

By Stacy Shoemaker
Photography by Lydia Gould Bessler

the big apple

a fusion menu meets fused décor **in Manhattan**

For New York City designer Glen Coben, Manhattan Japanese restaurant Riingo was a physical and an emotional challenge: The space, within the Alex Hotel, is narrow and tall, making it difficult to squeeze in 95 seats. In addition, the restaurant must work both as a stand-alone destination and the hotel's 24-hour dining component. Then, just as Coben began the project, the restaurant's executive chef, Marcus Samuelsson, was awarded the James Beard award for "Best Chef in New York City." "The stakes were raised," Coben says. "This was



riingo

This page: Riingo's entrance door. *Opposite page:* The restaurant's main dining room.



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Samuelsson's first restaurant outside of his native culinary skills [he rose to fame with his uncanny Ethiopian and Scandinavian fusion at Aquavit] and everyone was ready to knock him down. I had to rise to the occasion."

Inspired by the word "Nisei," which means second generation Japanese-American, Samuelsson's offbeat hybrid menu includes everything from short ribs to sushi. For interiors that complement the concept, Coben infused traditional Japanese details into an American bistro. Eastern materials (bamboo flooring, ebony walls) are mixed with modern Western ones (marble on stairs and the bar countertop, hanging stainless steel light fixtures and bar stools, mohair and leather on furnishings, and a Corian sushi bar). "Everything is subtle. We didn't want anything to be too Japanese or too American," he explains.

Other cultural references are almost imperceptible. Cherry red plaster walls are based on the restaurant's Japanese name, meaning "red apple." The Bento-Box, a semi-private booth in the main dining room, is constructed from ebony wood and upholstered with kimono-inspired fabric. Upstairs in the mezzanine, a rice screen (rice kernels between two pieces of glass held together by a wood frame) runs down the center of the dining room. And the striped Corian sushi bar (inspired by '50s American muscle cars) reinvents a traditional sushi bar because it's bare of sushi cases that usually showcase ingredients and keep customers at a small distance. "It's really the heart and soul of the concept. It's a chef's counter. It was the most complicated piece because it required a strong participation from the sushi chefs," Coben says.

Other treatments grow out of the space's limitations. Photographs of light on dining room walls and a medley of exposed-bulb fixtures overhead lower the 18-foot ceiling and brighten windowless space. Little room was left for bathrooms after the kitchen was moved forward and expanded, so frosted glass doors (they reveal a shadow of activity inside) make a design statement without taking up space. In the lounge with floor-to-ceiling windows, a velvet curtain gives a sense of enclosure and blocks out the unattractive street and its fluorescent lights. "People can peek in," Coben says, "but it doesn't make the lounge the front porch of the hotel." hd



Left: A view of the lounge from the mezzanine. *Left, below:* The marble staircase leads to more seating upstairs. *Opposite page, top:* The Bento-Box banquette at the edge of the dining room. *Opposite page, bottom:* Another view of the bar and lounge



Rüingo

New York City

Owner Alexco Management Group

Architecture Firm/Interior Design Firm Glen & Company/Glen Cohen

Architecture & Design LLC, New York City

Architecture/Interior Design Project Team Glen Cohen, Joy Cardillo, and Ron Deschamps

Operator Townhouse Restaurant Group

Contractor Gaul Brothers Construction

Purchasing Firm Glen & Company

Graphics Patricia Spender Design

Lighting Glen & Company

Engineering Robert Ettinger & Associates

Chairs/Banquettes Munrod Custom Upholstery

Fabric Moore & Giles

Banquette Back Fabric Maharam

Bar Stools Millbar by ICF

Dining Tables/Millwork Gaul Brothers Construction

Upholstered Wall Panel Fabrication Munrod Custom Upholstery

Fabric Schumacher Contract

Mosaic Tile Bisazza

Counter Corian

Pendant Lights Oxygen

Drapery Fabrication Mason Contract Products

Fabric Kravet

Bento Box Wall Panel Fabrication Munrod Custom Upholstery

Fabric Bergamo