

# Bells & Whistles on Designing Bracero & Los Angeles vs. San Diego

by [Candice Woo](#) Jul 8, 2015, 1:42p



*What does San Diego need more, and less, of?*

Chances are, you have eaten or drank in a [Bells & Whistles \[0\]](#)-designed space and felt pretty cool while doing so. The duo, **Barbara Rourke** and **Jason St. John**, have put together several of San Diego's sleekest spots, from their early landmark Starlite to the Smoking Goat, Sycamore Den, and North County's Sea & Smoke and Blue Ocean Sushi. Presently, the pair split their time between San Diego and Los Angeles, where they're helping to expand the Juice Served Here brand and worked with chef Ray Garcia and the Sprout Restaurant Group to launch his BS Taqueria and the [just-launched Broken Spanish \[1\]](#). Last year, Bells & Whistles scored the design gig for the new Javier Plascencia-led

Bracero, which will be unveiled this week; Rourke and St. John recently spoke to Eater about the highly-coveted project and the differences in designing restaurants in Los Angeles and San Diego.

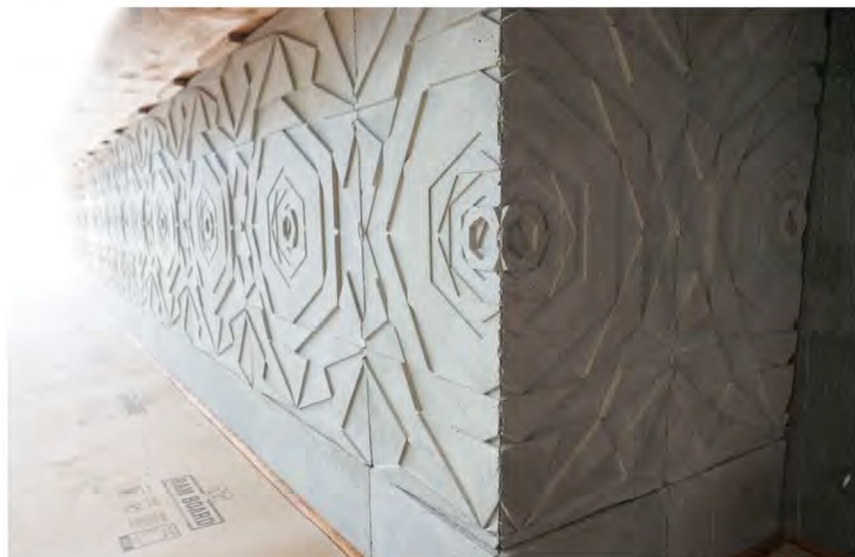
**What was your overall design approach to Bracero?**

**How are you feeling now that it's finished?**

Jason St. John: The original concept was inspired by the Bracero farm worker movement; it's very important not just in Mexican, but also American history. We wanted to tell the story through materials— using old wood, raw materials, farm tools, leather— in a subtle way. I think people are going to be really excited to see Javier finally have his own space in San Diego, with great food and cocktails.

**Are there some unique features? Or Bells & Whistles signatures?**

St. John: We lined the under bar area upstairs with 40" x 24" cast concrete tiles designed in a geometric agave pattern, and a beautiful long communal table downstairs, both made by JXL Studio.



Barbara Rourke: We also tried to add architectural elements, like a leather-covered back bar that goes from the downstairs up through the mezzanine, to enhance the existing high ceiling, and repetition through an installation of Bracero hats that hang in the stairway.

**You're working a lot in L.A. too; what differences have you noticed in its restaurant culture versus San Diego?**

St. John: There's less convincing with owners and chefs in L.A.; I think they experience a lot more different kinds of restaurants and ideas, so they're open to the next cool thing.

Rourke: L.A. people know they have to be on it and have the whole package, from branding to an amazing cocktail program.

**What does L.A. have that San Diego needs?**

St. John: In L.A., there's someone like Bill Chait who partners with chefs and takes care of the money and management; by forming that kind of supportive partnership, he's allowing chefs to focus on cooking really good food.

I think a lot of restaurants are designed to look like clubs or bars because they're not really relying on the food. If you have a bonafide, real restaurant with a wonderfully talented chef, your design mission is to create a space where people can spend a few hours with their friends and really enjoy that kind of experience. San Diego's been good at making hybrid bar-slash-restaurants, but we're missing a lot of small neighborhood restaurants that are staffed by incredible chefs.

Rourke: In San Diego, there are places that look cool but their food isn't amazing.

### **Which one of your projects has been your favorite?**

Rourke: Starlite will always be my favorite; it was our first really big project and it's just still so cool after all this time.

### **What are some spaces in San Diego that you really like?**

Rourke: Jayne's Gastropub— it's authentic on every level, the food is great, and the design is a reflection of the owners. It's not trying too hard.

St. John: I love Cafe Chloe; it's my go-to.

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