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all in GOOD TASTE

A sample of AIA/LA Restaurant Design Award winners whets the appetite **BY MICHAEL WEBB**

A GOOD RESTAURANT SHOULD STIMULATE ALL THE SENSES WHILE FOCUSING ATTENTION ON THE FOOD. DESIGNERS MUST BALANCE a multitude of factors, from traffic flow to comfort, acoustics and lighting levels to express and enhance the joy of eating out. Easier said than done, for diners' tastes are as varied as the menus they are offered. One size does not fit all, and eateries that try to please everyone are usually as dull as boiled cabbage. The most successful are cued to the culinary offerings, simple or complex.

That's certainly true of the winning entries in this year's AIA/LA Restaurant Design Awards, which spanned the country from Los Angeles and San Francisco to New York, with one popular choice in Boulder, Colorado. Sleekly tailored or unbuttoned, shadowy or sparkling, the restaurants, bars and cafes in this selection have a common thread: they evoke the spirit of what they serve.

Michael Moran



Photography by Michael Weschler

ASSEMBLEDGE+

South Beverly Grill, Los Angeles, CA

The South Beverly Grill offers good ingredients simply prepared, and the woodsy interior with its exposed steel columns and textured brick wall evokes the solid quality and value of the menu. It was commissioned by the Hillstone Restaurant Group as a sibling to the wildly popular Houston's. Each of their properties has a family resemblance, born of a collaboration between owners and designers and a commitment to quality. Architect David Thompson of Assembledge+ worked with interior designer Brad Dunning and contractor Minardos Group to create this contemporary spin on an old-fashioned dining club, an apt choice for its location at the edge of Beverly Hills's Golden Triangle. "It's an exercise in subtlety, achieving a delicate balance of lighting and materials that should wear well and not go out of date," says Scott Walter, Thompson's partner on the project.

Walnut and cherry are used for massive bars at either side and for a louvered screen that divides them, for tables and to enclose black-leather banquettes. Fir beams from an MTA garage were recycled for the exposed ceiling joists. LEDs are employed in the pin spots that cast a pool of light on each table, illuminating the food while leaving diners in shadow, and this enhances the quiet drama of the room. Lighting rakes a relief pattern on the brick wall, and the open ceiling also adds to the sense of texture and depth.



Photography by Michael Moran