

Check, Please!

*M*useums and Destination Dining

By Susan Breitkopf

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In the three years since the Museum of Modern Art reopened, Adam Freed has never stepped foot in the galleries that hold groundbreaking works. He has never seen the 110-foot-tall, light-filled atrium where rotating works hang as perfect foils for architect Yoshio Taniguchi's simple geometric forms. He has never strolled through MoMA's Abby Aldrich Rockefeller sculpture garden.

But Freed, who lives 5 miles from the museum, has twice dined at MoMA's award-winning restaurant, the Modern, and sampled such offerings as the chorizo-crustad Chatham cod with white coco bean puree and harissa oil and the Long Island duck breast with black trumpet marmalade. "The [restaurant] space is quite unique, but it could be in any type of building," says Freed, 31. "I would love to have walked through the galleries, but the reservation was for 9 or 10 at night [when the museum is closed]."

Americans may love museums, but they love to dine out even more. Today, more than half of the average American household food budget is spent on meals outside the home, compared with 25 percent in 1955, the National Restaurant Association reports. As museums have become increasingly adept at marketing, you would hardly expect the dining trend to escape their notice, especially in the age of reality T.V. shows such as *Iron Chef*, *Hell's Kitchen* and *Top Chef*. And it hasn't. Alongside the starchitect of recent years now stands the celebrity chef, whom museums are increasingly recruiting to create a top-notch dining experience that will increase the institution's prestige and audience. "It's not an accommodation," says Ray Coen, a foodservice consultant who works with museums. "It's part of the institution's image." The destination museum should have a destination restaurant.

According to AAM's 2006 Museum Financial Information, 22 percent of museums have some sort of foodservice in-house. In art museums, having a restaurant is much more likely—54 percent have full-service restaurants, according to a master's thesis survey by Crissa Van Vleck Williams at John F. Kennedy University.

"What I hear from museum directors is they want their restaurants to become . . . an attraction, a draw," says Arthur Manask, president and CEO of Arthur M. Manask and Associates, which consults on foodservice in cultural institutions. "The reality is that if a percentage of customers are coming because of the restaurant, some percentage are coming to museums that wouldn't otherwise come and be exposed to your collection."

Operating almost entirely independently, the destination restaurant can bolster a museum's image. "These are not dependent upon museum visitors," says Manask. "The way they are set up, they're really becoming detached from the institution, the mission. If you cut them away from the museum and put them across the street, they're restaurants."

Foodservice in museums is nothing new. By the early 20th century, the presence of museum tearooms at such institutions as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Detroit Institute of Arts was expected, according to Williams. By mid-century the fashion was to have lunch spots or cafeterias, such as the one at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., which opened in 1941.

Beginning in the 1970s, museums looked at restaurants as more than a rest stop for weary visitors. "Many directors regard their restaurant facilities solely as a service for visitors and staff, and . . . some may even consider it a necessary evil," Carol A. King wrote in the June 1975 issue of *Museum News*. "A well-merchandized, well-operated food service can be a profitable venture and a continuing source of funds for operations."

Profitable, maybe, but not necessarily gourmet. "Museum visitors historically are going in with an expectation that the food is not going to be great," says Manask. "Museums are trying to turn that perception around."

Star chefs, designers and architects are helping in this transformation. "It used to be taboo," says Mike Devine, president and chief operating officer of the Malrite Company, which owns Washington, D.C.'s International Spy Museum and its Zola restaurant. Early pioneers include Sette MoMA in the mid-1990s, Joy America Café at the American Visionary Art Museum in 1995 and Palettes at the Denver Art Museum in 1997. Zola, which opened in 2002, also charted new territory by seeking neighborhood restaurant status. "It's a restaurant that could be any place," says Dan Mesches, president of Star Restaurant Group, which operates Zola.

Zola, for one, meets the current high-end restaurant menu trends. A recent trip there was not a disappointment. The menu included such trendy items as asparagus, ham and brie "sliders" battered in egg like a croque monsieur and lobster macaroni and cheese further upscaled with fontina and asparagus. The grilled flatbread with prosciutto and fresh figs is made luscious with foie gras butter and mascarpone cheese. The food is not what you would expect from most museums. Neither are the prices: That mac and cheese runs \$21 for a lunchtime entrée.

This is the mantra of the destination restaurant: Don't just make it adequate; make it exceptional.

"We think the cafes should stand on their own and be another reason people should come to the museum," says David Swinghamer, who co-owns Union Square Hospitality Group, which operates the Modern as well as several other top-rated New York restaurants.



"We can make it so good that others will want to come if they don't have time to go to the galleries."

Whereas the Modern opened with splash and sizzle from the start, when Café Sebastienne opened in Kansas City's Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in 1994, founders envisioned it as a place to grab a snack. As it became more popular, the offerings grew and in the last few years it has developed into a true destination for locals, who dine on tempura-watermelon salads with baby spinach, candied pecans and a balsamic vinegar reduction. "It's an important amenity, but it really serves to draw people in who might not have a reason to come here," says Kemper Director Rachael Blackburn Cozad.

Until 2001, Café Sebastienne was under a management company, which was not an efficient or profitable way to do business, according to Cozad. Since then, the museum has owned and operated the restaurant, hiring local talent Jennifer Maloney to run the kitchen and giving managers a financial incentive. "It's been doing a whole lot better the last few years," says Cozad.

With the much larger Nelson Atkins Museum of Art nearby, the Kemper wanted to set itself apart with great food, convenient parking and a "fun, easy and welcoming" environment, according to Cozad. "There aren't many places like this in town."

Despite the cafe's amenities, Chef Maloney says that working in a museum has been an adjustment. Whereas the hours are much shorter, she says she has had to get used to working around the museum's agenda. "It took a while to get on the same page as each other," she says. Part of reaching an understanding was trusting in the restaurant staff's expertise. "Why it works so well is because our team at the cafe are all high-end restaurant people," says Maloney. The rest of the museum staff "wouldn't know how to run it. We have total creative freedom and full support."

However, similar situations don't always work out. A respondent to Williams's survey cautioned other museums about managing their own restaurants: "[We] tried to open a restaurant initially with staff we hired, purchasing our own food and preparing it in an ill-equipped kitchen. Bad choice! Museums considering entering the restaurant business should be advised to think it through thoroughly and proceed cautiously—food and beverage is a tough industry."

James Gara knows that all too well. "We've tried every version of restaurants. We're probably the pioneer of restaurants," says Gara, MoMA's chief operating officer. "We've run restaurants ourselves. We had people with shopping carts at Fairway [supermarket] when suppliers didn't come through. After years of buying poultry and escarole, we went with a management company."

MoMA is not alone. The 2003 Museum Financial Information, the most recent information available, reports that 68 percent of museums contract out foodservice.

The relationship between MoMA and the Modern is ruled by a license agreement, where the museum gets a base fee and then a percentage above a threshold. Despite the hefty funds the restaurant provides, Gara says, "We don't look at it as a revenue source. We look at it as an amenity to our members and visitors. When you look at a restaurant, [you have to ask] is it to make a lot of money or is it an amenity? I'm always looking for new sources of revenue, but our primary concern is experience."

Café Sebastienne also provides a revenue stream for the Kemper, particularly through the special events it caters. "The money goes back into the mission of the museum," Cozad explains. And the restaurant furthers the museum's educational mission by displaying 115 paintings from the collection, offering music and dance performances and hosting cooking classes.

Despite the peace, love and harmony, the Kemper's focus is clear. "The museum always comes first. The collection, the exhibitions and the programs are central," says Cozad. "[The restaurant] is an amenity. It's under the umbrella of the museum. It's not operating in its own realm."

Mike Devine of Malrite says that while Zola extends the museum experience for visitors, perhaps most importantly the restaurant ensured that the Spy Museum wouldn't be solely a tourist destination. "It provided us with a different way to attract a different audience," says Devine. "In D.C. we expected the museum to draw tourists. We also knew that without local support, we wouldn't be able to thrive the way we wanted to."

Also to Zola's advantage is its prime downtown location, a neighborhood that has become increasingly vibrant since the restaurant opened in 2002. Capitalizing on that momentum is what Malrite had in mind. "We thought the revenue stream would be opportunistic," says Devine.

The Modern's David Swinghamer understands the power of place. He calls the Modern "a restaurant that has one of the world's best locations," which is closer to fact than hyperbole: It made Restaurants and Institutions magazine's top 100 independent restaurants in 2007. The Modern sits at No. 91 with \$11 million in food and beverage sales and 300,000 meals served in 2006. Others on the list include New York's Tavern on the Green and Joe's Stone Crab in Miami.

Whereas the Modern's location has been an asset, Palettes' has proved challenging. Kevin Taylor, who owns five other restaurants and two catering businesses, says that before the Denver Art Museum's Frederic C. Hamilton Building opened last year, Palettes would be relatively dormant between temporary exhibitions. "It would take months to rebuild an exhibition," he says.

And even after the opening, the flow of patrons has not been as steady as expected. "The Denver Art Museum expected the Bilbao effect," says Taylor. "In the first year they expected the architecture to carry the museum and that there would be a tremendous amount of traffic." Taylor adds that traffic was also hampered by a winter with back-to-back snowstorms. The cumulative effect is that the restaurant is 15 percent below projections for the year following the new building's opening. He says he expects Palettes to fill in October when a series of exhibitions opens.

Palettes' particular challenges are a lack of evening foot traffic and that the neighborhood is not a destination, Taylor says, even for potato-crust diver scallops with a caper-raisin reduction or salmon with bacon mashed potatoes and a béarnaise sauce. "We're surrounded by Civic Center Park with lots of homeless people and parking lots."

Despite the issues with traffic, Taylor does not regret his nine-year partnership with the museum. If nothing else, Palettes has served to build his brand and drive visitors to his other restaurants. "That donor, that customer, that board member has been in the community for a very long time," he says. "They eat in all our restaurants."

Strengthening local ties through its chef is something DAM felt strongly about. The museum was courted by big national foodservice companies but decided to stay with Taylor. Manask says he sees the same thinking with many of his clients. "The thought is that maybe there's more cachet to a local celebrity than a national chef," says Manask.

Sodexo, which runs foodservice for 25 museums and cultural institutions nationwide and has been doing so for more than 20 years, has been partnering with celebrity chefs and remaining competitive with Wolfgang Puck, which operates 10 museum restaurants. The Cincinnati Museum Center, with the help of Sodexo, has partnered with local celebrity chef Jean-Robert de Cavel, known in Cincinnati for turning Pigall's back into a gastronomic jewel. "The client needed a partner that could not only provide high quality foodservice for their retail operations, but one who could also support their initiative to grow special events and become 'the' destination spot and caterer of choice for the greater Cincinnati area," according to an internal Sodexo memorandum.

It can come down to keeping up with the Joneses or even staying in the race. For instance, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, recently opened a new \$37 million building, complete with a Wolfgang Puck eatery with salads, homemade soups, grilled panini and desserts created by Puck's pastry chef from Spago, Sherry Yard. The goal is to attract more visitors in a city where most museums are dwarfed by the Museum of Fine Arts. "There is a tremendous amount of peer pressure," says Manask. "What I continually hear is concern with what their peers and counterparts are doing. They all want a brand that is synonymous with who they are—where they can make a statement and be the hot ticket in town."

Despite the success that some museums have had, Manask does not see a bright future for the destination restaurant. "They're really the anomaly," says Manask. "I think you'll see more branding where museums reach out to local regional and national restaurant operators to bring cachet, brand, recognition and earned income to their institution."

Manask says museums need the right combination of factors to have a successful destination restaurant. "You need the traffic, visibility and access. How many can do that? Not that many."

Coen agrees, but adds that it also comes down to available audience. "The higher you go, the wider appeal you need," he says. "If your average check is \$8, everybody in the neighborhood is going to come to you. If you're at \$100, you're a destination attraction, but you have to attract from miles around."

With the success and proliferation of these restaurants, museums might be tacitly accepting that all functions need not be mission-driven. Which brings us back to Adam Freed, who would rather go to the Modern than MoMA. When asked about this scenario, MoMA's James Gara says patrons like Freed represent the minority. Even if all Modern-goers never stepped foot in a gallery, Gara says it's still a trip to the museum. "Even if you're going for a dining experience, you're still looking at the [sculpture] garden." In the end both the restaurant-goer and the museum staff get what they want: a great experience within the institution's walls.