

Tasteful Looks: The Valley's Best-Designed Restaurants

Written by Lydia Martin

If presentation is just as important as flavor in the culinary world, then the eye-catching establishments on our list of top local restaurant designs are more than meets the taste bud. We asked the designers, architects and managers of these five gastronomic and aesthetic hot spots to weigh in—and got everything from Dr. Weil and feng shui to “Phantom of the Opera” and spiral staircases.

Avalon Restaurant



Expert: Ryan Leslie, managing partner of Avalon Restaurant

Aesthetic: Contemporary glam

Go With the Flow: In a restaurant, form, function and flow go hand in hand—whether it’s the physical flow of waiters and diners coming and going in a space, or the feng shui-esque flow of energy triggered by curves, corners and colors. Accordingly, Leslie sought harmony and balance in the layout and design of his first restaurant.

Opposites Attract: Casual yet formal, cosmopolitan yet familiar, spacious yet intimate, Scottsdale’s Avalon is a seamless study in contrast. Diners can take up casual bar seating or make a commitment at the 12-seat community table. Large glass garage doors bring outdoor elements in, while across the room white beaded curtains lend a small shroud of Oriental mystery. The color palette—blacks, silvers and blues punctuated by bold chocolate browns and whites—is light and airy by day and rich and soothing by night. “I wanted something timeless, not something that’s cool today but not tomorrow,” Leslie says. “We can accommodate everyone.”

Foodstuffs: Because Leslie considers food a restaurant’s most important component, Avalon boasts a delicious spread of contemporary coastal American dishes crafted with Mediterranean spices and French technique. These organic offerings echo Avalon’s atmosphere: formal yet accessible, like the butter-poached Maine lobster with ricotta gnocchi and asparagus.

The Scoop: 7707 E. McDowell Rd., Scottsdale. 480.656.0010, www.avalon-scottsdale.com.

The Herb Box Catering, Eatery and Market



Experts: Brad Krause, president of Krause Interiors; Jennifer Consentino, senior designer

Aesthetic: Fresh and femme

Good Vibrations: When The Herb Box’s owners decided to transform their high-end catering business into a restaurant on Market Street at DC Ranch, they sought a dining space with a “frilly, beachy, fresh and funky vibe.” Krause Interiors answered the call. “We came up with all these funky, weird patterns,” Krause says, including seven kinds of horizontal wall coverings, from floral patterns to thick bold stripes, with an energetic color scheme. “It’s not something you see every day,” Consentino says. “We try to drag your eye into it right away.” Meanwhile, aged-brick wall segments with porthole-shaped mirrors break up the wall coverings. Traditional chandeliers hang above the booths, as wine glass-shaped pendant fixtures above the bar add a classy twist. Large retractable windows open onto an expansive patio, allowing for a two-way bar space. And off to the side, a market area sells food and provides on-site event catering.

Reflections: Consentino believes The Herb Box’s unique design “mimics the sophisticated yet playful menu.” Krause adds that the bright space also reflects the owners: “It just embodies what they’re trying to achieve in their restaurant.”

The Scoop: 20707 N. Pima Rd., Scottsdale. 480.289.6180, www.theherbbox.com.

The Mission



Experts: Brian Raab and Terry Ellsior, owners of The Mission; Charli Morrow, designer for Philip Charles Design

Aesthetic: Modern Latin

The World’s a Stage: Somewhere between “The Phantom of the Opera,” Ecuador and the Himalayas, The Mission was born. This trendy modern Latin restaurant in Old Town attracts couples seeking romantic candlelit meals on the patio as well as singles wanting good drinks and

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great company. The eclectic transitional design incorporates contemporary elements infused with dramatic Old World flourishes. "It's supposed to make people feel like they were...the star in their own play," Raab says.

Bar None: The pros all agree on their favorite spot: the bar area. Between the travertine floor, the marble bar top, the chandeliers, the onyx community table and the Himalayan salt block wall—all close by, and each exuding its own warmth—the bar area "really hits you with a ton of elements," Raab says. "It's all right here."

Cuisine Continuity: Amid mahi mahi tacos and grilled sweet corn, chef Matt Carter serves homemade tortillas on heated bricks of rock salt reminiscent of the bar area's salt block wall, and dishes up guacamole in palmwood molcajetes, which match the palmwood dining room floor. The incredible food, music and theatrical setting result in an unforgettable dining experience. "It's not just the restaurant that is beautiful, it's the whole ambiance," Morrow says.

The Scoop: 3815 N. Brown Ave., Scottsdale. 480.636.5005, www.themissionaz.com.

Sassi



Experts: George Melara, principal at Nelsen Partners; Janet Henrich, vice president of Nelsen Henrich Interiors www.sassi.biz Aesthetic: Old World romantic www.sassi.biz Villa People: Inspired by travels in Italy, Sassi's owner and Melara developed the 20,000-sq.-ft. Italian-style farmhouse and villa that comprise Sassi in North Scottsdale. Elegant, warm and charming, the secluded establishment embraces Old World architecture and Southern Italian hospitality and flavor. "We were trying to evoke [the] emotions of a place as much as the aesthetics of a place," Melara says.

Evolution: The kitchen, dining room, library, enclosed garden terrace and other rooms each assume a distinctive function and design, which results in the impression that the farmhouse has evolved and been added to over time. Rustic timber beams, handmade terra cotta tile, authentic stone, plaster and bricks are used for ceilings, floors and fireplaces; bookshelves, high-backed upholstered chairs and iron chandeliers accent the rooms. "Of paramount importance was [authenticity] in every detail, from the food to the ambiance and the construction methods," Melara says.

Live and Local: From design to cuisine, Sassi embodies locality and tradition. "We might make a pizza in the wood-burning oven using Bob McClendon's organic tomatoes and Black Mesa Ranch goat cheese, or make a dessert of almond pound cake topped with fig preserves from our own fig tree," says Stephen Plunkett, general manager of Sassi.

The Scoop: 10455 E. Pinnacle Peak Pkwy., Scottsdale. 480.502.9095, www.sassi.biz.

True Food Kitchen



Experts: Judi Testani, founder of Testani Design Troupe; Sam Fox, CEO of Fox Restaurant Concepts Aesthetic: Eco-industrial

True Mood: The lemon yellow and apple green color palette, blended with dark and light wood tones, is relaxed and cheery at this Biltmore Fashion Park eatery. Two community tables, an exhibition-style kitchen and white oak butcher-block tables in the dining room provide an inviting and open feel. "There's a great energy to the room," Fox says. "It makes you feel good when you're in there."

True Food: Fox notes how the organic, energetic space matches the fare. Fresh, regionally grown organic fruits and vegetables, whole grains, as well as house-made natural sodas and teas promote unique, balanced and globally inspired meals to nourish the body and mind. They further integrate the healthy living philosophy of Dr. Andrew Weil, renowned author and True Food co-owner.

True Good: True Food Kitchen's design and construction are environmentally friendly, from reclaimed wood floors and recycled quarry tiles to low-voltage LED lighting and high-efficiency kitchen equipment. Indoor plants help absorb the facility's carbon footprint. A member of the Green Restaurant Association, True Food also participates in recycling and water management programs; its waterless urinals will save 40,000 gallons a year.

The Scoop: 2502 E. Camelback Rd., Phoenix. 602.774.3488, www.foxrc.com.
