

Cuisine scheme

Restaurant designers have more than food on their minds

By Ronni Ross

Daily News staff writer

When designer Ron Meyers is creating a look for a restaurant, he locks himself in his studio for a month or two and lets his imagination run wild.

"I pull things from within," said Meyers, owner of Ron Meyers Design Inc. "I don't look around me to see what's fashionable. I look inward."

He and other local designers agree that designing a restaurant is somewhat like producing a movie: The project begins as an idea, is finalized on paper, a crew is hired to execute the plan and construction can take months, even years, to complete.

"Somehow, it all has to be orchestrated," said architectural interior designer Barbara Lazaroff. "To put all the images together, you have to put in a lot of forethought. You have to be decisive — you can't start ripping out walls later," said Lazaroff, who has designed a variety of restaurants including Spago in West Hollywood and Tokyo, Chinois on Main in Santa Monica, Shane in Bel Air and Granita in Malibu.

Restaurant designers say they consider such things as the type of food a restaurant will serve and its cost, hours of operation, the neighborhood and the needs of the chef, staff and customers. If the restaurant is being designed for a client, the client's budget must also be considered.

Meyers begins the process by determining the restaurant's physical space and the client's wishes.

He then writes himself a "script" with a scenario. "It's kind of like method acting. I spend a lot of time working on the scenario. It gives me an emotional feel for a restaurant," said Meyers, who designed Tryst and Atlas Bar and Grill in Los Angeles and Club Lux in Santa Monica.

When designing Atlas, which is connected to the

Wilern Theatre, the owner provided Meyers with the name and then let him interpret its meaning. Meyers decided to base the design on Greek mythology and carried out the theme with ceiling-high, wrought-iron sculptures.

Club Lux was fashioned to look like a futuristic men's club on Mars, while Tryst was designed similar to an old-fashioned boudoir, he said.

"I was feeling very romantic when I started (Tryst). I wanted to create a place to fall in love. It's sensual without being erotic," he said.

Creating such emotion is the goal of many restaurant owners and designers. The client who hired City Spaces in Pasadena to design now-under-construction Equator Coffeehouse wants customers to have "the coffee experience," according to Christie Skinner, president of the firm.

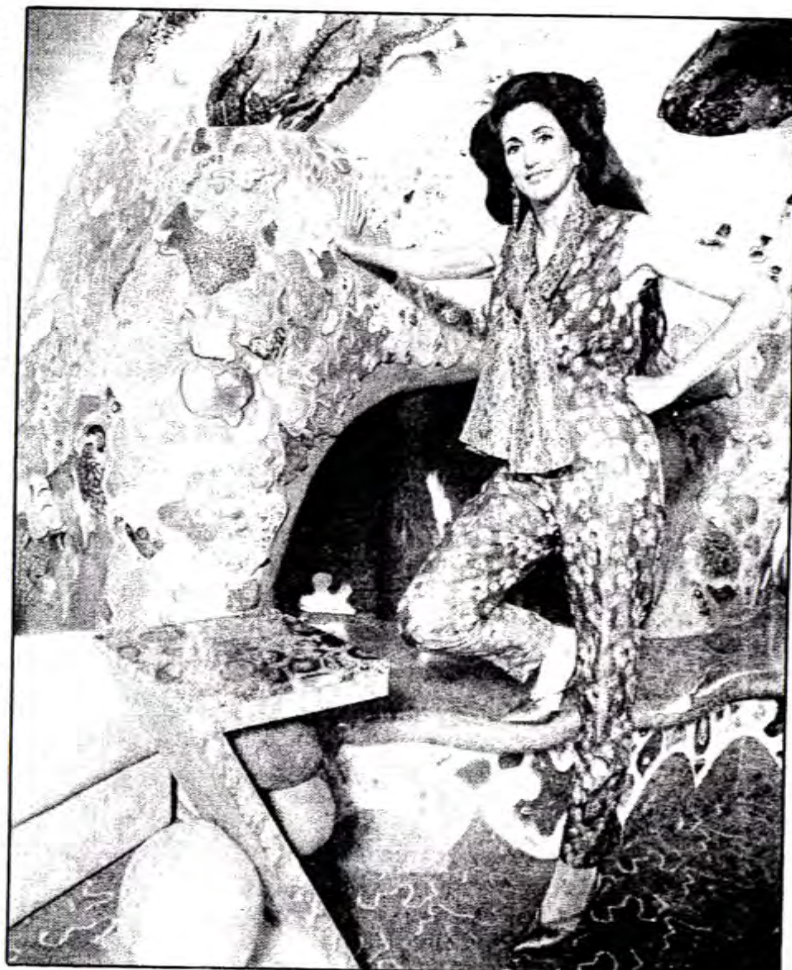
The Pasadena restaurant will be a cross between an old-time coffee shop and a contemporary espresso bar, according to Skinner. One of the primary features will be a large mural with several panels depicting different cultures and how they enjoy coffee.

"The whole focus is around coffee and natural products," said Skinner.

Johnny Rockets owner and creator Ronn Teitelbaum designed his chain of eateries to recapture the feeling he had when he went to the corner malt shop as a child, he said.

"When I was a kid, we'd go to Newberry's or Woolworth. I wanted to stay very true to that feeling, to re-create a typical '40s malt shop."

After about 18 months of planning, Teitelbaum opened the first Johnny Rockets in June 1986 on Melrose Avenue. There are now 35 locations, with restaurants in Tokyo, London, Australia and Mexico, as well as throughout the United States. All look



Barbara Lazaroff said she designed Granita in Malibu with an eye to creating a "three-dimensional metaphor for the sea."

Phil McCarten/Daily News



David Crane/Daily News

Ronn Teitelbaum, creator and owner of Johnny Rockets restaurants, designed his eatery to look like an old-fashioned malt shop.

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the same, he said.

"The all-American theme works better in other countries than here. People love anything American, especially retro-America," he said.

To come up with a color scheme, Teitelbaum said he purchased a set of felt pens and spent a weekend trying out different color combinations. He wound up using the first combination he tried — yellow, blue and red, or, as he puts it, "Superman colors."

"Most designers lay out a color

chart. I'm not that sophisticated. I just used what I liked. You never know what it will look like until it's finished, but that's part of the excitement," he said.

Lazaroff said she strives to create an environment that is functional and comfortable, yet whimsical and fun.

"Food and people are the most important elements for the space," she said. "The space should never be more important than the people. The space should not diminish the people; it should empower them, make them feel happy, beautiful, enlivened."

Meyers also works to make customers feel good in his restaurants. "I like people to come to my spaces and feel special. I love sit-

ting in a corner and watching people reacting to a room and enjoying it. That's my great reward."

Lazaroff said she is known to be "a little avant garde" and likes drama and flamboyance, but she also believes that the food and environmental concept of a restaurant must be congruous. "You're not building a monument to yourself," she said.

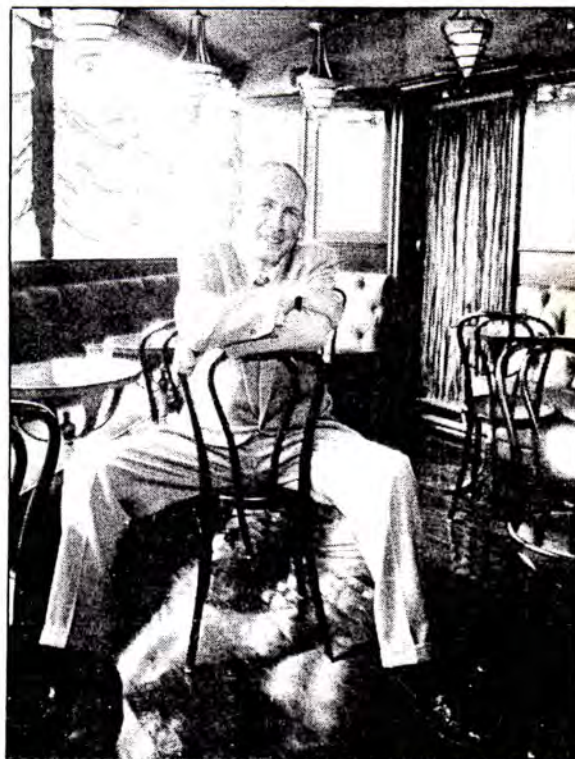
When designing Granita, which took four years to complete and has been open for about a year, Lazaroff said she wanted to create a "three-dimensional metaphor for the sea."

"It's about the quality of light and sense of movement of the water. It's my comment on man and nature colliding," she said.



Tina Gerson/Daily News

Christie Skinner's firm, City Spaces in Pasadena, is



Tina Gerson/Daily News

Two restaurant designs by M. M.