



Designing A Hit Restaurant

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KPBS evening edition

Food and cocktails have never been trendier. Next time you're dining out, just ask the "[mixologist](#)" to make you a lavender rosemary-infused cocktail while you wait for your locally-sourced, farm-raised, grass-fed burger to arrive, perfectly plated, of course. Really, it's all a bit much.

Design, in the form of interior design, is also more popular than ever. These two cultural forces meet - for good and for ill (we've all been in some over-designed spots) - in the design of our local restaurants and bars.

I love good food, but I'm just as inspired by the atmosphere and design of the space I'm eating in. So I set out to talk to some of our local designers who create the spaces where we love to eat and drink.

A Design Dream Team



Above: Barbara Rourke and Jason St. John, two of the three designers that make up the design company Bells and Whistles.

[Photo Gallery](#)



Bells and Whistles' Designs

First up, the design team [Bells and Whistles](#) (B&W).

B&W principals Barbara Rourke and Jason St. John met us at Imig's Kitchen and Bar, the new restaurant they designed in the [Lafayette Hotel](#). The first thing you should know about them is they are impossibly good-looking and stylish. When we met, Rourke was wearing a canary yellow vintage dress, which was barely upstaged by her signature blond pompadour. To sum up: if [The Sartorialist](#) saw her on the street, his camera finger would start twitching.

KPBS videographer Nic McVicker and I were thrilled to put these two on camera.

We chatted in front of a standout wall screen B&W designed and built with their third partner, Jason Lane. The screen is a hodgepodge of doors, windows and wainscoting, all salvaged pieces from the 1800s snagged from an estate sale in La Mesa.

The chaotic mix of naturally-aged architectural elements speaks to the sense of history the designers were trying to capture.

When the historic Lafayette opened on El Cajon Boulevard in 1946, Bob Hope was the first guest to check in. St. John says the hotel became a glitterati stopover on the way to Tijuana. "They got a lot of really big celebrities of the time to come and stay here," he says. "There was incredible jazz in the foyer and swinging pool parties. It looked like a lot of fun."

Imig's has an old world cafe feel with plenty of modern twists, notably two chandeliers made out of glass orbs, chalkboard trims and a wall installation of plants by regular B&W collaborator [Britton Neubacher](#).

Conversely, Bells and Whistles' design for Little Italy hot spot [Starlite](#) is far from Old World. Starlite, which opened in 2007, was designed to be "timeless" with a nod to both mid-century and the future. "We wanted it to have a modern edge, but we didn't want it to be too 'space-agey' or use too many wild materials," says Matt Hoyt, co-owner of Starlite with music impresario [Tim Mays](#). Hoyt adds, "we didn't want anything that looked like a giant plastic diaphragm."

"For Starlite we had a lot of different inspirations," says St. John. "The Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico was one of them. They have these incredible stalactites coming down so the chandelier at Starlite is a reflection of that. They did a lot of architecture underground in the 1950s and 60s, and it has this almost Superman's lair feel to it."

The Bells and Whistles designers actually build a lot of their designs themselves, which is rare in the design world. Rourke says the final product is more tied to what she imagines if she doesn't have to hand a drawing over to a fabricator. "You're not relying on someone else to produce your idea."

St. John chimes in: "I think we both feel that you can get a lot more soul into a project doing that."

Michael Soriano Captures Soul Of A Neighborhood

At the new Raglan Public House in Ocean Beach designer Michael Soriano has tried to tap into the soul of a community. The owners, who are from New Zealand (Bare Back Grill franchise), asked Soriano to capture the feel of this quintessential SoCal neighborhood, but to also reference New Zealand's surf and rugby culture.

Soriano, who's designed for his share of wealthy, luxe-seeking clients, says that with Ocean Beach, "it was more about anti-establishment, anti-design, anti-structure, anti-corporate."

The prolific designer seems relaxed as we talk - he sips on a beer - but that laid back facade masks an exquisite attention to detail and an overall reluctance to talk to the press. Soriano doesn't like being the face of his design brand; he'd rather have the "properties," as he calls them, speak for themselves.

For Raglan, Soriano immersed himself in Ocean Beach and became a regular at the weekly farmers market. He took note of all the visual hallmarks of the neighborhood: surf shop stickers, skateboards, graffiti and surfboards among them. "We looked at how we could have a nod to those design elements but reinvent them in our own way."

Simple black bullhorn-shaped lamps hang over the tables. Look up, and you'll see the illuminated insides are covered in stickers. "The elements are there, they're just not so obvious. They're not in your face," says Soriano.

Soriano designed the fantastical interior of the Gaslamp's [Vin dy Syrah](#), as well as the mid-century minded boutique hotel in Point Loma called [The Pearl](#). "I like to play on things that have to do with memory, childhood sensibilities, a sense of play, things that everyone can relate to," says Soriano. "Design for me is about giving people the opportunity to reconnect to those good feelings, those good memories."

Soriano also likes to add a quirky touch to his spaces whenever possible. Each room in The Pearl has a wall-mounted fish bowl (and live fish!).

At Raglan, the bathroom designs offer a dose of off-beat humor. The ceiling in the women's bathroom is covered with an enlarged newspaper image of two rugby players. The ceiling also has recessed lighting, one of which is placed in a blush-inducing location on a handsome rugby player. Let's just say Soriano chose a longer, tubular bulb for that one.

"Bathrooms are pivotal to me," Soriano says. "I ramp them up so that they become a memorable experience."

Designing For A Design-Savvy Public

Today's design-savvy public expects a lot from their restaurants and bars. Starlite co-owner Matt Hoyt explains: "The food and the drinks are a huge part of that. Service is a huge part of it. But the space that you're actually sitting in is a huge draw. I think that's half the thrill ride."

"Design is everywhere now, from Target to Ikea," says Rourke. "It's wonderful. People get it now, they understand the language."

The internet is flush with design blogs, highlighting every interior decorating trend. Pinterest, the visual pinboard site that has skyrocketed in popularity, is full of favorite home decor "pins." One of my favorite sites is actually a brilliant sendup of all the design tropes flooding the web. It's called ["F@#\\$ Your Noguchi Coffee Table."](#)

One trend both Soriano and the Bells and Whistles team get behind is the handmade, handcrafted revolution that has taken place over the last five years. They all sing the praises of [Etsy](#), and work regularly with individual artists and craftsmen.

Being a designer seems like such a glamorous gig, but these local design stars say it's hard work. Rourke points to a handcrafted table in Imig's. "Everything that goes into this space is thought about with four or five different options. It's mundane sometimes." St. John grins and insists it's still glamorous. Rourke laughs, countering, "When the project's done, when it starts and when it finishes, then it's glamorous."

I couldn't help but wonder what inspires these creatives. "I've been looking at a lot of fashion blogs," Rourke says. "For me, if I'm inspired by fashion, food and travel, then the ideas for design come."

Company partner Jason St. John looks to history for inspiration. "I'm a huge history buff so I do a lot of research on who we are, where we come from, what the future looks like," he says.

Soriano says his inspiration doesn't come from other designs. It comes from "seeing people laugh, seeing people smile" in the spaces he designs. "At the end of the day, that's my highest agenda."

Michael Soriano and Bells and Whistles talk about design on KPBS Evening Edition, Friday at 6:30.
[See the video by Nic McVicker here.](#)

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