

# FLAVOUR HUNTER

DISPATCHES FROM THE FOODIE FRONTIER. EDITED BY TOBY SKINNER



## PLATE EXPECTATIONS

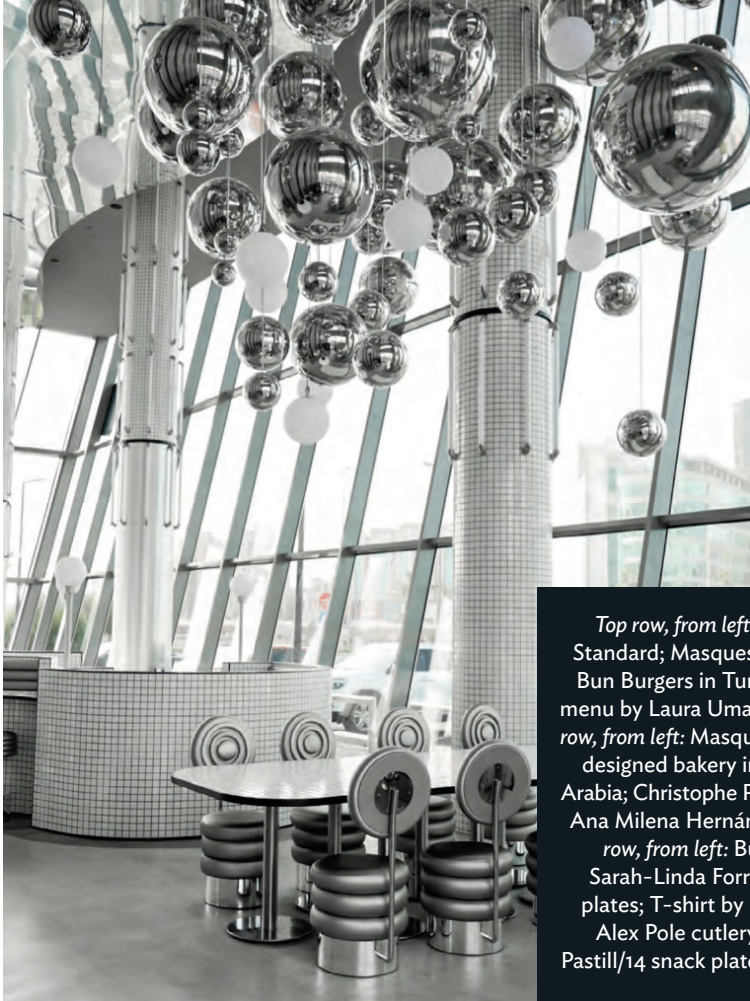
BOGWOOD CUTLERY, MANGA-INSPIRED T-SHIRTS, POP-UP MENUS AND MORE: THE DESIGNS ROCKING THE FOOD WORLD RIGHT NOW

BY RICK JORDAN

### STORY-DRIVEN SPACES

Back in the 1980s, it didn't matter what you ate: it was being in the right place that counted. Fashionable restaurants were all about the look: cutting-edge designs for writers such as Bret Easton Ellis to hone their wit on. The Atlantic Bar & Grill in London. Le Cirque in New York. "Restaurants are as much theatres for social competition and cultural modelling as places to eat," says design critic Stephen Bayley. "It's about taste in every sense. In the 1980s, Terence Conran traded on dreams of Provençal lunches mixed with a Scandinavian furniture fair. Today we want charred sardines on planks of rough-hewn ►





Top row, from left: dishes by Odd Standard; Masquespacio design for Bun Burgers in Turin; Che Fico menu by Laura Umaña. Middle row, from left: Masquespacio-designed bakery in Saudi Arabia; Christophe Penasse and Ana Milena Hernández. Bottom row, from left: Bun Burgers; Sarah-Linda Forrer's pearlescent plates; T-shirt by Merlin Mannelly; Alex Pole cutlery. Previous page: Pastill/14 snack plate by Odd Standard





wood. It'll change again soon – maybe someone will rediscover cuisine ancienne.” As aspirational arenas, restaurants have carefully woven narratives, whether it's the circular-design thread of Apricity, where lampshades are made from recycled coffee grounds, or the backstory of Hav & Mar, Marcus Samuelsson's latest in New York, where artist Derrick Adams painted African mermaids to reel in the chef's Ethiopian heritage. The big question, of course, is always: is it Instagrammable? “It's one of the first things clients ask for,” says Christophe Penasse, who, along with partner Ana Milena Hernández, runs Valencia-based studio Masquespacio. “Our spaces may become that, but it's not something we ever set out to achieve.” Their designs are sculptural, playing with form and texture: a burger bar in Milan that rejects Americana for Italianate arches and gold detail; a bakery in Al Khobar, Saudi Arabia, riffing on the distorting effect of water. “We used to be described as new Memphis, for our bold use of colour, but I think we're more new deco now,” says Hernández. “Restaurants are a form of escapism but there has to be a human connection. It has to be emotional.”

## NEW-OLD CERAMICS

Despite mystifying attempts to replace them with slate, wooden boards, even miniature shopping trolleys (as mockingly documented on Instagram's We Want Plates), ceramics are hard to beat as a design template for serving food. And while white porcelain has reigned supreme as a blank canvas for artfully assembled edible landscapes, there are cracks in its authority. Just as old-school tablecloths have been whisked off top tables, ceramics have become more rustic and rootsier. In North Carolina, East Fork – co-owned by a descendant of Matisse – has a cult following for its Ruskin-inspired work ethic and iron-speckled glazes. At two-Michelin-star Moor Hall in deepest Lancashire, sandstone from the 16th-century manor house was used to throw earthenware for a real sense of terroir. And just outside Tokyo, Yoshinori Ishii – one of a new breed of potter-chefs – dug out clay from beneath where his latest restaurant, Auberge Tokito, now sits to shape hundreds of plates and bowls. How's that for soil-to-table provenance? Meanwhile, the rise of 20-course tasting menus has led to bespoke creations for individual courses: tactile, sculptural ceramics such as Sarah-Linda Forrer's sensual shell-like dishes, and the surreal works conjured by Norway's Odd Standard, which once embalmed two chicken feet in clay for Oslo's Rest destination. “The pristine designs of Bernardaud and Ginori are also enjoying a renaissance, though,” says culinary agent Mat Froggatt, who matches chefs with artisanal makers. “When it comes to enhancing a chef's meticulous creations, there's nothing quite like it: long live the white plate.”

## HAUTE CUTLERY

At an Oslo restaurant called Pjøltergeist a few years back, I was handed a plate of baked skate wing and encouraged to eat it with my fingers (“You'll really appreciate the texture”). Scraping away, I got the idea – but on the whole, I prefer cutlery. I even made a spoon once, tapping a sledgehammer daintily onto a mould in the Viennese workshop of silversmith Jarosinski & Vaugoin, which has been forging tableware since the Habsburg era. Surrounded by centuries of fine cutlery (did you know forks have four tines because the Devil's trident has three?), it was apparent these weren't just tools for eating with but displays of social status and wealth. “If restaurants are charging £300 for a tasting menu, they don't want any old knife,” says Dorset blacksmith Alex Pole, who hammers out one-off stainless-steel tableware for clients. “The current mood is for textural designs, which look rustic and

handmade but can be put in the dishwasher,” he says. “Cutlery rests are very popular right now – and I'm making mini forks to be used for a single mouthful. The provenance of artisanal craft is almost as important as that of the ingredients.” That backstory can include anything from the ancient bogwood used by maker Luke Hope for cutlery at Berlin's Ernst to the Vermont farm tools upcycled by Chelsea Miller into chef's knives for Daniel Humm. The desire to control every aspect of the dining experience, meanwhile, can be seen in the hands-on approach taken by The Rotunda's Endo Kazutoshi, who, like many Japanese chefs, designs his own chopsticks. As he says, “Everything has to balance.”

## SUPREME-LEVEL MERCH

You've seen the queues around the block, the patient wait for the latest drop by skate brand Supreme – a collaboration with LV, maybe, or The North Face. In recent years, though, restaurant merchandise has become almost as hyped, with limited-edition releases – Panache x Challah Dolly's purses, for example – being snatched up in hours. Food as the new rock 'n' roll was a familiar riff, but now it has the T-shirts to match: Mugaritz rather than Joy Division, Fanelli Cafe instead of Metallica. This merch boom hit its stride during lockdown, keeping names on the simmer and spinning an income (sadly, the “Fuck Sourdough” tees from my favourite local café, Max's Sandwich Shop, are long gone). Totes, aprons and homeware followed: for the foodie who has everything, how about a set of oyster shells – finished inside with a golden glaze – from Barcelona's Disfrutar? But it's still the T-shirt that really rocks. Some are mere logos, but the best are really creative. “They're like the new matchbook,” explains Brooklyn-based graphic designer Merlin Mannelly, who takes Japanese manga and the cartoon signage of Coney Island as inspiration. “Even high-end restaurants are dabbling in them. Sometimes, I base designs on an inside joke, or an ingredient, then they let me run wild. If something's limited edition, I can take risks and be much more playful, which is where I love to be.” (Footnote: wearing a Hard Rock Café T-shirt will never, ever be cool unless, like Johnny Rotten's Pink Floyd tee, it's customised by scrawling “I hate” on top.)

## POPPING MENUS

I'm not really one for souvenirs, but I do bring back the occasional menu – and each is a culinary snapshot of its time. There's one from Read's in Kent from the early 2000s that evokes the taste of asparagus on a sunny lawn, and another from Grand Central that conjures oysters Rockefeller before a train journey upstate in the 1990s. The best menu designs echo the tastes of their era, tracing the feminine curves and florals of art nouveau, the bold typographics of Bauhaus or electric colours of pop art. A menu from Harry's Bar in 1960 resembles a storybook illustration you want to step into. Of course, there are fewer these days – replaced by daily-changing menus that are chalked up and recited tableside, or else shrunk onto a QR code. But the art form endures. There's a growing trend for spot illustrations, little tattoo-like bursts of ink around the playlist of dishes, and Seoul-born artist Dani Choi paints surreal cabinets of curiosity inspired by Korean folktales for Atomix restaurant in Manhattan. At Tom Aikens's Muse in London, an origin story about a boyhood challenge becomes a pop-up menu in the form of a tree. “Perhaps there's a renewed appreciation for human connection, a comfort in the handcrafted,” says Laura Umaña, who designs whimsical menus for Che Fico in San Francisco. “But I'm also excited for what the future holds – there's a lot of cool things happening with AI, turning QR codes into vibrant artworks.” 📍