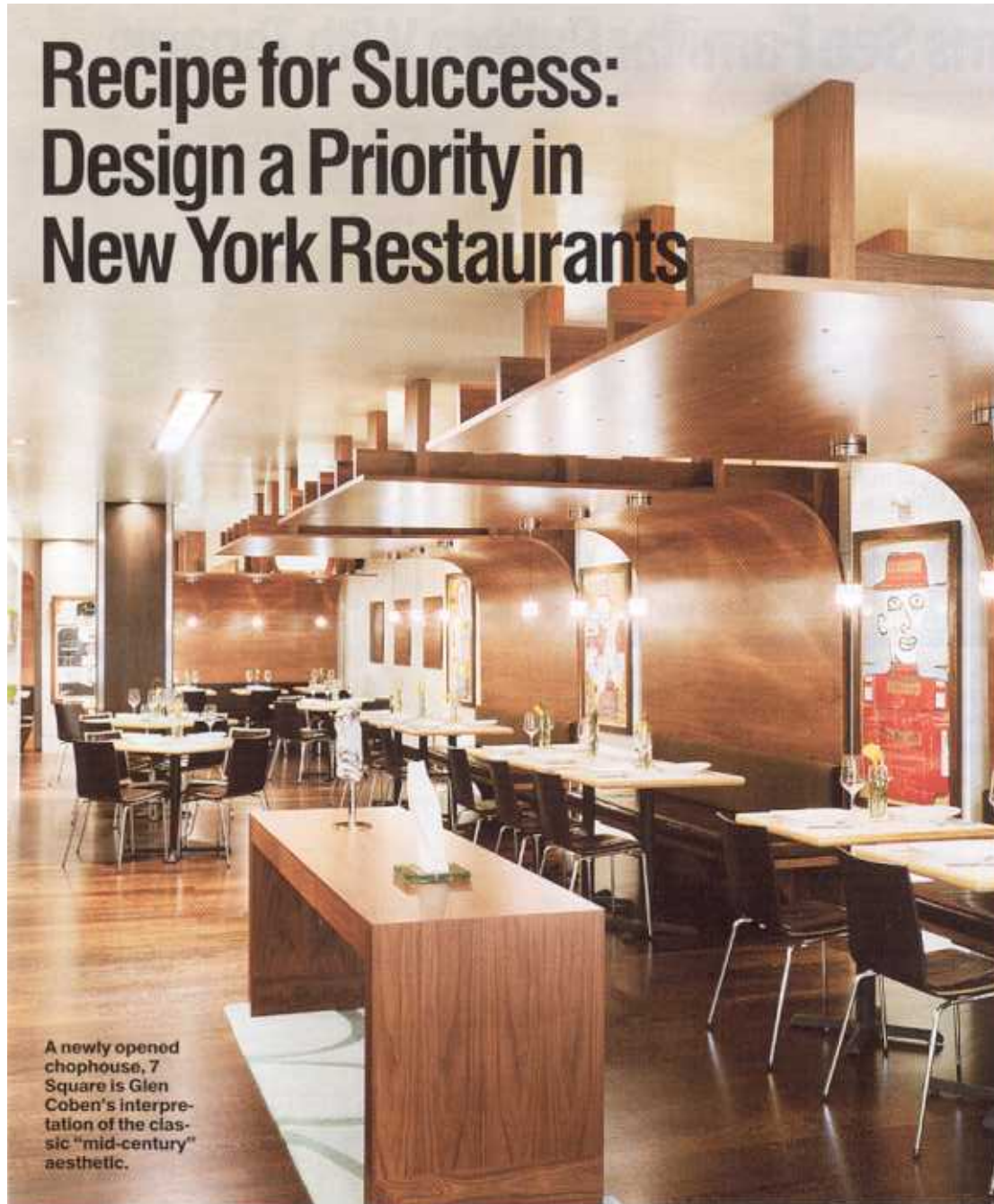


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Recipe for Success: Design a Priority in New York Restaurants



A newly opened chophouse, 7 Square is Glen Coben's interpretation of the classic "mid-century" aesthetic.

By Andrea Lillo

NEW YORK—In a city with thousands of choices of where to eat dinner, restaurants have to make sure to offer diners an experience they can't get elsewhere. And given the responsibility to create the atmosphere, from the entrance door on in, restaurant designers have become almost as well known as the chefs themselves, which is especially not surprising in food- and design-obsessed New York.

And that obsession goes down to the tabletop. "It's always a debate in the design process: What's the tabletop going to be?" said Cass Calder Smith, architect, CCS Architecture, New York and San Francisco, and who has designed such restaurants as Giorgione 508 and The Meeting House.

Many restaurants are going au naturel, dispensing with tablecloths and going with beautiful wood tables, but it can't just end there. Though this trend saves on doing laundry and is the current style direction, "you can't leave those tables bare," Smith said. "They're big, and they draw attention to the center of the room." As "people are a teeny bit uncomfortable" with a completely naked table, there is usually some sort of table covering, even if it is small, like a square placemat by Chilewich. Still, a bare or semi-bare table draws more attention to the dinnerware, glassware and flatware on the table.

Restaurant design has trended toward more casual luxury, and tabletop is mixed and matched more, even at the high-end, with less adherence to five-piece place settings. "Before, [luxury looks] came with formality," Smith said. "Now it comes with every level. It allows people to be a little more eclectic."

As restaurant design filters over to residential kitchen design, though, the opposite is also true. Calling it "the domestication of appliances," Smith said kitchens are taking on a more industrial look that's also simpler. Kitchen and dining rooms are melding into one space, as "kitchens are spreading into the house a little bit."

Speaking of space, the 320-seat restaurant Buddakan made a big Pan-Asian splash when it opened earlier this year in the Meatpacking District. Chef Michael Schulson helped decide which dinnerware to use, after looking at "thousands and thousands of samples." And even though the decor is sumptuous, he wanted the dinnerware to be simple, and chose a bone white china pattern. "I didn't want the china to take away from the design. ... It's not cheap but it allows my food to be beautiful." But such beauty comes with a price, as Schulson said the

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PHOTO: SCOTT FRANCES—ROCKWELL GROUP

Above: Designed by The Rockwell Group, Nobu 57 is an example of the style direction restaurants are heading in, according to Cass Calder Smith.

Left: To showcase the food, Buddakan went with simple, but expensive, white china, and it goes through \$20,000 in china a month.

exist, but for now the pendulum is swinging in the other direction." Besides offering an intimate environment, however, smaller restaurants are also attractive to restaurateurs because of the high costs in real estate, construction and staffing, he added.

Coben does see the trend of restaurants having bare tables still continuing, but "it depends on the concept." Overall, "we're seeing a lot more done with tabletop," he added, as some restaurants prefer to use tablecloths only at night or change the tabletop seasonally, for example. Restaurants used to just wrap plywood with padding and put a cloth on it, and "now we are looking at tabletop more creatively—it can be as simple as a butcher block or as exotic as inlay."

Regarding tabletop, "the menu will dictate" which china, pattern, flatware and stemware to use, Coben said. "It allows for a consistency of vision." At the restaurant La Puerta Azul in Millbrook, N.Y., "we went with Fiesta ware, mixed and matched with other things, including neutral charges. It just all related." — Allison Zisko contributed to this report.



Above: Cass Calder Smith's The Meeting House in Amagansett, N.Y., brings bare, simple design to the table.



As Sasha's upstairs dining room needed to be able to switch to a nightclub or event space, Glen Coben designed the area with loose seating.

But smaller restaurants may be on the horizon. Though he had a design hand in Buddakan, as well as other large restaurants such as Sasha and Del Posto, Glen Coben, architect and interior designer, Glen Coben & Co., now sees restaurants as shrinking in size and becoming more intimate. "It's still about design," he said. "But the era of big restaurants is waning."

Having designed the just opened 7 Square on West 49th Street and Bistro Chat Noir on East 66th Street, Coben said, "These two are not budget busters, but are more intimate," he said. "They're meant to get more return visits, as opposed to being a special-occasion place only. Those big restaurants will always