Ripert restaurants at The Ritz-Carlton, Grand Cayman, counts on the freshest seafood from local Caribbean waters. Left: A smoked salmon pizza with crème fraîche and caviar, one of Wolfgang Puck's signature Spago dishes.



MAKING IT INTERACTIVE

Watching a meal being cooked may be interesting, but it's also a passive act; these days diners want to participate rather than feel that they are just being served. To achieve this, restaurateurs are searching for ways to amuse and engage diners at the table.

"It can be in small ways, even if it's just giving a little more service," says Puck. "You bring the porterhouse steak to the table and cut it in front of the guests, or fillet the Dover sole for two at the table. It adds an element of showmanship. Or we put the side dishes down on the table and allow the guests to serve themselves. It's about that little bit of excitement." Chef Jacques Sorci of The Ritz-Carlton, Battery Park in Manhattan ups the ante with a sauce cart, brought to the table along with the guests' main course.

"Dining used to be 90 percent about

food and 10 percent entertainment," says Carl Bruggemeier, who has consulted on Ritz-Carlton properties in St. Thomas, Kapalua and Philadelphia. "But now people have an expectation that the dining experience is valuable not only from a sustenance point of view, but also as part of their entertainment dollars. We don't flambé anymore because of the liability, but we try to do the simplest things tableside. So we might bring back a cheese cart, which used to be seen as a formal thing, and push it around the dining room to educate people."

At chef Laurent Tourondel's famed BLT, which has numerous stand-alone restaurants in New York, Washington, D.C., and two others under construction in Ritz-Carlton properties in New York on Central Park South and in San Juan, Puerto Rico, diners are actually encouraged to construct their own meals. "The philosophy is, we're not building

an event, we're building an experience," says Michael Bagley, BLT's designer. "There's a subtle but significant difference. It means the restaurants are meant to be user-friendly, and you can go several times a week because you assemble your meal options. You build your meal any way you like, and then you top it off any way you like with the sauces and the sides. You're empowering people with options, allowing them to do what they feel like."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT, INDEED

If dining is now a form of entertainment, chefs and designers are ensuring that there is a take-away from the experience that goes beyond the memory of a wonderful meal. They want the experience to be something that might be discussed and debated, even after the curtain has fallen. To do this means walking a fine line between satisfying customers and challenging them.

"You need intellectual stimulation when you go for entertainment," explains Craig Strong, the chef at The Ritz-Carlton, Huntington Hotel & Spa in Pasadena. "So at a restaurant, you want something that satisfies you nutritiously but stimulates the imagination as well." Strong achieves this through surprising flavor combinations—combining crab with vanilla bean and mango, for instance—and creating discussions around the food.

"What you want to do is have interesting conversations with the food, or a story behind the food," he says. "For instance, we serve a petit four which has a great story. It's from Bordeaux, and since they used egg whites to clarify the wines, they would take the yolks and turn them into this cake. You explain this to people and then they think, 'I learned something here.' Whether it's about food, or wine, or the pairing of the two, they can feel that they've taken a journey to another country."

To keep his diners on their toes, Trabocchi introduces a sense of whimsy. "Fine dining can be intimidating, and while we take the food very seriously, we also want it to be fun," he says. "So we try to play, whether it's serving an amuse-bouche of green-tomato gazpacho out of a test tube, or sending out



State of the art: A digital rendering of Wolfgang Puck's newest Spago, designed by Tony Chi.

complimentary dishes." Arnaud Berthelier, the executive chef at The Ritz-Carlton, Buckhead in Atlanta, finds the element of surprise by taking a classic dish and reinterpreting it. Grits are made with fresh grated corn, truffles are churned into ice cream and fish is served on one plate three ways: as a fillet, in croquettes and as a mousse.

For the real adventurer, there's Berthelier's nine-course blind tasting menu. The guest tells the waiter about any possible allergies or limitations, and the rest is up to the chef, who refuses to dampen the surprise no matter how hard a customer begs. "They always do," Berthelier says with a laugh, "but they have to wait to see

what's next. People get so excited." The payoff is an evening that delights, satiates and thrills. "When you are open minded," says Berthelier, "you can really let yourself go for an evening."

And if all goes according to plan, you will be gently led out of everyday life and into the imaginations of the chefs and the designers, a journey well worth the price of admission, producing similar emotions as the best of theater. "You just have a reservation instead of a ticket," says Tihany with a shrug. "But other than that, it's exactly the same thing. You walk in, you sit down, the lights dim and the atmosphere changes. And then, you will find yourself captivated, transported into another world." ●

reservations, please

If you're not going to use your reservation, remember to cancel it so someone else might. "I know that customers sometimes make several bookings at several restaurants, but the restaurant suffers enormously from no-shows," says Gray Kunz. "Please don't book if you're not actually going, and give the restaurant at least a couple of days to recoup the reservation." Consider it good restaurant karma.