



LIGHTING



By Amelia Levin

HOW
RESTAURANT
AND KITCHEN
DESIGN WORK
TOGETHER
TO BOOST
THE GUEST
EXPERIENCE.

TEN
WAYS
TO

ELEVATE

TEN WAYS TO ELEVATE

It's all about the experience. That message continues to have a noticeable impact on the conceptualization of new projects, restaurant design and even the selection of foodservice equipment.

Just look at any new chef-driven restaurant, or even a new wave fast-casual or forward-thinking university dining hall. Wide-open kitchens with plenty of cooks and equipment on display are not just popular, they're expected. The new norm calls for high-end design with plenty of attention to detail. Even lighting trends have changed; the dim, moody restaurants of years ago continue to fall by the wayside in favor of table spotlighting, natural light and other methods that perfect diners' Instagram photos.

Growing consumer interest in watching food preparation and gaining greater insight on food sourcing both factor into the current wave of elevating the experience. And the industry is responding.

Here, veteran designers Nina Grondin, partner and founder of Chicago-based Curioso, and Joseph Szala, creative director and principal of Atlanta-based Vigor, identify the Top 10 experience-driven kitchen and restaurant trends.

1. THE HEART OF THE HOUSE

While many designers prefer fully — or at least partially — open kitchens these days, the placement of the kitchen proves just as important. “One of the things that I see as a big trend over the past five years is that there is a blurring between front of house and back of house,” Grondin says. “This is as people are becoming much more aware of what they're eating and they are looking for that level of transparency, not just for peace of mind but for a more sophisticated dining experience.”

Some new restaurants go full-blown heart-of-the-house style with an open hearth or wood-fired oven in the center of a dining space and the kitchen designed around it. Others place counter seating and/or traditional tables around an open or partially open kitchen at the back or side of a space.

“Focusing on the open kitchen really energizes a space,” Grondin says. “There's nothing worse these days than being in a dining room that's partially empty with nothing going on. It feels outdated, like you're there for an early bird special. The trend is to make the kitchen feel like a warm and casual dinner party at someone's house where you might be centered around the cook, tasting ingredients or watching the prep.”

ELEVATING THE BAR

Tobin Ellis, hospitality design specialist and founder of BarMagic, who has designed and developed countless upscale bars at restaurants, reminds us all not to forget about the bar. In this post-recession world, the bar, it seems, has become the main driver of revenue at restaurants of all types.

To maximize success in this environment, Ellis encourages operators and designers to work collaboratively to design spaces that allow bartenders to make more complex drinks with all the tools and technology they need at their fingertips so that they're not turning their back to the customer.

“You will never find a bartender who says, ‘I'm so glad this bar was designed all in-line and symmetrical!’” Ellis said at Zoomba Group's Foodservice Equipment & Design Global Thought Leadership Summit in September. “They're the ones who have to get the drinks over the bar quickly and efficiently while providing an immersive hospitality experience to guests at the same time. There is no immersion without service and hospitality.”



And, as more diners forgo formal reservations for more casual, bar-side dining, seating in this area has to be well thought-out, Curioso's Nina Grondin says. If space allows, she's fond of “knuckles” at the edge of a bar where four or five people can sit around, talk and dine together. This is the case at the recently opened etta in Chicago. There, you'll also find a row of high-top tables for four, separated from the main dining room by a small partition. The height of the tables allows for a more casual feel as well as a top-down peek at the lower-set tables in the dining room and the open kitchen with a hearth oven at the back.

“You also have to think about the space between the front of the bar and the back,” Grondin says. “Too much space means bartenders might turn their back more often or hang out further away from the guests rather than directly interacting with them.”

And then there are the tools for today's immersive bar experience, from rose-colored martini glasses and strainers (as at etta) to smoking guns, containers filled with herbs, big fishbowls for sharable sips and more.

“Seeing the craftsmanship of the bartenders is just as huge a part of the overall ‘show’ as seeing the cooks in the kitchen,” she says.

TEN WAYS TO ELEVATE

2. LIGHTING

“Designing kitchens these days is like set design for a theater,” Grondin says. Kitchens need to be well-lit, especially open kitchens or peek-a-boo kitchens, where the intent is for customers to watch the action.

After that it’s all about Instagram. Diners continue to whip out their cameras and snap photos of dishes to post online, regardless of whether they’re professional food writers. That said, lighting trends now create more of a focus on the individual plates and tabletops.

“For the tables, we try to create intimate zones with spotlights directly over the tabletop to showcase the food,” Grondin says. “Lighting can also be used in this way to create a more intimate zone so that the table next to you fades into the darkness.”

Natural light and plenty of windows near tables help create the perfect lighting for food photography. Operators and their supply chain partners need to understand these factors when curating the individual elements that will work together to create the restaurant’s tabletop.

3. MIRRORS

Grondin says she tries to incorporate mirrors in as many restaurant projects as she can. “Mirrors double the amount of activity in the room so there’s constant motion and movement,” she says.

Mirrors can also improve service. “Your server now has views of almost the entire space and can see activity at his or her tables from a further distance,” Grondin says.

4. FIRE

These days, it’s all about fire and open flames. Newer, chef-driven restaurants capitalize on a wider range of wood-fired equipment, from flywheel grills where staff raise and lower the cooking surface for direct or indirect cooking to wide-open ovens stacked with logs and embers. Restaurants like José Andrés’ Bazaar Meat in Las Vegas and Proxi in Chicago both have custom-designed,



Mirrors, like these in Proxi in Chicago, add a feeling of motion to the space.



Fire and open flames, seen here toward the far back wall at Bazaar Meat in Las Vegas, add ambience to the restaurant.

wood-fired grill/oven combinations on display at the center and open back kitchen, respectively.

Those mirrors Grondin referenced come in handy here, too, as they capture the flickering flames coming off wood-fired equipment or even open-flame fireplaces. In fact, Grondin incorporated the later into the design for The Terrace Room at The Harbor Grand resort in New Buffalo, Mich. There, she designed a narrow, open fireplace-like feature along the banquettes to separate the main dining room from a meeting space annex.

Grondin also continues to work on a design and sourcing equipment for fire pits that could cook a whole pig and more on the patio of a new restaurant in Texas. This approach would allow the operator to expand on the limited kitchen space. Diners would be able to sit on the patio around the hearth as well as view it through windows from inside the dining room.

“There’s something so magical about food and fire,” Grondin says. “They create memories and get people to talk about the space and come back.”

TEN WAYS TO ELEVATE

BRANDING TWO BRANDS

Great design, intent on elevating the guest experience, all starts with concept development and branding.

“For us, branding is all about identifying the unique attributes of a restaurant or experience from the beginning to the end and making sure all of the moving parts work in unison,” says Joseph Szala, principal and creative director of Vigor, a restaurant and beverage branding firm. “We also have to remind our clients that

the brand experience isn’t just for customers and guests, it’s also for the employees.”

Everything from the entryway to the color scheme, packing, food presentation, and tabletop selection must all match the defined brand. “You can’t just slap a logo up on a wall and call it a day,” Szala says. Here are two of his recent projects as examples of more thought-out branding.

GYRO WRAP



For this fast-casual concept, which opened in a retail mall location in Atlanta last spring, Szala looked to combine class with value. “For this brand we had to consider the new reality of mall food courts, which are seeing less teenage foot traffic and more blue-collar workers,” Szala says. “People who go to malls these days for lunch or dinner want value, so that became the focal point. They want more food for their money and food that tastes good and delivers a feeling of the exotic while also delivering familiar foods like french fries.”

The Vigor team started by identifying “white space,” and then filling that in with authentic images and color schemes mixed with modern industrial and raw materials like plywood, cinder block concrete and white brick to create a street-food-meets-garage-style-loft ambience. When it came to the equipment, Szala

fought to expose the gyro spit and flattop grill as much as possible, though mall restrictions prohibited him from positioning the equipment on the front serving line.



101 DELI BAR

Szala worked with David Pilkenton of Draftsman Design Studio to develop a gastro-centric, artisan look for this full-service, modern deli. Branding appears on everything from the bar napkins to the beer glasses in an effort to tell the education-focused “Deli:101” story. Definitions of “napkin” and “pint” add a little playfulness.

Natural wood was used throughout, speckled with whimsical artwork, vintage flair and graffiti. For the small kitchen space, Szala opened up the window for a peek inside to the custom-built equipment line while maintaining focus on the long narrow bar traveling down one side of the restaurant and lined with an extensive wine, cocktail and beer tap system.



5. FUN, FUNCTIONAL EQUIPMENT

Just like wood-fired ranges, large dome pizza ovens add drama to a space but they also play a key role in kitchens; chefs continue to identify more uses for the ovens, from baking breads to roasting vegetables, proteins and more.

Some chefs also now opt for vertical spits, which come with the additional benefit of adding visual intrigue for customers. At the first East Coast location of The Taco Stand in Miami, customers can watch as kitchen staff trim al pastor pork straight from a vertical spit while others roll out masa dough, then flatten it with a tortilla press for handmade shells.

Vertical spits, like the one behind the counter at The Taco Stand in Miami, add authenticity and visual interest to the restaurant.



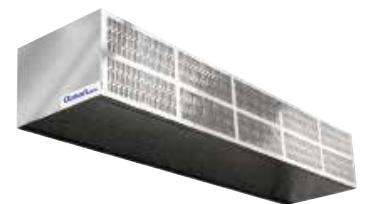
Pest-Pro 150 Bug Light
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TEN WAYS TO ELEVATE

6. SEATS WITH A VIEW

Adding to the theater aspect, more operators are incorporating chef's tables and counter seating to their operations to offer customers a prime view of the action. Proxi has about eight spots set up directly at the restaurant's main expo line across from the window to the kitchen's wood-fired grill/oven, allowing guests to chat directly with the chef.

"I'm seeing more restaurants interested in chef's tables for off-hour education, like pizza-making classes or other special events," Grondin says.

Counter seating offers diners an additional choice in watching the action close-up. For those preferring a more traditional dining room setting, Grondin says, furniture selection depends on whether the restaurant owner wants guests to linger longer (in that case comfort takes precedence), or prefers to turn tables faster (less padding).

"The furnishing choice has a direct impact on operations and the overall feel and energy of a space," Grondin says. Spacing tables closer together or further apart can also impact the energy in a space.

7. FOOD DISPLAYS AND MERCHANDISING

The fast-casual segment is killing it in terms of upscale food merchandising. Clean eating, transparency-focused Sweetgreen is a perfect example of this, Grondin points out. There, diners pass by rows of glass and open displays filled to the brim with colorful crock pots, baskets of fresh produce and large smoothie machines with multicolored vegetables. Chalkboard signs and other displays with handwritten notes all combine to signal notions of craft and small-batch menu items.

"All this is meant to evoke that you're going to eat good quality, homemade food, or you're in Grandma's kitchen," Grondin says. Stainless steel industrial is out; homey and colorful is in.

Of course, tabletop feeds into this enhanced focus on food presentation. From more colorful plates to uniquely shaped vessels, individual serving size



Punch Bowl Social in Chicago combines food and entertainment throughout its large, 30,000-square-foot space.

pots, cool pottery and more, tabletop selection further tells the story of the food diners are being served.

Even server and staff uniforms are more thought-out these days. "More restaurants are ditching the stuffy ties for waste aprons, fun T-shirts and denim that also offer opportunities for merchandising branded items for purchase," Szala says.

8. PACKAGING AND BRANDING

Aside from uniforms, packaging and paper-based presentation items also offer enhanced tools for branding and merchandising.

Szala says he works with his clients to add logos and branding on everything from to-go bags to paper liners for baskets, cups, glassware, napkins and more. At the recently opened Dutch and Doc's in Chicago, paper-based plate liners for deviled eggs come printed with the restaurant's logo, as does the package of hand towels for cleanup after Thai-style sticky ribs.

"These are just additional touch-points where you can bolster your brand, create more of an experience and remind guests to come back," Szala says.

9. GAMING AND ENTERTAINMENT

Some restaurants are taking the notion

of experience to a whole new level, melding food and drink with actual game playing like ping pong, darts, bowling, arcades and more.

"Millennials in particular seem to be craving these kinds of immersive experiences while also enjoying high-quality food and drink," says Robert Thompson, founder and CEO of Denver-based Punch Bowl Social.

The layout at Punch Bowl Social specifically caters to the surrounding entertainment; diners can order from the full menu at any place in the bar/restaurant, including the bowling alley. "I have seen guests order a four-course meal while bowling," Thompson says. This has a direct impact on where the kitchen(s) needs to be located within the space to be able to accommodate diners in every corner of a large space.

10. TECHNOLOGY

Convenience drives the tech experience for the younger generation. Expect to see more of it. Technology, in the form of digital menu boards, self-ordering kiosks, tabletop tablets and more will continue to find their way into the restaurants of the future, in Szala's opinion.

At the same time, the restaurants and brands doing the best job of integrating technology are the ones that don't forget about the human touch. **FE&S**