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bathed in luxury

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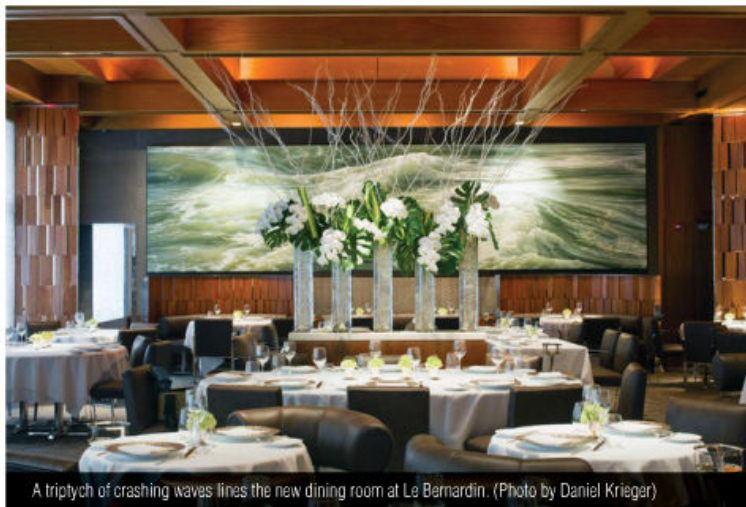
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dressing down

Fifteen years ago, chef Ken Oringer made his mark on Boston with Clio, a fancy French restaurant in the Eliot Hotel imagined by local designer Peter Niemitz. "When I first met Ken, he was a young guy. I asked him about his vision and he said modern French. At the time, it was provocative cuisine," Niemitz recalls. So he crafted a space that followed suit, one that resembled a 1940s Parisian supper club with a "mid-century modern, soft, easy, classic dining room that could stand the test of time and be a background to the food."

But that was 1997, a time when white tablecloths connoted upscale dining, when comfort was sacrificed for over-the-top displays of service, and the thought of eating dinner at the bar felt like being punished at the kids' table rather than an opportunity to converse with a knowledgeable bartender.

Stuffiness certainly has no place in a fine dining restaurant today. The new generation of diners wants an experience, where a sense of casual comfort reigns. That's why Clio recently underwent an overhaul: "It was time for a rethinking of the menu and the approach, to adapt it to



A triptych of crashing waves lines the new dining room at Le Bernardin. (Photo by Daniel Krieger)



Clio's swank new bar.

attracting a younger clientele. These restaurants tend to age with their clients," explains Niemitz.

For chef Michael Mina of Mina Group restaurants, personalization is key to attracting a wider demographic. "In its strictest sense, [luxury] could mean tuxedoed waiters and three hour meals. Diners can still find and enjoy that experience if they are looking for it, but luxury can also be found in a more refined, casual setting," he says. "Luxury today means many things to me: special ingredients procured for simple expressions of their purest flavors in a dish; intimate and casual dining rooms where guests feel comfortable and special; service staff dressed more casually—yet very knowledgeable and friendly—and approachable menus."

Wider Reach

Like Oringer and Mina, chef Eric Ripert of celebrated seafood temple Le Bernardin in New York understands the need to attract younger diners. While small décor changes were made throughout the years, Ripert points out that not much changed since Philip George designed the space back in 1986, when brother and sister duo Gilbert and Maguy Le Coze first brought the Parisian restaurant stateside. With the advent of a new lease, Ripert and Maguy knew it was the ideal time for a revamp, and turned to Locust Valley, New York-based Bentel & Bentel Architects/Planners AIA. "We gave them key words to drive the design," Ripert says. "We wanted more comfort and luxury, something that is contemporary, but timeless and more convivial and sexy. We kept our original clientele but at the same time we have been able to rejuvenate. It's a great mix between loyalists and newcomers."

Partner Carol Bentel explains that enlarging the lounge's presence was pivotal in the transformation, a process jumpstarted by ripping out an old closet that covered a window facing east. "Opening that up lightened the front zone," she explains. "The lounge before wasn't used—guests were basically waiting there for their table. Now you can just go to the lounge and eat and drink and you don't need a reservation. It sounds like a separate area, but we tried very hard to give the two spaces a shared language."

A partition of teak blocks demarcates the two disparate spaces—jackets required, jackets optional—without closing them off. "[There's] a connection," says Ripert, "but at the same time it stops the sound of the lounge when it's very busy since we have a serene atmosphere in the dining room."

The original ceiling beams remain intact, but there are now custom dark brown leather chairs, strands of twisted metal on walls, a triptych



Votive walls separate dining areas at Wit & Wisdom, a Tavern by Michael Mina.



Wolfgang Puck's intimate dining alcove at the Hotel Bel-Air.

of crashing waves, and a delicately veined onyx bar. "We wanted it to be a subtle use of natural materials," says Bentel.

Old is New Again

Timed with Clio's milestone anniversary, Niemitz was once again tasked with interpreting chef Oringer's mission—this time to create a chic interior that feels more relaxed. While the "bones of the room did not change," Niemitz assures, significant changes were made. "It never clicked," he says of the old stone and mahogany bar, now showing off a walnut top and frosted glass. "The new bar is double the size and created a whole new energy point."

The dining room, awash in pale taupe, is all one color now, a monochromatic background punctuated by contemporary artwork purchased at Art Basel. Uni, the sashimi bar at Clio, also features a more sharply defined entrance and identity. "Nothing was wrong, nothing was broken," Niemitz says. "The difficulty was making it better without ruining what we had."

Finding balance between tradition and modernity was also the approach favored by New York-based Rockwell Group when designing Wolfgang Puck as part of the highly anticipated Hotel Bel-Air renovation in Los Angeles.

"Luxury is an evolution, just like fashion. I think the Hotel Bel-Air is the perfect place for its elegance in its own simplicity, and how it fits into its own environment—it has a sense of place," says Puck.

Shawn Sullivan, principal and studio leader at Rockwell Group who worked on the restaurant (New York design firm Champalimaud handled the hotel), agrees with the prolific Austrian chef that its surroundings define the hotel: "The soul of the hotel is its outdoor dining space. It's the place where Nancy Reagan had lunch, where movie deals were made. The interior space was a difficult sell; it's hard to compete with Mother Nature."

To alleviate the problem, the Rockwell Group team grounded the indoor in the outdoor at Wolfgang Puck. "The Hotel Bel-Air truly is smaller scale experiences scattered in a larger landscape. Once you go through the gate, it feels disconnected in a special and private way. We

spent time thinking about gardens first, and shaped and tailored them to all the spaces we were working on. Whichever space you are in, you feel these magical gardens," he explains.

Shrunken interiors are now anchored by the likes of a Carrera marble fireplace. There are teak wood finishes, Spanish metalwork, and power booths overlooking the property's revered swans. In the private dining room, a glass blown and polished brass chandelier is loosely inspired by tree branches. "It's a very beloved property. It has a deep history with the people of Bel-Air. We wanted to keep the authenticity intact but show there's something new," Sullivan says. "We're most proud of knowing how to blow the dust off and capture that Bel-Air sense of casual luxury."

Historical Context

One of the most impactful ways of exemplifying modern luxury is by linking design to its environment. This is what inspired Frank Frost and Wendy Tsuji of Frost-Tsuji Architects in San Francisco when designing Wit & Wisdom, a Tavern by Michael Mina, at the brand new Four Seasons Hotel Baltimore. For this project, the long-time Mina collaborators (they worked on his original Aqua in San Francisco, and when the space became Michael Mina) channeled Maryland's past and its Chesapeake roots, complementing Mina's Mid-Atlantic-centric menu focusing on local, sustainable products.

"We really tried to select materials and specifications that reinforced this idea of the historic tavern," says Tsuji, noting the use of white brick and hand-scraped wide plank flooring crafted from local Appalachian hickory. So the carpet stays true to the pre-Revolutionary War era, Frost and Tsuji specified one that isn't color dyed, in charcoal gray wool.

Along with the curved window wall that Tsuji says is in keeping with the Four Seasons' flair for simple and elegant, another highlight is the row of four votive walls comprised of handblown glass hurricanes. The bar, with its copper bell suspended above, is a centerpiece, and once again the material, in this case a countertop built from one single walnut tree, pays homage to its location. "Luxury," says Tsuji, "is the ability to draw on history."