



Scene setters

MOOD & AMBIENCE **B**

The essence of a good restaurant doesn't merely rest on the food – ambience plays just as vital a role, as our consultant experts explained to Howard Riell

What is it that gives a restaurant its essential mojo? Here's a hint: it's more than just providing great food and service. From architectural and technical touches such as lighting, music and décor to the quality of carpentry and rest rooms, crafting a memorable dining experience means attention to detail, an overarching vision and some insight into the human condition.

According to Arlene Spiegel FCSI, veteran restaurateur and founder and president of Arlene Spiegel & Associates and Hospitality Matchmaker: "It's the experience. A great restaurant is always determined by the guest's individual experience. It doesn't matter if it's a Quick Service Restaurant, fast casual, family or fine dining. It's the 'takeaway' and memory that defines greatness." When creating a restaurant experience, Spiegel, a third-generation restaurateur who opened and operated award-winning Garden of Eating eateries in Manhattan and Queens, New York, in the 1980s, asks: "How do I want guests to feel?" Romantic? Excited? Connected? Smart? Righteous? Transported? Adventurous? Cosy? The answers to these questions help create the DNA of the experience and the road map for the sensual aspects engineered into the design." Others focus on various aspects of the dining out experience.

Reducing the shimmy

Creating ambience is "a passion point for me," declares Karen Malody FCSI, MSW, the principal of Culinary Options, a foodservice consultancy in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Malody explains that as a consultant, it is her job to point out where the problems are. For a restaurant to serve as a diner's "third place" after home and office all the elements must come together to create a seamless experience.

Material world

Ray Soucie FCSI, LEED AP, principal of RSA Inc in Portland, Oregon, points to The Living Room Theater Project in Portland as an example of how to craft an ambience using building materials – in this case, its wooden walls, stone bar top, Marmolium flooring and cushioned seating.

Exciting and familiar

"A restaurant should be located where people are, want to be, or want to go," insists Paul Bartlett FCSI, CEC, principal of KitchenSolutions, LLC in Baltimore, Maryland. "It should be one

with its environment and welcome the guest with visual cues that stimulate a feeling of well-being and anticipation; a blending of the familiar with the intensely exciting. After all, people must live and work here in comfort for a long time, and desire to return, over and over."

Sense of theatre

Foster Frable FCSI, President of Clevenger-Frable-LaVallee in White Plains, New York, recently wrote in a column about open kitchens. When designed tastefully and with attention to detail, Frable adds, an open kitchen can be "a marketing tool, a stage set for your culinary staff, as well as the major visual element of the restaurant design".

Total experience

There are, according to James Sinclair FCSI, principal of OnSite Consulting in Los Angeles, California, three core pillars to a restaurant; food, price and experience. "So when one talks to the mood and the ambience most would contemplate that it only applies to the last pillar – but in reality mood and ambience are driven by the total experience, which encompasses the food and price and how the staff create, embody and deliver the experience."

Every last detail

"As you can see, the total success of a restaurant lies within intricate attention to detail," Malody concludes. "This clarity derives from absolute concept clarity in the beginning."

The mojo of any restaurant, maintains Spiegel, the former director of the global food and beverage practice at PricewaterhouseCoopers, is also created by the energy, enthusiasm and hospitality provided by the staff. "Even a simple cup of coffee or a slice of pizza is special when the staff make the guest feel special and appreciated."

There are also obstacles that can interfere with an otherwise great dining adventure that can be avoided, she adds. For instance, fluorescent lighting shining in from the kitchen or in the bathrooms, drafts of cold air and, "of course, the forever-wobbly table". ■

"Many restaurant operators fail because they don't recognise the need for a brand, a voice, an image and a unified vision."