

New York



TABLE FOR TWO WITH A SIDE OF DRAMA

Restaurants designed by Tony
Award winner David Rockwell have the
recipe for delicious entertainment.

BY MERYL PEARLSTEIN



Opposite page: The 24-arm Quan Yin statue greets diners at TAO Downtown.

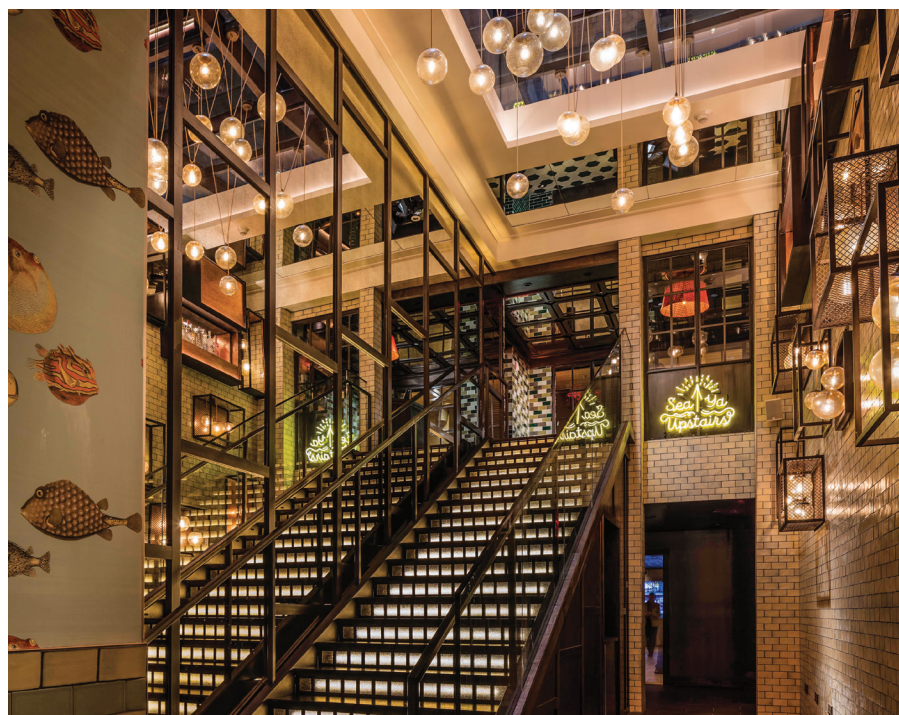
This page: The ash-wood sculpture carved by John Houshmand swirls above the lounge at Nobu Downtown.



● No review of a Broadway play or musical is complete without a description of the staging, sets, costumes, lighting, colors and overall tone. Design contributes significantly to the theatrical experience. With New York City restaurants, design plays a similarly important role. The feel and look of the room, whether overt or subtle, can markedly enhance the dining experience and contribute to the enjoyment and taste of a meal.

The revival of “She Loves Me” won David Rockwell the 2016 Tony Award for Best Scenic Design of a Musical for the “jewel-box” perfumery that gracefully transitioned into a restaurant, an apartment and a hospital room. Thanks to Rockwell’s avowed “emphasis on arrival, procession, lighting and the all-encompassing power of a live theatrical experience,” dining in one of the New York restaurants designed by him can have the same immersive, transformative quality as watching one of his 27 (and counting) Broadway shows.

In stage and restaurant productions, design plays a leading role with storytelling at the heart of each. States Rockwell, “To some extent, both theater and hospitality are centered on scenography and storytelling. They also share the intention to communicate ideas through an experi-



ence.” In Rockwell’s vision, theatergoers are transported to a world of fantasy from curtain to curtain, and from scene to scene. Similarly, diners enjoy “acts,” with the plot “choreographed as a promenade through spaces” and cuisine paced into a rhythm of courses.

Like some plays, some restaurants can be construed as revivals. The feeling when you dine at the redo of Danny Meyer’s Union Square Cafe is “familiar but fresh,” according to General Manager Chris Nelson. Designed by Rockwell, the “new” USC returns for an encore after a multiyear hiatus, incorporating elements of the past but adding new spins. USC’s balcony, with its choice “opera box” seating, recalls the original café as does a portion of the upstairs bar. Wainscoting from the previous “production” has been refreshed in a richer tone, and familiar artwork graces the walls. Like a theatrical revival paying homage to the original piece, the restaurant feels comfortable and current at the same time.

Then there are shows and restaurant designs that stop you cold with their breakthrough quality, charting new territory that wows from the start whether they are “revivals” or totally new productions.

Manhattan’s TAO “part two” is such a restaurant. Taking

Above, left: Avra Madison looks to an open-air villa in Greece for its design inspiration. Above, right: Legasea boasts a staircase made for grand entrances and even grander exits.

PHOTOS: AVRA MADISON AND LEGASEA, WARREN JAGGER

advantage of its multilevel space in the Maritime Hotel, TAO Downtown plays to its audience with even more drama than the Midtown original. Enter through massive doors studded with lion door knockers, and you'll encounter a long, vaulted corridor leading to a giant reclining Buddha overlooking a staircase that conjures up "Sunset Boulevard" or "Hello, Dolly!"

"We looked at how stairs add drama to the audience's arrival at a performance venue," notes Rockwell, "and we wanted to mark and celebrate the entry here." At TAO, Rockwell gives the stairs two additional roles: They're the location of the restaurant's premier seating and a theatrically lit line to the 24-arm Quan Yin statue awaiting diva-like adoration at the back of the room.

Successful design also takes into account the culinary orientation of the restaurant. At TAO, food presentations are often as dramatic as the setting. Take, for example, the larger-than-life fortune cookie filled with chocolate and white mousse and adorned with exotic, diced dragon fruit and rambutan. The dessert's provocative double entendre

fortunes are the culinary equivalents of characters with dual parts.

Also utilizing the device of a Broadway-like staircase but this time heading skyward, Legasea is a buzzy brasserie on the second floor of the Moxy Times Square hotel. Here Rockwell's nautical world of tiles, lighting and furnishings creates a fun, maritime feel and an immersive "set" for seafood-focused dining. Scattered theatrical cues enhance the experience with lighting shaped like buoys, rope designs on the ceiling and backdrops decorated with fish. A sidewalk-level sign invites you upstairs with the bright lights and neon of a Broadway marquee. Chef Jason Hall describes the Legasea experience this way: "It's important that the food, menu and restaurant design all flow together. We have a lot of cool moments depending on where you sit; the bar in the front is like the first act, a comfortable booth in back is the main show. The menu is like that, too, with the appetizer, entrée and dessert sequence leading to the final curtain."

Nobu Downtown is a remake of sorts of Nobu's now-closed TriBeCa eatery. Rockwell's goal was to reprise

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Nobu's original "exploration of materiality" and cultures within its new, larger neoclassical home in the Financial District. Hovering over the bar and lounge, a sumi-e ink swirl sculpture points downstairs to the main dining room, where design elements honor the past but give birth to a new and exciting space. Signature ash trees inspire the supports for an undulating wood canopy fashioned kirigami style. Two walls of ceramic sake carafes create an intimate tasting room, a set within a set.

If not as overtly dramatic as TAO or Nobu, Avra Madison gives you a first-class dining ticket to the Mediterranean. Using props like real lemon trees, a seafood and vegetable market mini-set, and an open staircase linking the airy upstairs with a sexy downstairs space, the sequel to the popular Midtown estiatorio is theater on a lighter scale. While the "melodies" may seem familiar, the fresh white-washed palette informs Avra Madison's updated "script" for food and service.

Looking for something more intimate but still with a touch of drama? Theatrical dining design doesn't have to be bold or showy like that of Nobu or TAO, nor does it need to be derivative à la Union Square Cafe or Avra Madison. The Library at the Public Theater, helmed by chefs Andrew Carmellini and John Ramirez and also designed by Rockwell, is a cozy boîte that gives a textured Off-Broadway feel to an unexpected space and a culinary destination for those "in the know."

Although there are several awards given for restaurant design (or hospitality design)—including those bestowed by the prestigious James Beard Foundation—there really should be a specific award for theater-influenced dining akin to the Tony awards given for Broadway sets and lighting. We can single out restaurants where theatricality is every bit as important as the chef's food and shower them with the accolades they deliciously deserve. David Rockwell would be my first nominee.

And, now, Mr. Rockwell, we're ready for our dinner.

Restaurateur Danny Meyer's Union Square Cafe attracts SRO crowds while earning rave reviews for its cuisine and ambience.

ROLODEX

Avra Madison

14 E. 60th St.
212.937.0100
www.avrany.com

Legasea

485 Seventh Ave.
212.268.1888 www.moxy-hotels.marriott.com

The Library

425 Lafayette St.
212.539.8777
www.publictheater.org

Nobu Downtown

195 Broadway
212.219.0500
www.noburestaurants.com

TAO Downtown

92 Ninth Ave.
212.888.2724
www.taodowntown.com

Union Square Cafe

101 E. 19th St.
212.243.4020
www.unionsquarecafe.com



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