

Creating a restaurant from the ground up

Some people dream about opening a restaurant. Riva Sloan "dreams" restaurants up.

But as owner of Axis Architectural Studio, the Englewood resident knows there's a lot more than dreaming in designing a functional and attractive dining spot.

Her firm is responsible for the South City Grill in Rochelle Park and Mountain Lakes as well as Bisque, a new restaurant on Route 4 east in Paramus.



TABLE TALK
BEV
MORTENSON

Q. What made you become an architect and how did you begin designing restaurants?

A. My mother was an artist, and my dad was in construction, so I was exposed to several aspects of the field very early.

When I started college, my dad insisted I take an architecture class, and as soon as I did, I knew that was what I wanted to do.

I earned a bachelor of science degree in architecture from the University of Maryland and worked for several firms on Long Island and in New Jersey. During that time, two of my high school friends began opening a series of restaurants in Pittsburgh, and I helped them out by designing them on a freelance basis.

When I opened Axis in 1996, I decided to utilize my experience in restaurants, which now make up about one-third of our business.



DANIELLE P. RICHARDS-STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Riva Sloan, architect and restaurant designer

Q. How does designing a restaurant differ from other projects?

A. You really have to know how a restaurant works in order to lay it out correctly.

The first impression is really important. You want people to be knocked off their feet, to think "This is so beautiful, I'd eat here even if the food isn't wonderful."

And, of course, you have to consider the food — you can select colors and materials which will stir up the appetite.

We can also get involved in choosing the china and flatware and developing menus and tabletop cards, because they are part of

the overall effect. Some chefs even have asked for our input regarding the presentation of the food on the plates.

Q. Other than those you designed, what are your favorite restaurants in terms of design?

A. I really like a lot of the restaurants done by the Rockwell Group in Manhattan like Nobu [105 Hudson St.] and the new One C.P.S. [1 Central Park South] — they have so much atmosphere and character.

Q. If you had no restrictions as to budget and other considerations, how would you design your fantasy restaurant?

A. I would choose a historic building and renovate or start with new construction but, in either case, my No. 1 design requirement would be high ceilings.

It would be a classic design — something that would not need a face-lift or look dated in a few years. I would choose high-end materials — a lot of woods and metal — that will look substantial and hold up well. I'd also devote a lot of time and money to lighting design and fixtures... I feel that lighting is one of the most important aspects in establishing atmosphere.

As for location, I would probably avoid Manhattan, because there's too much competition there. But the exact location isn't nearly as important as having great space, and a creative client to work with.

Q. Where do you see yourself professionally in five years?

A. Doing the same thing for more good clients. I'd like the firm to be a little bigger, but I love what I'm doing, and it's going well, so I can't imagine doing anything else.

Q. Do you have a food fantasy?

A. Eating a perfectly ripe mango on a beach in the Caribbean.

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Table Talk is a weekly column focusing on local food professionals. Recommendations for subjects are welcome; send them to Bev Mortenson in care of the Food section, The Record, 150 River St., Hackensack, N.J. 07601; fax, (201) 646-4047; e-mail, features@northjersey.com.