

Serving Museum Patrons Something More



Evan Sung for The New York Times

Chef Saul Bolton closed Saul, the restaurant he founded with his wife, Lisa, and reopened it in the Brooklyn Museum, part of a trend among culture centers to raise the quality of the dining they offer to patrons.

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HIS voice barely audible above the screech of power tools, Saul Bolton — chef and founder, with his wife, Lisa, of the Michelin-starred Saul restaurant in a modest storefront in Brooklyn — was not only describing the construction site around him, but also the newest embodiment of his dream.

Mr. Bolton has shuttered Saul and moved it more than a mile away. He explained that his new restaurant now has a kitchen that is three times larger. It has 30 more seats, and a bigger staff. Instead of exposed brick, its sleek, contemporary design showcases cherished Abstract Expressionist murals.

Yes, it's still called Saul. But it's inside what was once the gift shop of the [Brooklyn Museum](#).

If the term “museum restaurant” once summoned up institutional dinnerware, dank steam tables, cafeteria trays and dishwasher odors, Mr. Bolton’s aspirations are immeasurably higher. “You don’t take a Michelin star with you, but we are going to do everything we can to maintain it here,” he said of the new restaurant, which, after construction finally ended, opened Oct. 18.

During the last decade, museums and other culture centers have increasingly paired their fine art with ever-finer dining. Now they and their food-service providers — driven not only by discerning, demanding visitors and elevated competition from other museums but also by the need for revenue — are reaching for culinary innovation by seeking out high-end restaurateurs and imaginative chefs like Mr. Bolton to bring the quality of their cuisine in line with the quality of their artworks.

“Museums are like sports stadiums, hotels and hospitals: they are in the category of captive-audience dining,” said [Danny Meyer](#), the global restaurateur who opened the Modern at the Museum of Modern Art in 2004. “The old idea was that ‘we need to have food here because people need to eat something — so we can actually get away with the lowest common denominator, and charge whatever we want.’ ”

But increasingly, “this whole concept of captive-audience dining is ready to die,” Mr. Meyer added. “People who have come to appreciate well-sourced and well-cooked food refuse to pay too much for food that they wouldn’t want to pay anything for.”

Glenn D. Lowry, director of [MoMA](#), said he brought in Mr. Meyer because “we didn’t think that the usual suspects would do,” adding that the force driving enhanced dining in the nation’s museums was “that there is an increasingly sophisticated food culture everywhere, and people who go to museums are certainly part of that culture.”

If associating with a fine restaurant “can give a museum a sense of cachet,” he said, a more fundamental motivation is that “the experience of the art and the food cannot be discordant — it should be seamless and energizing.”

The establishment of the Modern at MoMA was “a landmark beginning, when the museum went not to a food contractor, but to a restaurateur,” said Malcolm M. Knapp, a Manhattan-based restaurant consultant.

And, following the success of the Modern, Mr. Meyer was sufficiently energized to open a restaurant at the Whitney Museum of American Art called Untitled. He is planning a restaurant, as yet unnamed, in the museum's new building near the High Line.

The advent of Saul at the Brooklyn Museum is unusual, though, since it signals the closing of a much-praised restaurant and its reopening in an arts institution. "We moved it lock, stock and barrel to the museum, with my entire kitchen crew," said Mr. Bolton, 47.

Dick Cattani — the chief executive who oversees Restaurant Associates, the museum's food operator since 2005, which sought out Mr. Bolton — said that "Saul is a new model, something we haven't done before," adding that "it may have application in other museums."

Restaurant Associates, based in Manhattan, is the in-house caterer for the Metropolitan Museum and 27 other museums as well as 100 blue-chip corporate dining rooms, but it is increasingly working with partners that include Marcus Samuelsson, at the American Table Cafe and Bar at Alice Tully Hall; the chef Kenneth Oringer, at the New American Café in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; and José Andrés and Michel Richard, at the Garden Café in the National Gallery of Art.

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