

KITCHEN REVOLUTION

By Marguerite Richards

Innovative design brings the client closer to the cooking than ever before.

The open kitchen is not a new idea — but franchises are turning the way people look at kitchen design on its head, putting aside the traditional separation between kitchen and dining room in order to bring diners closer to the cuisine. For ZED451 and Vapiano, esthetics now take precedence, although careful planning and close relationships with equipment contractors allow the restaurateurs the freedom to design without losing sight of functionality.

BRINGING THE KITCHEN INTO THE DINING ROOM

The concept behind ZED451 is to recreate the experience of going over to a friend's house. In this instance, of course, the idea is that the food is always great, and guests actually can interact with the chef as much as possible — just as they would at their friend's home. ZED451's chief brand officer, Daniel Harf, brings up an important point about the house party: "Everybody always ends up hanging out in the kitchen anyway," so why hide everything in the back?

Harf developed the idea with the understanding that intent to repeat a dining experience is completely emotional. In order to charm the senses, inspire curiosity and allow guests to engage with chefs as much as they please, ZED451 ensures that the chef becomes the host, while the server is eliminated. This may be sacrilege to the traditional upscale restaurant owner, but it makes perfect sense for the way things are done at ZED451.

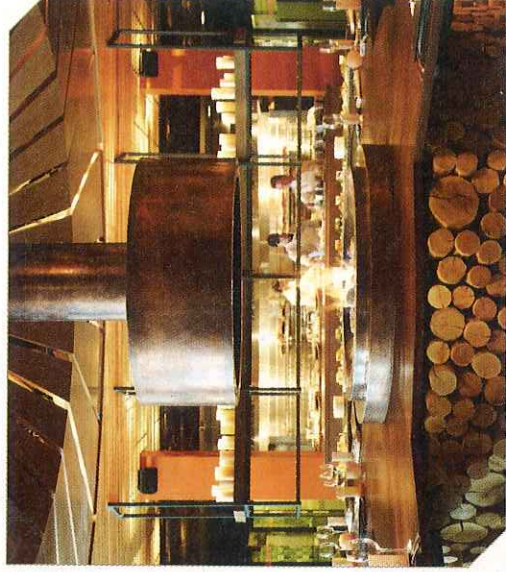
HARVEST TABLES

Food prep and frying all remain in the back of the house, but grilling, salad-making and dessert-finishing are brought to the front. The dining room turns into a mélange of dining tables and "harvest tables," inspiring guests to sample dishes in small portions. Guests are invited to move around the room with their glasses of wine, to mix and mingle, to hang out with the chef as he finishes grilling and to taste various dishes at the harvest tables.

The design of the various tables was conceived to evoke the most beautiful of home kitchens — making chafing dishes and the traditional salad bar completely out of the question. Harf was inspired by display windows where products appeared to be floating and wanted to give the same feeling at the harvest tables. The countertops are made of Balsatino volcanic stone, and cold ingredients are presented in cantilever fashion over a compressor-powered marble slab that freezes to a sheet of ice, keeping prepared dishes fresh. To eliminate the chafing dish, Staub crocks serve as soup warmers over induction burners and cast-iron escargot dishes are used for multiple sampling dishes. Lava rocks decorate the warm harvest tables to serve a dual purpose — both practical and esthetical. Their dark earthy appeal is just as important as the lack of heat transfer, as the rocks aren't hot to the touch.

ALL CHARCOAL GRILL

Guests are seated on hand-carved wooden stools, right in front of the grill at their walnut-top dining counters with



ZED451

leather fronts. The ensemble lends to a rustic feel, and the chef is right there with the diners. The custom-made stainless steel grill is a center piece to the dining room. Imported from a small Brazilian company, it was custom designed for ZED451. In his effort to mirror the pleasure of the home kitchen and patio grill, Harf counts on the appeal of charcoal and the rotisserie for slow-roasting. The restaurant aims to convey the sense that there's always something good on the grill, even before the dining room is open.

ZED451 partners with M. Tucker in New Jersey to make its design concept happen. "These kinds of things are difficult to shop," Harf noted, referring to how much planning and design goes into choosing the equipment. "You really need to partner with them to make it happen," he said, "and M. Tucker is good to work with."

BRAND LOYALTY TO CONCEPT: BRINGING THE EUROPEAN DESIGN TO THE STATES

A quick look at the blueprint of Vapiano restaurants and one might think it doesn't differ much from the standard fast-casual cafeteria line. But upon taking a deeper look, the master plan becomes clear: Vapiano has turned fast casual into a veritable quality-price ratio goldmine. A European concept, with more than 30 locations worldwide, president and founder Kent Hahne this year is opening the chain's fourth restaurant in the United States. In 2006 Vapiano partnered with equipment contractor Tom Lawson, president of EVI, to open the company's first restaurant.

Lawson's initial recon mission in Germany enlightened him as to the true innovation of the Vapiano concept. Frowning at the initial idea of doing another food-court style restaurant, Lawson was surprised to find that the concept was "stunning; the sight lines were wonderful, classic and tactile," he said. With the old maxim in mind — fast, cheap or good, but never all three — Lawson was sure that the quality of the food had to be suffering at the hands of the low price point and the quick service. But again, he said, he was happy to be mistaken. "In 20 years of business, I haven't been this excited about a concept," Lawson

added. How can Vapiano be fast, cheap, good and esthetically pleasing to boot?

VAPIANO FLOOR PLAN

Instead of a food line that wraps around the dining room, with people following one behind the other, moving through signs reading "Order here" and "Pay here," instead there are as many as 14 mini-cooking stations, at which chefs prepare pastas, pizzas and salads to order. Guests are greeted and given a "chip card," and first-timers are walked through the experience. The chip card allows clients to order food directly from the cooks and to order drinks, dessert and coffee from the bar.

Each cooking station is equipped with cool storage drawers, which are crucial to the "front cooking" concept. Cooks never have to leave their stations to restock. Electrolux pasta cookers are completely automatic and silent, to keep sound to a minimum, and guests interact with cooks who are "cast" as much for their personalities as for their cooking skills. The Cuppone pizza oven is completely electrical, again allowing cooks to spend more time interacting with clients than being concerned about unevenly cooked pizza.

However, "the heart and soul of our system is how the pasta is made fresh every day with the Mercedes of all pasta makers," says Hahne, proud of his Dominioni machine, imported from Italy. Lawson confirmed that even though larger pasta-making machines can produce greater quantities more quickly, Vapiano chose to use a smaller machine for two reasons: one, so the pasta would be made continuously to guarantee its freshness, and two, so clients would be able to watch the pasta being made all day long. For the same reasons, the company chose a smaller pasta mixing machine, despite the availability of much larger industrial equipment.

Adding to the heart that went into the restaurants' esthetics, Lawson notes that Vapiano chose a fully manual

Cimbaldi espresso machine because "in today's world of automation, anyone can work a machine, but not anyone can be a good barista ... they do it for the show, and it's a big commitment on their part."

According to Lawson, there were some translation challenges when it came to UL and NSF certification. It was a hard work to ensure that the same equipment could be used everywhere in order to maintain the brand look. But the company believed that consistency was necessary, since the kitchen is very much open. Lawson enjoys partnering with someone who has so much attention to detail, and says "They are very particular, very stringent about their look. Hahne is protective of Vapiano and talks about the restaurant as he would his child."

When it comes to a complete renovation of tradition, Vapiano and ZED451 demonstrate that patience is fundamental, and a good partnership with one's equipment contractor is indispensable. ◀