



I Hate Design Waste



Clark Wolf is a New York City-based food and restaurant consultant hell-bent on designing flatware people will like and dishware that's more about the chef and his or her food than the artist who crafted it. He is proprietor of Clark Wolf Company (clarkwolfcompany.com).

How's this? Groovy lounge leads to stainless, suspended staircase, down, down into what is actually called the moat room. It's an exposed brick-wrapped space with underlit water flowing around the perimeter. Your friend puts her purse down to pick up a menu. Four hundred dollars worth of Prada handbag takes a header into the drink and floats off into the distance, cell phone, credit cards, and all. How was the food? Who cares.

Mind you, the subtleties and magic of nearly everything design-related in the world of eating and drinking are more important and, just possibly, more powerful than ever. There's so much to consider for an increasingly sophisticated and demanding public. When someone grabs a new location in, say, France, they refurbish a bit, fix the bathroom tile, and unlock the front door. Here we tend to gut the place and spend millions—so it had better be right.

Real sophistication can often mean less but *better* design. But it always means a successful use of space. Is every seat a good one? Can the staff actually make it through the room? Is an unfortunate part of the kitchen exposed every time the door swings open? Can your purse escape?

Flashy design, like press coverage or a well-known chef, is no more (or less!) than an opportunity to grab people's attention and help to create a memorable experience. You, and the room, have to deliver something that will bring them back for more, not send them screaming into the night.

Design waste I hate:

- Weird knives that fall off the plate
- Tables at the wrong height for the chair/banquette/stool onto which you're plopped
- So many hard surfaces that you can't hear yourself think
- Art so powerful it defines the room (if you don't like it, you can't go there)
- Menu holders that weigh more than I do
- Nonfunctional bathroom sinks and other fixtures (they're amusing the first time but they usually don't work, and I hate watching someone washing their hands at the urinal)
- Places that don't look like restaurants from the outside
- A joint so overdesigned that I feel like I'm paying for it with every bite
- Have I mentioned moats?

Design concepts I love:

- Lighting that makes me look young and rested
- Design I can examine if I want, or just feel, without effort
- Glowing rows of booze
- Comfortable chairs
- A solid handful of flatware
- Glassware that feels classic
- Amusing accessories (that can be affordably replaced because they may disappear out the door)
- Pure cotton
- Materials that age well with active use

Then there's all that graphics stuff. You'd think with a brave new world of software (and plenty of out-of-work computer geeks), people would just revel in strong templates of good construction, creating menus we can read and inserts we can steal (can you believe people pay money to print menus without a restaurant name and a phone number?). Now that logoed ashtrays are nearly extinct (and who really wants a matchbook filled with toothpicks?), other touches (give me a great pressed paper coaster!) are crucial—and fun.

Finally, ultimately, and in the beginning, there is the food itself. We seem to be nearly recovered from what seemed like a Viagra-induced erection of food, sliced and fanned and sillily scattered on the plate. Most naturally presented meals, are really quite beautiful and deeply appealing. Which is what this design discussion is all about. A little visual stimulation, a pinch of emotional resonance, and a plate of satisfying food in a place I'd like to sit.

Mind you, I'm happy to smile at the occasional umbrella in the occasional (OK, regular) funny drink. ☺