

contract

commercial interior design and architecture march 2004

A VNU Business Publication

Paul Frank Store by Giorgio Borruso

What's Cool

Mandarin Oriental Hotel by Hirsch Bedner Associates

Wallcoverings

Life Cycle Analysis

Most Admired Design Firms Survey





Catering to a sophisticated Manhattan clientele, Geisha forgoes cliché imagery for subtle references to the rich cultural history of a Japanese geisha. Geometric forms echo the specific folds of a geisha's kimono in the lounge (this page), while delicately shaped lighting fixtures mimic Japanese flowers in the main dining room (opposite).

in the details

Combining an historically rich theme with glamorous and intricate detailing, Rockwell Group uses a deft touch to entice New Yorkers at Geisha

By Katie Weeks

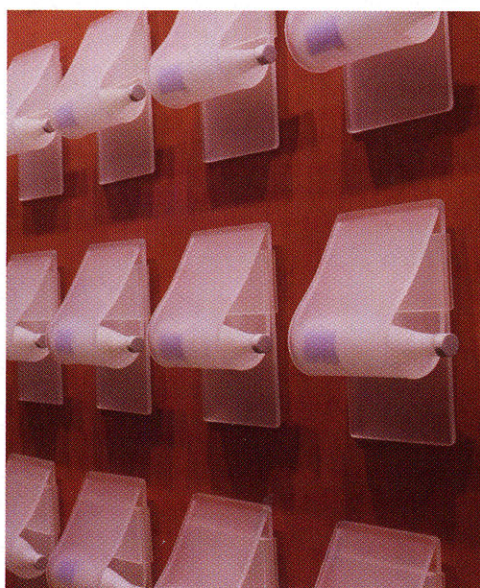
Photography by Joshua McHugh, Rockwell Group



The history of the Japanese geisha is rich with beauty, romantic intrigue, and sophisticated detail. From the fine, deliberate folds of a geisha's kimono to the geometric forms of a traditional Japanese parasol, it is a culture with a design language all its own. So, when Serafina Restaurant Group approached New York-based Rockwell Group about creating a new geisha-themed restaurant on Manhattan's Upper East Side, the challenges were great, but the possibilities were greater.

"The original idea was to create a space that looked different from other Japanese restaurants. One that was more fun than a conventional and traditional space," says Vittorio Assaf, president of Serafina Restaurant Group. "We wanted it

"The inspiration was more than just Japanese culture. It was specifically the dress of the geisha, the tailoring of the geisha outfit," says Greg Stanford, senior interior designer at Rockwell Group. Working with the scale of the building, Rockwell Group created four main dining rooms on two levels and gave each a different feel while maintaining a similar aesthetic. Patrons enter into the bar and lounge area that appeals to a younger demographic, but then move forward to a sushi room, an upstairs dining room, and a private dining room that aim to satisfy an older crowd. "My idea was to make everyone feel at home, like it was an extension of their own dining rooms, and Rockwell understood perfectly what we were looking for," says Assaf.



targeted to the Upper East Side of New York, to appeal to an exclusive type of clientele but still do so with a fun, fresh environment."

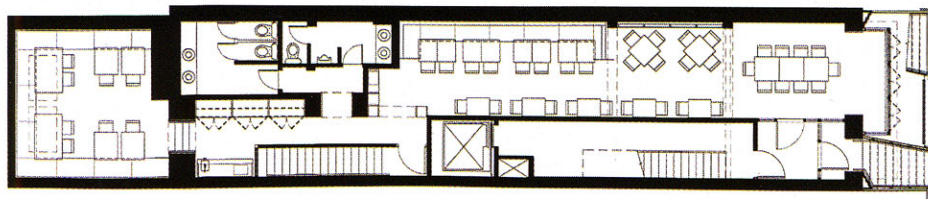
Attracting a savvy clientele wasn't the only challenge. The space, a renovated townhouse just off Madison Avenue and around the corner from high-end retailers like Barneys, was narrow and didn't lend itself to having one big restaurant experience. The intimate scale, however, proved to be a defining asset. Taking a cue from the name Geisha and the sophisticated menu developed by Eric Ripert of Le Bernardin (also in New York), the designers focused on combining the intimate scale of the building with the detailed and tailored culture of the geisha.

"We were limited by the architecture of the townhouse," says Stanford. "We had to be more thoughtful about how to deal with it and had to build an experience that was driven by the architecture. Constantly engaging the customer was the challenge. We sort of turned that around and made it more fun—it gets better as you make more of a commitment."

In each room the geisha remains the dominant yet subtle theme. Entering into the bar, patrons are surrounded by upholstered wall panels inspired by a geisha's kimono while lit orange discs behind the bar represent her parasol umbrella. Moving deeper inside, the sushi room has more than 70 custom glass blossom light fixtures and the sushi counter is made of crushed

Geisha references continue to meld with the modern flair as patrons move deeper into the restaurant, where an enlarged photo of a geisha (above, left) contrasts with slick, shaped sake holders (above, middle) and funky fixtures that pull their inspiration from a geisha's parasol umbrella (above, right). Throughout the space, the rich color palette, silk fabrics, and dark woods are a reference to Japanese culture (opposite).





river rock to resemble flower petals in a red resin. In addition more than 40 Obi knot acrylic holders display sake bottles. The main dining room features an archway reminiscent of a Japanese teahouse, as well as backlit glass that holds laminated Japanese seaweed. Throughout the restaurant, silk fabrics, dark woods, and a rich color palette prevail. For the private dining room, inspiration came from the Japanese tatami mat, and a series of tatami pillows hang from the walls as back rests.

The results continue to win rave reviews in the wake of Geisha's December 2003 opening. "Everyone

who walks inside loves it," says Assaf, noting that "it's something to envision the restaurant on a drawing board, and something else in the reality when it all comes together." For Rockwell Group, it was another chance to create a high-profile, individual space, says Stanford. "For every project we do, clients expect a one-of-a-kind result. This was a very unique approach where we took the geisha idea and turned it on its head," he adds. "We weren't a slave to the cliché things you could fall into. It was a good learning experience for all of us." ■

Giving patrons a glimpse to the neighborhood both opens up the narrow townhouse space of the restaurant and entices passersby (above).

Project Summary

Who

Project: Geisha. **Client:** Serafina Restaurant Group. **Architect, interior designer:** Rockwell Group. **Structural engineer:** Wayman C. Wing. **Mechanical engineer, electrical engineer:** Yusuf M. Patel, PE. **General contractor:** Technetek LTD. **Food service consultant:** Rascoe & Jacobs. **Restaurant supply contractor:** Bari Restaurant Supply. **Lighting designer:** Thompson & Sears. **Graphic lights:** Michael Paladino. **Photographer:** Joshua McHugh, Rockwell Group.

What

Wallcoverings: Anya Larkin, Koroseal Studios. **Paint:** Benjamin Moore. **Dry wall, flooring, ceiling, doors, door hardware, window frames, architectural woodworking:** General contractor. **Carpet/carpet tile:** Custom A.M. Collection. **Carpet fiber:** Wool. **Lighting fixtures:** USA Illumination, INC, Lightolier, Lucifer Lighting Co., Belfer, Litelab, Legion Lighting, B-K Lighting, Exterior Vert Lighting, Luz Lampcraft, Jordana Korsen. **Glass, railings/screens/ grillwork:** Carvart Architect Glass. **Dining chairs, cocktail tables:** Riato Furniture Co. **Dining tables:** Table Topics. **Lounge/cocktail seating, banquette/built-in seating:** Munrod Custom Upholsterers. **Upholstery:** Kravet Contract, Larsen, Knoll Textiles. **Cabinetmaking:** Technetek LTD, Pauline Yates. **Planters, accessories:** Victoria Marchand. **HVAC:** Luxaire. **Fire Safety:** Fire Response Inc. **Guest toilet plumbing fixtures:** Kohler. **Cooking range:** Jade. **Refrigerator/ freezer:** Beverage Air.

Where

Location: New York, NY. **Total floor area:** 3,000 sq. ft. **No. of floors:** 2. **Total capacity:** 122.