

Art à la carte: How restaurants are becoming the new art galleries

By Melanie Abrams

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Ever since Picasso and Miro painted for their supper at La Colombe d'Or, high in the hills of Provence, in the south of France, the close connection between art and food has flourished. Today, fabulous original works of their art hang on the walls and bear testimony to the unique deal the artists struck with the restaurateur. They were hungry and penniless, the restaurant had acres of bare walls, so what better than to knock up a picture or two in exchange for a free meal? While this might not still go on in today's rather more ruthlessly commercial eateries, many modern restaurants are still showcasing all forms of art. Artists range from the modern masters who ate at La Colombe d'Or to leading contemporary figures such as Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin.

Arguably the most celebrated works of art connected to a restaurant are the stars of a new show at Tate Modern, opening on 26 September. They are the Mark Rothko paintings known as The Seagram Murals, commissioned in 1958 for the Four Seasons restaurant in the newly built Seagram Building in New York. The commission was famously cancelled by Rothko a year later, after, according to legend, he learnt they would not be for an employees' cafeteria but for a restaurant for the wealthy.

The show unites, for the first time, seven of Rothko's related Seagram paintings from the collections of the Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art, Japan, and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, with the nine paintings that have been at the Tate since 1970.

There is today a vibrant and diverse art scene pervading some of the swankiest restaurants across the world, from The Ivy and Sketch in London, to the Four Seasons in New York, to Lucio's, one of Sydney's premier artistic and celebrity haunts. Indeed, the newest artworks in a restaurant are to be found in The Ivy and its new private club, and are by Maggi Hambling.

Julian Niccolini, co-owner of the Four Seasons in New York, explains why there is such a burgeoning art scene within restaurants: "Art is an additional attraction to bring people in. The restaurant business is an extremely competitive market and is going crazy at the moment," he says. "We have about 600 people coming through our



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Sketch has panoramic screens magnifying images that are combined with a pulsating soundtrack by day and diners' chatter by night

doors every day and all have the money to pay for art, so art in the restaurant space is an ideal combination."

Regular exhibitions keep the restaurant experience fresh and exciting, too, according to some restaurateurs. Sketch has the busiest exhibition programme, with different video and film displays day and night on the giant multiple screens that surround the space. "After 5pm the gallery is turned into a restaurant, so there is a different ambience," explains Victoria Brooks, the curator of the Sketch Gallery. "At night, our 12-screen video projections have no sound, and work can be challenging – like caraballo-farman, who presented their work, Epididymis, which showed one of their testicles being filmed continuously, which created an abstract film of different colours with weird organic forms."

Even artists value restaurants for the fact that they can rotate their own art on display there. Tay Dall, a renowned South African contemporary artist, who is about to show selling works in the Tasting Room at Le Quartier Français, near Cape Town, comments: "I am keen to swap more frequently than leave the art for too long, as a new look is always refreshing, creates excitement and entices the visitor to come again. Rotating keeps it cutting edge, keeps the space alive and prevents it from looking like a has-been environment."

Pierre Gagnaire's rue Balzac restaurant in Paris works with the Galerie Lelong and has shown works by stars such as Richard Serra and Antoni Tàpies. Michel Besmond, director of the trendy Restaurant Alcazar on Paris's Left Bank, reveals that all their spectacular photographs, including those by the likes of Martin Parr and Nobuyoshi Araki, are from the Kamel Mennour gallery, located nearby.

Russell Norman, operations director of Caprice Holdings, which owns The Ivy, Le Caprice and others, cites Tom Phillips as a good example of an artist who has had a long standing relationship with The Ivy: "Three or four of Tom's pieces are at The Ivy, including a hand-etched glass screen. He has even designed the menu backing."

New commissions, such as Nathalie Guinamard's prospective hanging mobile for Rivington Grill, can impact on the space immediately. Stephen Wadcock, the grill's general manager, says: "You can only experiment as far as your clientele will understand it. At the Rivington Grill it works because we're part of the art crowd."

Across the UK, emerging local artists are championed. Gilby's @the Bay in Cardiff, for example, commissioned works by the artist Rebecca O'Dwyer for its launch in February this year. Others prefer to support graduates, such as the Michelin-starred Number One restaurant at The Balmoral in Edinburgh, which displays 100 works of art by graduates from the Royal College of Art in London.

According to Raymond Blanc, his restaurants at Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons in Oxford are actually designed around the art. The Grand Salle and the Conservatory were inspired by the paintings of Eric Rimmington. "Art makes a room. It is part of the culture of the place. As much as the food makes a statement about the restaurant, so does the art," explains Blanc.

Michel Roux Jr of Le Gavroche, which also boasts a fine art collection, including original works by Picasso, Miro, Dali and Giacometti, concludes: "The art is there for people to enjoy the experience, whether they like it or not. It is their personal taste. It asks questions and feeds your mind, while we feed your body."

Rothko, Tate Modern, London SE1 (020-7887 8888), 26 September to 1 February www.tate.org.uk

The five best places to feast your eyes

Sketch, London W1

Downstairs is the most experimental area, with panoramic screens magnifying images that are combined with a pulsating soundtrack by day and diners' chatter by night.

Lucio's, Sydney

Has around 500 art works by Australia's leading artists, including sketches on paper or napkins by Sidney Nolan and Charles Blackman.

Rivington Grill, London EC2

A shrine to YBA. Tracey Emin's neon *Life Without You Never* is soon to join works by Gillian Wearing and Peter Doig. The Leader Board, which rates the local galleries and their shows, is also worth noting.

Four Seasons, New York

An interesting mix of display and selling pieces. The most legendary display piece is the Picasso tapestry, *Le Tricorne*. There was uproar when there was talk of it going in 2005. In the lobby there are four paintings by the American Nancy Hull Kearing, which are for sale.

La Colombe d'Or, Provence

With frescoes by Léger and Braque, paintings by Miro and Picasso, and a mobile by Calder, this a treasure trove. New work features too, such as a huge ceramic by Sean Scully.

My paintings at The Ivy

My work is in the Tate, the British Museum, the National Portrait Gallery, the National Gallery and others, but it's the first time I've had work in a restaurant. So it's a new and exciting experience for me, as it is a space where you go to eat rather than look at art.

The fact that the portraits are of George Melly is particularly poignant for me. George was one of my closest friends, so it is appropriate that two of my paintings of him are in The Ivy because that's where we often had dinner together. Since he died last July, I have undertaken a series of paintings of him, because if you are close to someone, they carry on being alive inside you.

I like the unexpected setting of a restaurant for art. You go to The Ivy to eat, so the art is a surprise. And if you're sitting beside great art, eating great food and drinking great wine, it is a voluptuous experience, and makes for a great evening.

Maggi Hambling

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