

Get your mojo working

SETTING THE MOOD **B**

It's the detail the customer doesn't notice that can often make the difference. Howard Riell finds out how foodservice outlets create that special bond with their clients

Ah, mojo. Austin Powers, the international man of mystery, knew its importance, and so do many restaurant operators. How to get it, however, is sometimes less obvious.

One way is through design and decor. "Customers love the vibe that decor can manipulate," Angela Phelan, senior vice president of The Clarion Group, explains. Phelan says there are certain glaring design flaws, of which many otherwise talented restaurateurs are guilty. These kinds of design flaws become operations issues after the designer is long gone and a frustrated diner is trying to find his way to his table and settle in for a meal. "So in the end, design is a major part of service," says Phelan.

A trio of restaurant concepts crafted by Arlene Spiegel, of Arlene Spiegel & Associates in New York City, cleverly use decor to shape the guest experience.

HU Kitchen and Market is a retail and cafe concept offering a modified Paleo diet. "HU stands for Human and there are design and branding cues throughout the facility," she explains. "All the wood is repurposed; natural sunlight is captured with mirrors; caveman hieroglyphics are stencilled on featured walls; chalkboard signs spell out the origins and preparation of the foods; an open kitchen lets guests talk to the chef and customise their meals."

Hill Country BBQ, an authentic Texas BBQ joint, uses barrels, crates and old-fashioned scales at the entrance. "Road trips through Texas helped the design team capture graphics, signage, merchandising, and even the service style," Spiegel says. Texas's flag, along with belt buckles and leather boots, line the bar area. And Havana Central in Times Square takes guests back to pre-Castro Cuba. "The storefront architecture starts the journey to another point in time – 1958," Spiegel says. The 40-foot bar is a recreation of a bar in old Havana. The leaning bar is a recreated cigar-rolling table like the ones in Havana factories. Slow moving

fans move the palm trees in a resort-like breeze. "The mostly adult crowd can find little nooks and intimate tables to let romance blossom."



"We have found restaurant mojo doesn't happen by magic," says Ray Soucie, the principal of RSA Inc in Portland, OR. Usually, he explains, the owner's vision is brought to fruition with the aid of professionals – architects, foodservice consultants, the engineering team and a quality interior design team. Designers will gravitate towards use of natural materials that are both pleasing to the eye and good for the environment. Lighting and acoustics are essential components of a successful space. With display kitchens, Soucie warns, "a delicate balance must be achieved". Acoustically mixing reflective and absorbent natural materials such as stone and wood, create acoustically comfortable surroundings where conversations don't have to compete with unsolicited noise. The addition of low-maintenance plants can contribute to the energy of a space, bringing vibrancy, colour and acoustic filters.

The selection of furnishings is another area that should not be left as an afterthought, he says. Having a party space available "may be the reason your restaurant is chosen above others. Allowing all attending your restaurant to feel confident their preferences for dining will be met is always a win/win situation." Win/win, of course, being consultantspeak for ker-ching! ■