

Part I: The rise of the design-led restaurants and cafes in Kuala Lumpur

By Muna Noor
Jan 21, 2023



COVER Cilantro

The first of a three-part series that explores the rise of the design-led restaurants and cafes, and the way we used to eat and drink

In this era obsessed with image and Instagram, the notion of a modern-day drinking or dining establishment that doesn't prize its appearance is as unlikely as [Kim Kardashian](#) retreating from the spotlight. Yet for all the visual content we are bombarded with, designing a restaurant, bar or cafe in the sense that we now understand—with the expertise and creative energies of the architect, interior designer and artisan coming together – this is a recent development and was for a long time limited to those with the capital.

International hospitality brands like [Hilton](#) and [Holiday Inn](#), which made their Malaysian

(now Concorde Hotel) that predate them, had the real estate to play with, and the budgets and connections to match. When Malaysia's elite and aspirational classes weren't circulating and cutting deals at private clubs, luxurious spaces designed to encourage patrons to stay and play like The Paddock Supper Club, Tin Mine and the revolving Bintang Restaurant became their playgrounds.

Don't miss: [Home Tour: A colourful home in Johor full of whimsical touches](#)

Restoran Ikonik A&W di Petaling Jaya



This was unlike the imported US fast food chains that followed when KFC, A&W and McDonald's arrived in Malaysia in the '70s and '80s. Utilising psychology and design tricks adapted from the lunch houses of industrialised US, they gamed the customer experience. Colours like red and yellow were used to increase appetite, uncomfortable moulded and bolted plastic furniture increased customer turnover, and repeatable design typography created instant recognisability and engendered a reassuring familiarity regardless of geographical location. They didn't want you to stay, but they did want you to return.

For Kian Liew, head of global interior design for a Singapore hospitality group, the synergy between cuisine and interior design has always been fundamental to the experience. "A meal is an experience, not just gastronomical but also spatial," he explains. "The unassuming kopitiam setting is as important to one's enjoyment of char kway teow as the amount of *wok hei*."

Don't miss: [6 architecture trends that will change the way we live in 2023](#)



View this post on Instagram

It was the economic boom of the '80s and the excesses that followed that saw fine dining establishments in global capitals recast themselves in the role of the test kitchen and level up with design-led venues and inventive culinary concepts. [Lai Siew Hong](#), founder and chief executive designer of Blu Water Studio (who designed the luxe [The Edison George Town](#), transformed EQ KL, and playfully chic CitizenM KL) remembers celebrity chefs such as Wolfgang Puck and Alain Ducasse among the instigators of this inventive movement.

“Their innovative dining concepts, which reflected international influences and modern interior design, created a unique dining experience for diners,” he recalls. Dining out had become theatre. Instead of tickets, diners had a waitlist for tables that could take as long as six months.

Don't miss: [3 New Hotels in Kuala Lumpur With a Strong Design Character](#)



View this post on Instagram

Malaysia's formal aesthetic awakening gathered pace in the '90s as international names like the US' Adam Tihany, Japan's Superpotato and Australia's Poole Associates poured their creative juices into early incarnations of hotel-based dining establishments like Shangri-La Kuala Lumpur's Lafite, Lemon Garden and Zipangu; [Starhill's Shook!](#); and the Ascott's Sevenatenine.

Access to the internet and immediate, unlimited content from around the world had primed an audience of increasingly wealthy and well-travelled Malaysians hungry for culinary drama.

[Don't miss: Explore a small art gallery with big ideas in Kuala Lumpur](#)



ABOVE Cilantro

Befitting that period, the overarching themes gracing the capital's culinary scene mirrored in mood and style the sleek, shimmering form of the newly completed Petronas Twin Towers. Its steely, masculine ambition was evident in the elegant white tablecloth and marble opulence of Cilantro at MiCasa, the austere wall-to-wall booths and futurist optic fibre lighting of Third Floor at J.W. Marriott, and the inspired alchemy of contemporary and classic at Frangipani in Changkat Bukit Bintang.

Located in a restored art deco building, Eddie Chew and Chris Bauer's contemporary French restaurant was unlike anything we had seen before. Featuring perforated steel panels and mesmerising ebony water in a central courtyard, the now-closed restaurant remains as compelling in memory as Bauer's unsurpassed warm tea smoked salmon.

NOW READ

[Home tour: A house with ceramic walls and handmade details that celebrate Ukrainian design](#)

HOMES | ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

Part 2: The rise of design-led restaurants and cafes in Kuala Lumpur

By Muna Noor

Jan 22, 2023

**COVER** Three Years Old

The second part of the series explores the obsession with Scandinavian interiors and delves into those who fly the flag for maximalism

Fast forward to present-day Klang Valley: No phrase sums up the surfeit of aesthetically pleasing culinary eye candy than “the camera eats first”. Where once urban gourmands worth their Himalayan salt would drive (or fly) for their fix of nasi ganja or chicken rice, today the Instagramable restaurant or café is the motivation for Gen Y and Z to roll out of bed, grab their ring light, and get their food and filter on.

Social media, Instagram in particular, has galvanised the design-led F&B upturn. Unless yours is an old-school establishment that has

Don't miss: 4 Beautifully Designed Restaurants and Cafes in Kuala Lumpur



ABOVE VCR Ritchie (Photo: David Yeow)

A winning [interior design](#) style, fresh colour palette, inventive dish or fashionable ingredient can be seen around the world in an instant and reproduced within weeks thanks to social media's virality. It's how ideas spread and trends take hold, rippling out from their point of origin like waves until the next wave comes along.

From the confines of our dining tables and bar stools we've had a front-row view of it all: The curated bric-a-brac and distressed reclaimed wood furniture of rustic shabby chic (Palette Palate); the polished concrete, galvanised steel and exposed inner workings of industrial style (Bean Brothers, ACME Bar x Coffee); and the rich timber, sharp lines and man-made materials of [mid-century modern](#) (Claret at Troika Sky Dining, VCR Ritchie), to name but a few.

Don't miss: [This Peranakan-Influenced Restaurant in Kuala Lumpur Is a Feast for the Senses](#)

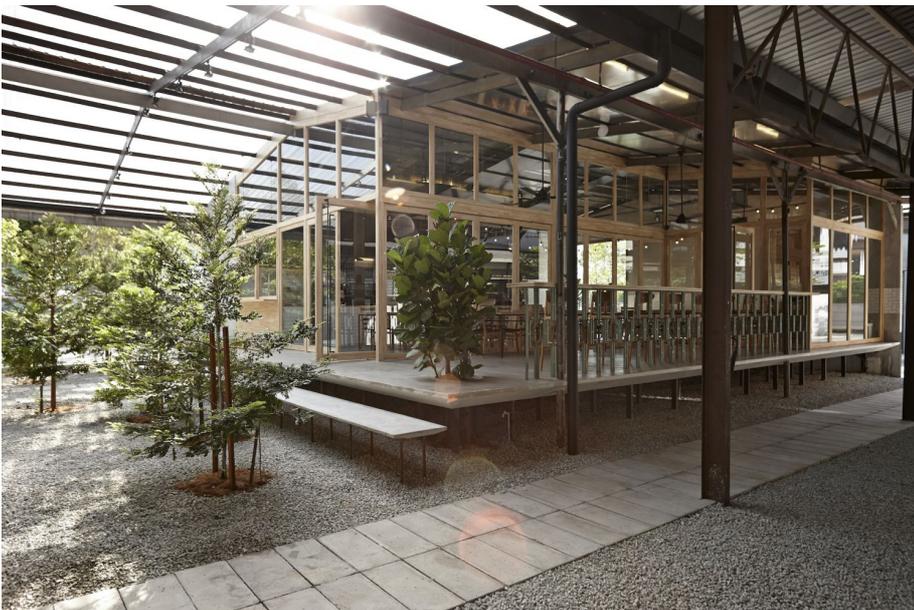


View this post on Instagram

No single design ethos has been as pervasive, particularly in Malaysian café culture as Japandi. A fusion of Japanese sensibility and pared-down [Scandinavian hygge](#), its use of pale woods, low-profile furnishings, and muted natural hues can be found in the remote recesses of central Perak (Lenggong's Pio Kopi) to the bustle of downtown Johor Bahru (Sunday Morning).

Banking on a trending aesthetic such as this potentially proffers a greater chance of earning the in-demand currency of social media: Attention. In only a matter of years, TikTok and Instagram have become indispensable tools for brand building. For F&B newcomers that lack pedigree, it can get patrons through the door. But beware of fame's downside. Unreasonably long queues to enter and the disruptive presence of oblivious photo opportunists can result in a dissatisfying experience for the more serious diner.

Don't miss: [5 Minimalist Furniture Brands to Know](#)



along Jalan Sin Chew Kee is unfazed and is all for the democratisation of information. “Now every small business has the chance to share their business and product with the world”, she says. Execution may be limited by budget and other practical constraints, but when small businesses have an equal chance of creating something unique as a big business does, everyone has the potential to win.

Then there is the matter of copying and pasting. In the rush to strike while the iron is hot a design aesthetic can be thoughtlessly rendered and repeated ad nauseum with little consideration of context. When this happens, even the brightest idea can devolve into a soulless pastiche of itself.

Don't miss: [9 Must-Visit Lifestyle Stores in Kuala Lumpur](#)



ABOVE Chocha Food Store

[Shin Chang](#), one-half of design collective Mentah Matter, cautions against any design-by-numbers approach to design. “A place can become a stereotype of what a café or restaurant should look like, which is boring,” he opines.

The mindless pursuit of photo geniality overlooks the critical role of the architect and designer, which he asserts is problem-solving. “It’s what we’re trained to do.”

Mentah Matter’s projects are peppered throughout downtown KL and include [RexKL](#), Chocha, Joloko, and Licky Chan. All are highly Instagramable, and none can be accused of being boring. Instead, surprises await at every turn: hidden levels, glass gangplanks, passageways that invite discovery, and unconventional shapes that encourage play.

“These are experiential spaces,” Chang points out, “It’s not about Insta-worthy corners.” Any Influencers and opinion leaders you spot posing for pictures are purely coincidental.

Don't miss: [Meet The Malaysian Architects Rebooting Heritage Buildings](#)



ABOVE The Swimming Club at the KL Journal Hotel

What social media can be credited with is giving wider society and the design community a platform for greater discourse. “Social media is merely bringing the conversation to the fore,” interior designer Kian Liew assures. “Interior design is fundamental to the user experience of any space, including cafes and restaurants. An increased awareness of this has resulted in more emphasis on good design, which is definitely a good thing.”

[Lai Siew Hong](#), co-founder of Blu Water Studio, concurs: “Social media has helped to elevate the F&B scene in a very progressive and positive direction.”

Adulation usually reserved for chefs, kitchens, and culinary empires is now deservedly heaped on the design collectives serving up good looks. Mentioning all of them here would be foolish, but it would be remiss not to highlight a few like Wunderwall – Jibby on the Park, [Small Shifting Space](#), and the most recent VCRs (whose queues to get a table are self-explanatory). Worth mentioning too are recent outputs of Studio Kanta’s Suek Mei Chai and Adrien Kent, which recall the cinematic universe of Wes Anderson, and [POW Ideas](#), run by Kyle E and Jun Ong, whose design raison d’etre is creating spaces with a “pow” as seen in OG Petaling Street cafes like Merchant’s Lane and Wildflowers, a slew of outlets at APW, and The Swimming Club in KL Journal Hotel.

Don't miss: [Ask a Designer: How to Curate a Timeless Living Room](#)



View this post on Instagram

And things are just heating up. [Michelin stars](#) and Top 50 Restaurant and Bar lists, once the preserve of European and American dining destinations, are steadily being infiltrated by Asia's finest. Southeast Asia is overdue for its time in the spotlight.

Locally, source material is abundant and Malaysia's rich multicultural heritage provides a worthy muse. Its mid-century tropical design vocabulary and Straits-style influence have provided the inspiration for casual dining stalwarts Alexis and Chinoz at KLCC, as well as the recherché Isabel, a sadly short-lived endeavour that paired fine Asian and Indo-Chinese fare with Malaya plantation chic.

[Don't miss: Home Tour: How This Hong Kong Colonial Home Was Transformed into an Urban Sanctuary](#)

VIEW THIS POST ON Instagram

Restaurants like hidden gem Adu Sugar and Chef Wan's growing D'Wan empire take a less restrained approach and recall the love affair with all crafts Asian that early pioneer Bon Ton had (even before it became a boutique hotel). Imbued with Chef Amran Hassan personal touch, Adu Sugar's authentic Malay offerings and intimate setting filled with Asian curios and art convey the feel of a dinner party at the residence of a bon vivant rather than dining in an upper-level Bangsar shop lot.

The grand salon theme reappears at Acme Group's OpenHouse where [Brian Quirk and Andrew Wong's](#) tryst with gilded Asian opulence and upscale Malay cuisine and rare, revived recipes is rendered with maximalist defiance.

Don't miss: [Ask a designer: 6 ways to curate a dramatic dining room](#)



When not toiling over design plans, Liew himself is presiding over *bōl*, the restaurant that's turning heads and changing minds about Peranakan cuisine. He describes the the interior design thus: "A physical manifestation of the cultures and flavours encapsulated by *bōl*'s dishes."

The "punchy and potent" taste profiles of heirloom recipes like *Itek Tim* and ingredients like *buah keluak* turn up in unanticipated new forms on the plate and are reflected in the décor with bright hues and botanical-themed wallpaper.

For gourmands, this risqué distillation of cultural identities and handed-down practises into fully realised dining concepts is novel ground to furrow. For those connected to Southeast Asia by geography or family, it carries a relatable honesty or as Liew puts it, "a sense of home that is inextricably linked with the cultural identity of Southeast Asians."

As mixologists, culinarians, and designers become emboldened on the back of other well-received projects and palates become ever-sophisticated, more of this lies in our future.

NOW READ

[Home tour: Step inside an oceanfront Hong Kong apartment, inspired by art and nature](#)

[Inside 7 of the most beautiful Starbucks stores in Asia](#)

[Home Tour: A modern net zero energy home in Kuala Lumpur](#)

Topics

[designinspo](#)

[social media](#)

[f&b design](#)

[instafamous](#)

[malaysian restaurant](#)

[malaysian cafe](#)

HOMES | ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

Part 3: The rise of the design-led restaurants and cafes in Kuala Lumpur

By Muna Noor
Jan 24, 2023



HOMES | ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

Part 3: The rise of the design-led restaurants and cafes in Kuala Lumpur

By Muna Noor
Jan 24, 2023



COVER Sabayon @ EQ

In the final instalment, we discuss where F&B design is going and how it ought to evolve

Problems for the age, like sustainability, plastic waste and climate catastrophe, will, of course, inform all human endeavours. If anything, the invasion of Ukraine and the Covid-19 scourge is a vivid reminder that even a neighbourhood matcha café in Puchong is subject to knock-on effects of international politics and global events.

Forward-thinking developments like Tamarind Square in Cyberjaya, Desa Park City, and [The Stories of Taman Tunku](#) have incorporated the biophilic design into their plans to reduce soaring temperatures and created an inviting space in which to live, work and play.

Our Newsletter

Sign up so you don't miss out on exceptional stories from across Asia

By signing up, you agree to our [terms](#) and [privacy policy](#)

SIGN UP NOW

areas into the caffeinated outposts like Kenny Hill Bakers in TTDI and [VCR Bakehouse](#) in Hartamas has been embraced by typically sun-adverse Malaysians.

Don't miss: [3 Most Expensive Neighbourhoods in Kuala Lumpur](#)



View this post on Instagram

Acme Group's mostly alfresco [Dusun by Open House](#) sets the benchmark, interesting for its emphasis on locally sourced produce and the use of sustainable, natural materials. Foliage is front and centre in its design and business philosophy. Woven bamboo cladding and rattan furnishings feature in the ID and a full-sized tree at the heart of its premises; at the same time, it sets its intention, offsetting its use of local firewood to create the smoky char in its grilled dishes by supporting Malaysian Nature Society's mangrove tree planting efforts.

For a city notorious for its unsentimental approach to development and sometimes heartless propensity for replacing old with new, the uptick in the adaptive reuse of old and often disused buildings is an especially gratifying turn of events for historophiles, aesthetes, and environmentalists.

Don't miss: [6 architecture trends that will change the way we live in 2023](#)



ABOVE Shhhbuuleee @ REXKL

The imaginative reboot of [Rex Cinema](#) and reinvention of enclaves such as [Jalan Doraisamy](#) and [Sentul's former train depot](#) are climate-friendly and capable of reinvigorating the community and fueling urban regeneration in otherwise overlooked locales.

As an appreciation for conservation grows, and old and new generations come together at the dining table, this is one development we're thrilled to see recreated locally and in towns across the country. Mentah Matter, for one, is already looking forward to bigger challenges at a much larger scale with projects that could include a boutique hotel. If its past work is an indication, expect the unexpected.

Don't miss: [Inside 7 of the most beautiful Starbucks stores in Asia](#)



View this post on
Instagram

Lai Siew Hong foresees more rooftop dining for the city. “The ambience, views and dining offer a total sensory experience,” he trills. Blu Water’s own ethereal melding of the heavens with [EQ Hotel’s Sky 51](#) collection of lofty dining and entertainment spaces is a dazzling showcase of that: Floor-to-ceiling windows, wrap-around reflective surfaces and the magic of illumination are used to spectacular effect.

For Kian Liew, the increasing appetite for authentic, extraordinary experiences is demonstrable in the pivot towards bespoke, unique spaces. The future is hard to predict but with “balance and nuance”, as he puts it, it is one in which our eyes will continue to feast as furiously as our stomachs.

NOW READ

[Home Tour: A modern net zero energy home in Kuala Lumpur](#)

[5 new and beautiful Singapore hotels opening soon in 2023](#)

[Ask a designer: 6 ways to curate a dramatic dining room](#)

Topics

F&B design

malaysian restaurants

malaysian cafes

cafe hopping

instagrammable cafes

instafamous

designinspo

HOMES | ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

Interior trends 2023: The best colours, fabrics and styles for your next home renovation

By Michele Koh Morollo
Jan 23, 2023

