

Inside inspiration

Dramatic design with an informal edge gives today's coolest fine diners their "wow" factor, writes **Lissa Christopher**.

The well-heeled, fine-dining set is a demanding lot when it comes to surroundings. These diners are hungry for "wow factor" wherever they look, the principal of Dreamtime Australia Design, Michael McCann, says. They want it at the gym, at the shops and at home but nowhere more so than in the restaurants they frequent.

"Customers save their highest expectations for the restaurant industry," says McCann, whose award-winning enterprise is responsible for the look of Steel Bar and Grill, Flying Fish, Pony at The Rocks and the Victor Churchill butchery in Woolahra.

These diners are spending their hard-earned to escape the everyday, he says, and as a result "dramatic, almost theatrical design has well-and-truly arrived".

Generally, the world of cooking and restaurants is becoming more like an arm of show business - take *MasterChef* and Jamie Oliver, Ferran Adria and Heston Blumenthal's on-stage ventures as a taste of the available evidence - and restaurant kitchens are changing as a consequence. They're moving centre stage.

"The kitchen is on show, that's a big thing now, particularly since *MasterChef*," says interior designer Rachel Luchetti, a principal of Luchetti Krelle, which designed The Cut Bar and Grill, Sake Restaurant

and Bazar and has won an interior design excellence award. "Everyone wants to see the chef," she says. "That's what you're there for, after all. Why hide the chefs away when you are there for the theatre of it?"

Kitchens, she says, are increasingly likely to be open, set towards the front of a restaurant and may even wind up in the front window. All this exposure of the

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pans zone demands more in terms of design as well as a greater financial investment.

When it comes to cost, chef-owners are more likely to spend up on a kitchen, McCann says.

"Chef-owners know the importance of having nice equipment and the space to work and often see a new kitchen as their chance to have their dream kitchen," he says.

"A sizeable percentage of restaurateurs, however, want to spend as little as possible on the kitchen... The public would be very surprised to learn how much persuasion goes into getting most restaurateurs to agree to install quality kitchens."



Kitchen vision ... Rachel Luchetti at The Cut Bar and Grill. Photo: Steven Siewert

James Viles's new venture in Bowral, Biota Dining, is a good example of the chef-owner approach as well as the trend towards making a show of the chef. His substantial new establishment, set on 1.2 hectares in the centre of town and set to open later this month, includes a full open kitchen as well as a private dining room with a video link to the kitchen.

Viles's kitchen is particularly

Viles has used many imported materials and products, which are cheaper than local equivalents, and bought second-hand fridges and benches to offset some of the oven's cost. He estimates the kitchen is responsible for just under half the total cost of his fitout.

Luchetti says \$200,000 to \$300,000 would be fairly typical for a restaurant kitchen for a 120-seat-or-so establishment, including refrigeration and coolrooms, and represents about one-third of the cost of the total fitout.

"(Biota's) kitchen is just on 120 square metres," Viles says. "That's like a mid-size apartment in the city; it's very spacious, very theatrical."

Every field has its dissenting voices, however, and not everyone agrees that theatricality is all-important.

Matthew Darwon, 41, has created several of Sydney's more striking restaurant interiors - Jimmy Liks is his work, as are the dark-timber-dominated Toko and Tokonoma, and the newly opened Pony in Neutral Bay, with its warm, caramel-toned atmosphere and wave-like timber ceiling - but he says he finds the idea of wow factor and theatricality anathema to his conception of good restaurant design. They're too temporary.

"It is not about theatre," he says. "When 'the show' is over you are not going to redo it. It's too expensive to just redo after three or four or

audience-worthy thanks to a vast and sleek all-in-one Kuchenmeister induction-cooking unit custom-designed by MKN. The German unit is extremely precise and can bring a litre of cold water to the boil in 60 seconds. Viles compares using it to driving a top-drawer German car but he's coy about saying exactly what he paid for it, beyond that its price, too, can be compared to "a nice German car and I mean a nice German car".



Mood with flavour ... (clockwise from main) restaurant designer Michael McCann at Felix; the kitchen at Biota in Bowral; Biota's entrance; the lounge/bar with paintings by Craig Waddell. Photos: Tamara Dean, Domino Postiglione

five years when things break down. It's really wasteful ...

"We are forgetting the original idea of very good architecture ... it's about creating timeless spaces, spaces that don't date. Whenever I design a space, I try to make it as timeless as I can so that in 10 years, it's still looking good."

"Jimmy Liks ... opened in 2003. That's almost 10 years ago now and I think that if you go in, apart from the

wear and tear, which is actually not too bad, it still has this feeling ... like it just opened."

Darwon finds inspiration in traditional Japanese architecture, with its use of stone and wood, and has earned himself a stellar reputation for his timber concepts.

With Tokonoma, he says, he feels he has come closest to meeting his own ideals concerning refinement and traditional Japanese

architecture in a restaurant. "I was able to really refine the joinery, partly because the clients believed in my vision and because I had an exceptional joiner in Dominick ter Huurne from Beclau helping me," he says. "There are no hard edges anywhere, which again helps with longevity ... but everyone also feels more comfortable in it because everything is just that little bit softer."

Another factor influencing contemporary restaurant design is the new generation of chefs, designers and restaurateurs, people in their 20s and 30s who are finding their feet in the business. They want to serve hat-worthy food but are less interested in traditional formality when it comes to the surrounds in which it's served.

"Fine restaurant design is ... moving away from the white tablecloths and stuffy environments; that feeling that you're in a boardroom when you're eating," Luchetti, 30, says.

"There is a trend towards good-quality food in a relaxed setting, which is a bit more conducive to having fun. And it's much easier to

get buds on seats with restaurants like that."

Diners feel as if they can drop by regularly rather than just on special occasions and there's not that feeling of bracing yourself for a social performance that can come with more-formal dining environments.

Viles's Biota also reflects this shift towards informality. While he has put a great deal of effort and cash into its fitout, which includes a nine-metre-long leather banquette, a mother-of-pearl-encrusted bar, hand-blown glass-and-nickel lamp shades, giant day beds and that oven unit, he is keen to emphasise that Biota "is not an up-yourself place". "We're all young. To come here, it's all about having fun," he says.



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