

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Saturday/Sunday, October 8 - 9, 2011 - Page C11 - By Katy McLaughlin

GLEN COBEN IN THE NEWS

The Blueprints Behind the Bistros



Francois Dischinger for The Wall Street Journal

GLEN COBEN at Romera New York; the two orange dots are based on the color of one of the chef's sauces.

CREATING:
GLEN COBEN,
RESTAURANT DESIGNER

To prepare for a new job, Glen Coben spends night after late night eating, drinking and talking with clients. Last Monday, he ate a three-course tasting menu at an up-and-coming chef's New York restaurant; on Tuesday he and the chef downed an 11-course dinner at another.

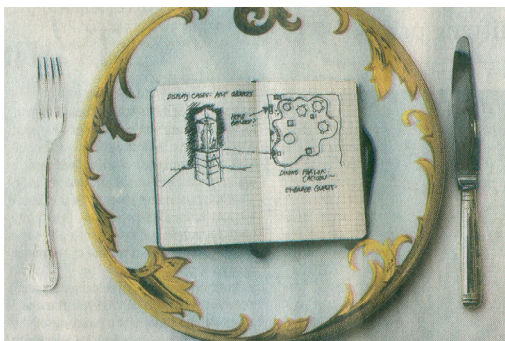
Mr. Coben sees such forays as a critical part of identifying the narrative that underpins a new project. "I need to spend a lot of time with these people to get their story," he said. He doesn't carry a briefcase. Instead, he brings along either a pocket-size Moleskine notebook or, if the project is already under way, several printed floor plans stuffed into his jeans or jacket pockets. Throughout the evening, he whips out the plans and sketches ideas in the margins.

Since opening his own firm in 2000, the 48-year-old architect has built 59 eateries, 47 of them in New York. He built Mario Batali's Del Posto, which is often cited as much for its opulent, luxurious design as its food, as well as Riingo, which displays Japanese and Scandinavian influences, reflecting the Swedish background of its original chef, Marcus Samuelsson.

Mr. Coben learned the importance of narrative with his first restaurant, Washington Park, which opened in 2002. The chef, Jonathan Waxman, had achieved fame in the 1980s for bringing California cuisine to New York, but by the early 2000s his impact was fading from memory.

In the fall of 2001, the two men and the restaurant's financier went on a week-long eating tour of Paris and London. Mr. Coben said he gradually perceived Mr. Waxman's role as an elder statesman of the culinary scene, noting the reverential tone with which other chefs approached him, and the magnanimous way Mr. Waxman picked out a bottle of 1949 Chateau Latour at a meal. Soon, the theme of the restaurant began to coalesce in Mr. Coben's mind. "The story was Jonathan's comeback," he said.

Mr. Coben designed a restaurant in which patrons stepped down into the dining area, "like a movie theatre," then looked up toward the open kitchen, which was framed by a proscenium arch, making it look like Mr. Waxman was "on stage," Mr. Coben said.



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GLEN COBEN'S NOTES of ideas he got for Romera New York while visiting chef Miguel Sanchez Romera in Spain in 2007.

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The cinematic comeback theme resonated: A positive review began, "Washington Park is one restaurant that almost needs a screenplay rather than a review." The



Edward Menashy (restaurant)

The completed restaurant, which opened in late September.

restaurant closed in 2003, but Mr. Waxman's star was tarnished: Today, he is a staple of food television.

By itself, design can be a collection of random choices. By using pieces of someone's life as the guide, even paint colors can feel like an essential piece of the story, said Mr. Coben, who has chosen colors to match a chef's sauce or a kind of butter he or she likes.

When describing restaurants, Mr. Coben is an inveterate sketcher, seemingly incapable of glossing over details like the location of the bathrooms or a tree. "Here's where his little red car was parked when I walked in," Mr. Coben said as he drew his recollections of his first visit to a restaurant outside Barcelona run by chef and doctor Miguel Sanchez Romera. His ability to create a complete mental picture on paper makes it easy for others to see what he sees. Though his visual memory is amazingly accurate—"a blessing and a curse," he said—he annoys his wife by forgetting things like the dates of the Jewish holidays. His drawing skills, honed from a young age, are also specific and limited.

"It was always spatial. I could never draw a person," he said.

Sometimes the vision for a restaurant comes together quickly. Flipping through a graph-paper notebook from his 2007 visit to Dr. Romera's restaurant in Spain, Mr. Coben pointed to notes and sketches of museum-style art cases, curtains and a layout that is nearly identical to what he went on to build at Romera New York, which opened in late September.

But some projects demand many drafts and much discussion. One chef in New York (who asked that he not be identified because he has not yet signed the lease for his new restaurant space) is currently working with Mr. Coben on an informal restaurant and bar in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. A few weeks ago, Mr. Coben began a series of outings with the 35-year-old chef, sometimes after he completed his shift at his current restaurant, an upscale place in Manhattan. Hunched over late-night drinks, the two discussed integrating a foosball table into the design.

"What if we connected it to the wall? That way you can pull it down when you play it, and put it away for space." Mr. Coben suggested.

"I dunno," said the chef, scrutinizing the drawing. "Foosball tables get a lot of wear and tear."

Though the foosball dialectic may appear to border on the sophomoric, Mr. Coben said it's a key element of the project. That's because he views the chef's story as one of a young man currently cooking "grown-up" food in a serious atmosphere, while the new place will let him have fun with his own generation, in an edgy, gentrifying area of Brooklyn. He encourages the chef to share nutty ideas and sketches them out to see if they'll work.

"That stuff may not make it in, but it gives me a sense of whom I am working with," Mr. Coben said.

A STORY TO TELL

- One of the first questions that Glen Coben asks a restaurateur is, "How long will a diner be sitting at the table?" He then supplies half-hour chairs (like stools and benches), hour chairs (unupholstered and low-backed) or pricier two-to-three-hour chairs, which are well-cushioned and have armrests.

- Presentation boards, which architects use to introduce design concepts to clients, are "B.S.," Mr. Coben said. A bunch of textures and colors on a board are a mere collection of random notions; the narrative that ties it all together is far more important. Mr. Coben said he has turned down requests to make presentation boards for projects where he doesn't know the story.