

Meet the Designers Behind San Diego's Most Instagram-Worthy Restaurants

Bells & Whistles principals Barbara Rourke and Jason St. John share the inspiration for Campfire, Bracero, Sycamore Den, and their other design-minded eateries

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Bracero | Photo: Paul Body



Jason St. John and Barbara Rourke

Self-taught designers Barbara Rourke and Jason St. John launched Bells & Whistles in University Heights in 1999 and have gone on to build a resume that includes everything from the new Campfire to retro-cool Sycamore Den. Here, St. John reveals the inspiration

behind five landmark designs.

Bracero (2015)

For chef Javier Plascencia's Little Italy restaurant, St. John and Rourke researched the historic Bracero Program, when the government hired Mexican day laborers to work in the U.S. during World War II. Rourke and St. John joined Plascencia and his team on a trip to Guadalajara flea markets to source the objects for the restaurant. "We found stuff that was absolutely ancient. It was a really good adventure with them."



Photo: Paul Body

Campfire (2016)

B&W tipped their hat to the National Park Service while outfitting the Carlsbad space. "[Owner] John Resnick had this dream of creating something with a California identity. We realized this was a great opportunity to express the world of the California National Park with a throwback feel. The space was a mechanic's shop, so it took a lot to get it to its current point. Barbara had been looking for [camping paraphernalia] in L.A., San Diego, and on eBay and Etsy. We wanted to give John a space where, over the years, he can tweak and add things."



Sycamore Den (2013)

St. John calls the Normal Heights lounge a tribute to “dad culture.” “There is this culture of growing up in the 70s, and this workshop your dad had.” For [owner] Nick Zanoni, it was living out this dream of his childhood. The intent was to create a California modern tract home of the 50s. It has this angled roof like a lot of houses in Clairemont. We did all the things that you would find in your dad’s area—fishing rods, banjos, guitars.”





Blue Ocean Robata & Sushi Bar (2014)

Because the owners didn't have a specific vision, B&W created their own storyline for the Carlsbad spot. "The [entryway] is like walking through the skeletal remains of a fish. When you look at the ceiling, it's like you're positioned at the bottom of the ocean. The bubbles [on the ceiling] are the bubbles that come up from the fish, so you are kind of a fish inside the aquarium. Everything has this underworld, Poseidon vibe to it."



Starlite (2007)

At the India Street eatery and lounge, the cinder-block exterior—intentionally devoid of design—was inspired by a house in Alfred Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest*, while the chandeliers are reminiscent of dripping stalactites at Carlsbad Caverns. As for the samurai? “In old Japan, samurai would put their swords to the side when they were in a restaurant, creating a democratic space. The idea of the portal entrance—when you go through the tunnel you are a regular person who’s just part of this beautiful experience.”