



ORIENT EXPRESS

JUST AS POH REINTERPRETS ASIAN FINE DINING, SO DOES ITS INTERIOR DESIGN BY SUMESSH MENON ASSOCIATES

BY MARIA LOUIS

Standing cheek-by-jowl with the trendiest restobars in the sprawling food hub of Kamala Mills Compound in Lower Parel, Mumbai, POH (Progressive Oriental House) is distinguished by its modern Asian cuisine as well as its interior design. This pet project of restaurateur Avik Chatterjee, is a beautifully rendered oriental delight in the heart of the city. The idea was to create a vintage space that exudes the essence of the cuisine served. "The distinctive look of POH was developed by combining the vision of Avik Chatterjee – the owner of the restaurant, and the creative efforts of me and my design team," states Sumesh Menon of Sumesh Menon Associates. "Avik was clear on what the design intent is to be, and that helped evolve the design into its final stage."

The concept was a dining space that resonates with the rich cultural influences adopted from both Japanese and vintage, Shanghai-inspired culture and, accordingly, the materials were carefully selected. Innovation was the design brief given – so that became the framework for selection of materials for the space. The mood board was basically a composition of raw natural forms and elements such as cane, bamboo, jute, larger-than-life custom chandeliers, vintage lantern designs, custom Siporex-clad columns blended with modern materials like me-

1. The 10ft-tall kimono sculpture at the entrance of POH has become its unofficial mascot.

MATERIALS & SUPPLIERS

Lighting: International Lights & Crafts

- Japanese-inspired umbrella pendant lights
- 14-ft long sculptural cane lights
- Custom-designed, Chinese-inspired vintage green lantern wall

Wall partitions/textures: All customised on site

Flooring: Bharat Flooring

Metal artwork: Vishesh Sonwal

tallic screens with nature-inspired designs used as backlit wall cladding, and a faceted, mesh-clad bar apron to add a touch of rawness to the space. "POH is a unique project, as the design process involved detailed research and development work and an in-depth study of various materials and their combinations, keeping in mind an oriental essence," discloses Menon.

Asian restaurants have a uniquely rich ambience that is not seen in other types of restaurants. For each of his projects, the designer tries to reinterpret oriental themes in a new way through design. Taking a cue from the abandoned mill buildings of the now-bustling food hub, he intentionally retains

CONCEPT AND EXECUTION

Sumesh Menon throws light on the design evolution

"The restaurant is strategically located in the heart of Mumbai's commercial centre Kamala Mills Compound, in Lower Parel, which has emerged as the haute spot for restaurants that span a vast spectrum of cuisines. Asian restaurants have a uniquely rich ambience that is not seen in other restaurants. For each of my projects done over the past couple of years, I have tried to reinterpret oriental themes in a new way.

"The abandoned buildings of Kamala Mills Compound have an old-world charm about them that immediately appeals to both clients and customers. I have, by now, designed quite a few times in such locations — and have intentionally retained some of the rawness of these mills by evolving the design concepts around the existing context. So is the case with POH, where the existing rustic brick arches were incorporated into the design seamlessly. Minimal structural changes were facilitated, such that the existing context gave form and function to the concept and enabled a smooth flow of spaces within the restaurant.

"For POH, even the lighting concepts were carefully researched and developed through several trials, before achieving the final grandiose effect. After all, lighting can make or break a space. Pod seating areas were decorated with Japanese-inspired umbrella pendant lights that display beautiful origami-like fabric coverings. The pièce de résistance, however, is the pair of huge 14ft-long sculptural cane lights [see image below] that crown the dining space with glamour. Cove lights were strategically provided in areas like the bar display, and almost every light installation was intentionally kept dimmable."

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Inspiration was derived from vintage Chinese design concepts with major influence from Shanghai and Beijing. The chosen colour palette for the space was muted greys and rich greens that capture the old-world oriental style while steering clear of the commonly-used red. So, whether it is the stunning 10ft-tall metal kimono sculpture that has become the faceless mysterious mascot of POH, or the Chinese lantern wall installation, one can clearly see that Asian undercurrents bind the entire space together.

2. The Yàodiàn Bar has a modern interpretation of Chinese apothecary drawers that contain indigenous, seasonal herbs and ingredients.

3. Notice the dramatic lighting and abstract bamboo shoots in the form of relief and inlay work.





4. Japanese-inspired, umbrella pendant lights mark the private dining nook at POH.

5. The traditional Sushi Bar set-up allows personal interaction with the chef.

6. Green is the trademark colour for the interiors, a departure from the clichéd red reserved for oriental interiors. 50 custom Chinese-inspired green lanterns add a whole new dimension to the ambience.

PROJECT DETAILS

The project: POH

The location: Kamala Mills Compound, Lower Parel, Mumbai

The client: Avik Chatterjee, Speciality Hospitality

The design firm: Sumesh Menon Associates

The design team: Sumesh Menon, Nishant Desai, Ankita Raja

Total area: 2,700sq-ft

Date of completion: July 2017

Several elements of the project lend it a unique aspect and set it apart. One such concept is the Yàodiàn Bar display – which is basically a modern interpretation of an ancient Chinese apothecary-inspired design, wherein the entire back wall of the bar is lined with compact drawers of 4x4 inches that contain a diverse mixture of handpicked, indigenous and seasonal herbs and ingredients. The mechanised drawers are operated by the bartender so as to select a random drawer and, thereafter, use the ingredients that pop up to concoct one of his signature surprise cocktails!

This project is close to Menon's heart, thanks to the deep study of the uses and types of oriental materials that formed

the basis for selection of materials. "A lot of natural elements like cane and jute and raw forms of materials like Siporex (fly-ash bricks), concrete, etc, were juxtaposed within the design canvas to capture the earthy and warm essence of oriental design," he recounts. Some elements were used in abstract form, like the bamboo design wall wherein the entire wall replicated bamboo shoots in the form of relief and inlay work alternately – thus creating an ethereal backdrop to the dining area.

Lighting is undoubtedly one of the key design features of the restobar. As this hospitality design specialist knows, it can literally make or break the look of the space. In fact, the lighting was given such prominence that an entire wall is lined with around 50 custom Chinese-inspired vintage green lanterns that add a whole new dimension to the ambience.

Usually, challenges arise from existing site conditions, regulations, etc – but in this case, the design team managed to incorporate most of the contextual structural elements into the design so as to create seamless spaces that revolve around the central theme of the space. "I generally encourage local artisans for many of my projects and, even for POH, I have done the same. Metal artisans were brought in to fabricate the ethereal-looking 10ft-tall kimono sculpture that has become the [unofficial] mascot of POH. Even the fibre composite dark olive facade with a vintage classic 3D design in a metallic finish was entirely customised by local artisans – and they have done a beautiful job!"

We cannot help but agree. A visit to POH is a must for art lovers – for not only is every morsel of the delicious cuisine exquisitely presented, but each element of the design is a feast for the senses as well. **AS**