# The Psychology of Restaurant Design

**The strategies, both large and small, behind drawing in diners—and having them return again and again**

by Diane Weintraub Pohl

The Inn at Pound Ridge by Jean-Georges

You think you're in charge, having planned the time, the companions, the type of cuisine, and the ambience for a dinner out. You have chosen the restaurant. But what you don't realize is, the restaurant has chosen you. Every detail has been meticulously plotted around your age, status, and preferences to lead you blithely to the restaurant's door. And you thought you just wanted dinner.

Here, a look at all this strategy: the thinking behind the bar, playlist, tabletops, menu, hostess desk, and everything else you see, hear, taste, and smell.

# Sensual Pleasures

**The best pleasures engage all our senses,** and good restaurants aim to do the same. What we generalize as ambience, they distill to minute specifics. Those butter-gold walls that seem like a dining room staple? It's not due to an industry paint color discount or the owner's sunny disposition. "Warm colors are stimulants," explains Stephen Zagor, dean of business and management studies at the Institute of Culinary Education in Manhattan, noting yellow, red, and orange. "Appetite suppressants are pale green, blue, and purple." Another stimulant: smells. "They turn us on more than any of our senses," he says. "We have an emotional attachment to smells—think baking bread or wood smoke." If a restaurant doesn't emit them due to kitchen venting, it can purchase them; Zagor cites technology that allows scents to be infused into the air. A less pricey option: those silver plate domes lifted in front of you at haute-cuisine temples. Leave it to the French, those sensualists.

Lighting—how it hits the walls, the tables, the floor—is the most important design element, Zagor states. For all the times I've had to hold my phone screen up to a menu, I'd agree with Raimundo Gaby, associate professor of business management at the Culinary Institute of America, who says, "It's the first thing that the industry does poorly."

Acoustics are the second, Gaby claims, citing forced conversation as the need to soften noise levels. And, while we're on the subject, what about that background (or, often, foreground) music? "The tempo and type is gauged to the customer base," says Zagor. "The thinking is: The faster the music, the faster people chew."

> "Lighting—how it hits the walls, the tables, the floor—is the most important design element."

Many designers have no experience working in restaurants," Gaby says. "The aesthetics prevail." Zagor concurs: "Many designers want their artistic moment. But practicality has to be built in to the design. Sometimes their artistic statement isn't practical."

Acoustic practicality is relative. I've heard it again and again from the experts: What some call noise, they call "energy." Says Gaby: "It forces people out of their comfort zone." Zagor agrees. "People like the energy of being crowded." Ira Grandberg, AIA, of Grandberg & Associates Architects, the architect of Mount Kisco's tri-level, posh Winston, agrees: "The bar in the open atrium area provides energy, and it provides a central gathering space, allowing for interconnectivity for all three levels." And Purdy's Farmer & the Fish Co-Owner Michael Kaphan agrees too: "It's the sound of people having a good time."

Keith Treyball, president of ESquared Hospitality (parent company of BLT Restaurants), says the White Plains location, BLT Steak, has a partially open kitchen that "provides energy, enlivening the dining experience." Pearl Restaurant Group President Jim Sullivan says, "Energy drives all our restaurant decisions." He notes that it lends extra frisson: "We don't mind if customers have to wait a little bit."

It's how all these elements converge that either makes or breaks the space. And those elements, as anyone who's ever undertaken a renovation knows, take money, time, and, above all, analysis. There's the aesthetics—décor, ambience—and then there's the nuts and bolts: traffic flow for both customer and staff, bar placement, restroom proximity, server stations—even hostess desks; the current trend is not to have a hostess desk, to remove all barriers to the customer's inclusive experience. "The best restaurant design," says Gaby, "is a collaborative effort between the operations people and the design people."

# Traffic Alert

**For Pearl Group's Jim Sullivan, once** the space is determined, his first question is how flow and energy (there's that word again) will work. "Everything starts there," he says. New construction, as opposed to renovation, can make integrating the two easier. Case in point: Sullivan's Rye Grill and Bar. "It's a huge two-level space with a lot going on at once," he says. "We have to get you in quickly and serve you quickly, so flow for customer and staff is crucial." The solution was to design for a varied customer base. The large main area is geared toward families; the smaller side room is carpeted for a placid ambience; and the upstairs caters to the adult patron. "The restaurant works well because the flow works," Sullivan says. "It's a busy place, and without good flow planning we couldn't handle the business."

Mount Kisco's Winston was designed with two entrances, at the front and back, each directing customers to the central atrium. Entering through the rear, from the parking area, is no less inviting. "The corridor leads you past the glass-walled pastry kitchen, which is a visual enticement," explains architect Grandberg. "It's a controlled sequence for bringing people to the central atrium, the heart of the restaurant." Once they're there, a staircase can carry patrons to the other levels, each offering a different ambience.

Grandberg and Sullivan had it easier than Thomas Juul-Hanson, architect for Jean-Georges Vongerichten's Inn at Pound Ridge. Bound by the 19th-Century building's landmark status, the renovation took two years. "We wanted people to feel the soul of the place, the magic when they walk in," says Vongerichten. That included directing them from the foyer into either the main dining room or down a staircase to the cozier space near the rear garden. A Juul-Hanson associate describes it as setting up a sequence of dining experiences. The kitchen, Vongerichten points out, was installed on an intermediate level, enabling convenient access for the waitstaff to both dining areas.

At Peekskill's Iron Vine, Co-Owner/Chef Gabriel Arango faced similar renovation issues. Constrained by the historical building's narrow space, a comfortable traffic flow was critical. "The room narrowed toward the back and felt confining," he says. "So we elevated the ceiling in the rear to create vertical space." And then there's the bar. If a river's natural flow is to the sea, a restaurant's is usually to the bar. Iron Vine's bar is 17 feet long and curved. "We wanted the room to feel cozy, not cramped, so we curved it for easier access and more table room." The curve, he adds, "allows your eye to take in the entire space."

> "The bar in the open atrium area provides energy."

The bar/lounge at The Inn at Pound Ridge is an elegant hub leading to the main dining area. Winston's bar placement in the central atrium, Grandberg says, provides community and (yup) energy. ESquared's Treyball considers the bar "the launch pad into the dining room." For his BLT brand, often situated in hotels, strategy encompasses an additional customer base. "We need to appeal to the solo diner, so we have soundless TVs at our bars." he says. "Sports programming drives bar business."

Winston's open, multilevel design encourages social interaction.

# ID Required

**All restaurants begin with a question:** Who do we want to be? And a follow-up: Who do we want our guests to be? Location and construction costs are obvious determinations, but it's with the answers to those questions that the concept is born. Without them, it dies.

Pearl Group's Jim Sullivan knows. He's opened seven thriving restaurants in Westchester and Connecticut, including Morgan's Fish House and Elm Street Oyster House. "Restaurants fail because they have an identity crisis," he says. "They don't know who they are." To discover it, they need a map: the menu. It may meander a bit as plans evolve, but it's the key—the "X" that marks the restaurant-success spot. "Great design begins with the menu," says the CIA's Gaby. "It dictates everything: equipment, décor, traffic flow. It's the heart of the business." And the brain, directing through sight and touch the experience that awaits. We register the menu's typeface, font, and pricing, but there's a textbook of subliminal messages at work: the menu's texture, size, heft, and composition. "The menu is the cradle from where everything comes," says Zagor of the Institute of Culinary Education. He lists it as one of the pillars of design, the others being service, ambience, food, and unique selling proposition: Why are people coming to you?

> "Great design begins with the menu."

## The Anatomy of a Menu

**The experts agree: The menu drives business —and the direction is profitability. Here, the menu for Armonk's Moderne Barn provides some road signs.**

*Leaving out the dollar signs "softens" the prices. Currency reminds diners they're using money, and may increase the chance they'll order solely based on price rather than on ingredients or what sounds most appealing.*

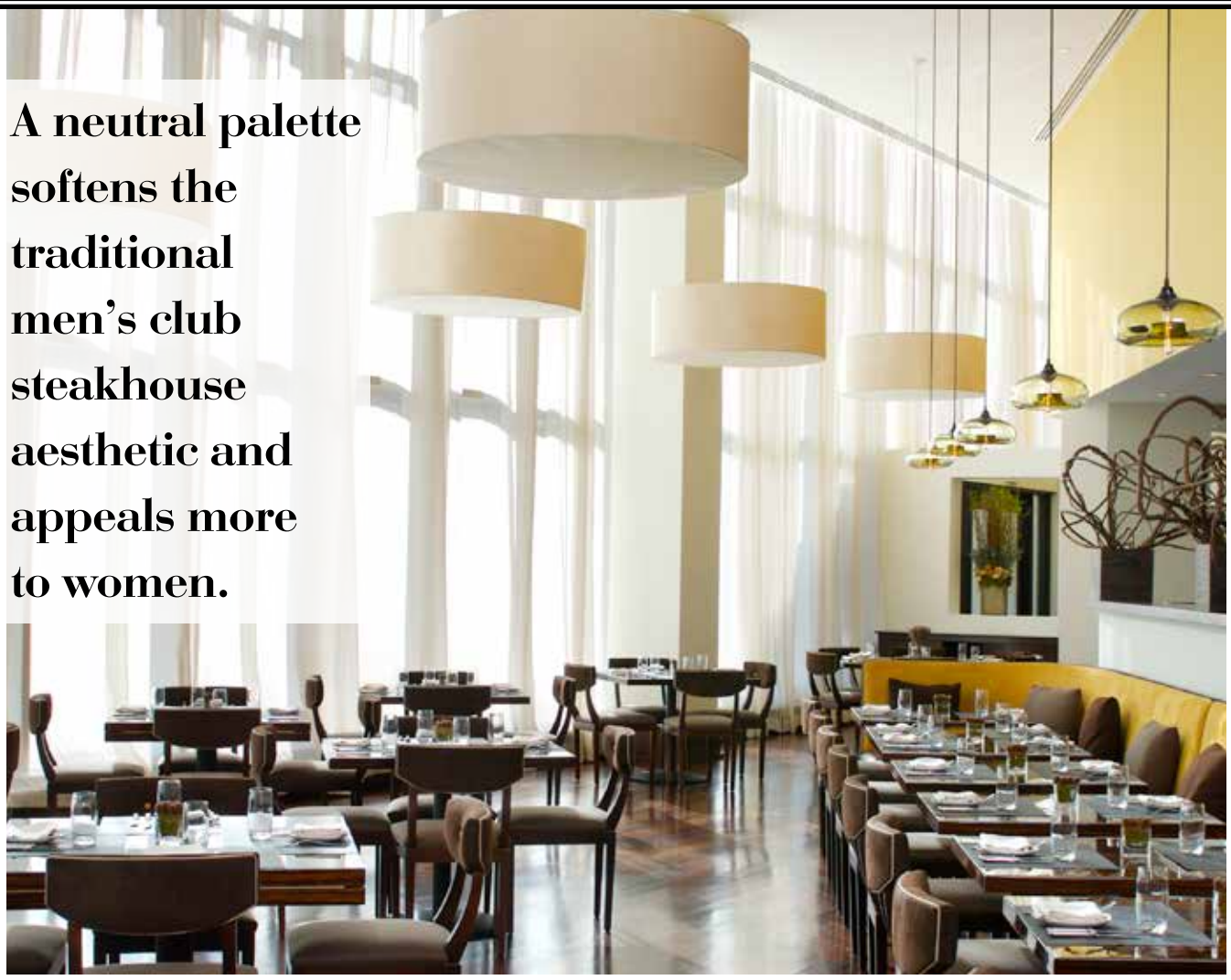
*Boxes, or, as the industry calls them, "eye magnets," draw the eye, so that's where you'll often find high-profit items.*

*Warm colors are stimulants: Red provokes our appetite and yellow, our attention. They're the ultimate design couple.*

*Price equals pain, so the less noticeable the better. No zeroes either, just the necessary, plain digits. Listing the price in the same size type as the menu item makes it less conspicuous.*

*The more description, the more we associate quality. Adjectives maximize the allure of an item, and even let us mentally taste it.*

*The more choices, the more stress. Seven items or fewer in a category is comfortable; more than that is confusing, so we may order something familiar instead of a new—and possibly more expensive—dish.*



**A neutral palette softens the traditional men's club steakhouse aesthetic and appeals more to women.**

# Into the Atmosphere

BLT Steak in White Plains

**For most of us, what drives a dining** decision, after cuisine, is ambience. Intimate, elegant, hip, rustic are generalities beneath which a thousand details lurk. There's lighting, materials, furniture, art. Oh, and us. "People go to restaurants to see and be seen," says Grandberg, who intended Winston's central staircase as theater as well as transport. "They want to be voyeurs without feeling intimidated. It's a herd instinct." And what we're herded to is comfort, vibe—what Vongerichten calls "magic." It's the intangible that every restaurant strives for, the brass ring. For Winston, that's the communal experience of three visually accessible dining options. For BLT, it meant softening the traditional men's club steakhouse aesthetic with a neutral palette to appeal to women.

But these days, the brass ring tends to be caught by nostalgia. In the era of instant gratification, it seems that when we want to kick back, it's way back—19th Century back. We yearn to take cover within reclaimed brick walls and beneath rough-hewn beams, to preserve our sanity with historic preservation.

The examples are numerous. Vongerichten worked his magic with The Inn at Pound Ridge's original planked flooring, timbers, and fieldstone, modernizing them with streamlined chairs and a sleek, underlit bar. Purdy's Farmer & the Fish conjured a New England fish house with wainscoting-like shiplap walls, single-pane windows, and white marble tabletops.

At Iron Vine, Gabriel Arango honored Peekskill's industrial past with locally reclaimed rafters, copper, and iron. The list goes on: the Livanos family's Moderne Barn, where horse photos and wood-paneled walls pay homage to the building's predecessor, the Yellow Barn furniture shop; and New Rochelle's relocated Modern Restaurant & Lounge, which, paradoxically, employs subway tiles, lights that look like gas lamps, and original moldings. Even Winston, with its modernist atrium, steel railings, and sweeping voyeur's stairway, was planned to suit Mount Kisco's urban pedigree with the use of brick, cornices, and woodwork. "The design is modern but anchored in tradition," Grandberg says.

So many restaurants, so little divergence in outcome. The style may differ and so may the menu, size, layout, and décor, but one uniting factor prevails: identity. Each had a concept, they followed through, they knew who they were. The ultimate proof of success? By the time we make a reservation, they're already expecting us.

**Food writer Diane Weintraub Pohl writes *Westchester Magazine*'s "Outside the Kitchen" column and has contributed to *Parents* and *The New York Times'* dining section.**