



Delivering the Experience

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As designers in Asia, we've always faced a moving target in terms of satisfying the ever-evolving tastes and expectations of consumers across this diverse region. The projects we choose to take on typically dictate the ease or difficulty in hitting that target. In opting to work with independent owners and visionary hoteliers on unique, locally-developed restaurant and bar concepts, we choose to forego the relative safety of repetitive design for global franchises, and instead embrace the creative challenge of a more bespoke and prescient approach. While the rewards for successful, independent concepts are potentially high, so are the risks, with the Asian consumer's love of the 'next big thing' leading to high attrition rates. Consequently, the quality of our creative input has always been vital in giving each venture the best chance of success. Recent consumer trends in Asia could be viewed as diminishing the significance of design's role in that process, but for independent concept restaurants the contrary looks to be the case.

Until relatively recently, it was a given that a visit to a restaurant was necessary to sample its menu. In a continent so passionate about cuisine, great food (or its branding) had the potential to drive footfall, even when the aesthetics and ambience of the physical space may have been unremarkable.

That landscape has changed, and yesterday's table-of-four are likely today to be among the many discerning customers fuelling the huge growth in third-party food delivery providers - happy to order their 'meals on wheels' from restaurants of a calibre that previously would not have been associated with anything other than formal table service. While it might be expected that this trend would diminish the designer's role in the success of a restaurant, the reverse is true, with the performance of these ventures depending on far

more than just the taste and packaging of what's delivered to your door. Genuine customer engagement in the Asian context necessitates an image that goes beyond the quality of the food - a visual identity that conveys an experience, and a physical premises that delivers on that promise, reinforcing the brand with seductive interiors that define an ambience that can't be delivered on a bike or conveyed through an Instagram photo.

It's understandable then, that when a restaurant has succeeded in drawing a customer across its threshold, today's patron expects ever-increasing levels of theatre. Beyond great-tasting food, the restaurant must deliver on another level, and as designers we play a key role in orchestrating a unique experience, that justifies the customer getting up off the sofa and through their front door. Our role is to facilitate the delivery of that theatrical experience, by crafting the physical space to provide a fitting and compelling backdrop to the culinary process. In Asia, as elsewhere, 'craft' is the buzzword of today, as customers invest more of their attention - and money - on the expertise and craftsmanship in well-made food and drink, and we must continuously reinforce that with our creative investment in their tangible surroundings.

As new trends in restaurants and food service emerge across this diverse region, the quality of the designer's vision, creativity and delivery is what will justify their sustained role in the dialogue. We must continue to relish every opportunity to work with owners and operators who see the potential in locally developed concepts targeting genuine opportunities, and who recognise the strong, competitive advantage a well-designed and well thought-out interior can offer.

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