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CHINOIS

Barbara Lazaroff's Fellini-esque Backdrop



Photography ■
Penny Wolin with Mark Adams

To dine at Chinois on Main Street, Santa Monica, California, is to enter the whimsical and avant garde world of Barbara Lazaroff, wife of renowned chef Wolfgang Puck for whom she has created yet one more highly dramatic backdrop. The first was Spago in Los Angeles in 1982 (and Spago Tokyo, 1983) which became famous for Puck's light fresh foods and its lively ingredients of Lazaroff's open kitchen, art-filled brilliance and paparazzi-trailing guests. Chinois, which opened in 1984, has many similarities to Spago: the warmth of the open kitchen, the glittery rendition of a mom-and-pop presence Lazaroff and Puck manage to maintain at both restaurants, and a clientele regularly studded with such celebrities as Johnny Carson, Tom Selleck and Jacqueline Bisset.

Yet Chinois, where Puck offers a unique Asian-French cuisine, seems much more as if one has entered the subliminal daydreams of this interior designer/artist. Lazaroff has brought to this real-life fantasy overtones of her past professional lives as a set designer and actress, and undercurrents from her studies of biochemistry and experimental psychology. Towering antique cloisonné cranes preside over a color explosion of fuchsia, celadon and black, intricately placed throughout her totally custom-designed environment. Raves legendary couturier James Galanos, "It's the most beautiful color palette I've ever seen in a space." Her aesthetic purpose was to turn "an impossible shoe-box-like area into a curving, sensual interpretation of yin-yang, masculine/feminine." This the designer has unmistakably achieved through the motif of "high energy waves" she developed for the Chinois logo ("I always design a logo first," she says). Further exotica include an orchid and bromeliad garden, Oriental and contemporary Western art, and her non-stop floral arrangements — seemingly a dream come true for one who grew up poor in the Bronx and who says she has always imagined it could be rather nice to be a princess.

But it took more than a brilliant fan club, palette and wardrobe (Ms. Lazaroff maintains a separate one for each restaurant) to turn 3,500 square feet into a functional, profitable eatery. "As owner as well as designer, I feel I was particularly concerned about this," she says. "There are a lot of beautiful spaces, but they're not good as restaurants if they don't work." And they don't work, she adds, if the

chef can't see the grill under the rack, if the air conditioner is placed over the pick-up counter, if the business systems are not planned *before* instead of *after* the manager moves in. "These are just a few of the things the restaurant designer has to consider," says Lazaroff. "For example, I wanted round tables, but I also was concerned about being able to move them together so we wouldn't wind up turning down parties of 16. So I designed round tables that can be converted to squares. I also designed

Chinois

Contractor: Robert Krump Construction
Millwork framing and installation: James Douglas Carpentry

Hanging light fixtures in kitchen: Floss through Lighting Associates, with copper plating custom by the designer.

Light fixtures over bar: Oluce through Lighting Associates

Recessed lighting: Lightolier

Track lighting: directly imported for Stilnova, Italy (hanging on soffit areas)

Spotlights: Capri

Track cans: TrakLighting, Inc. and Lightolier

Iron and copper work: Art in Iron, Los Angeles
Ventilation hood: Advanced Engineering & Construction Corp.

Doors and windows: custom by designer

Chairs: Alias through ICF, Inc.

Tilework (except floors): custom by Barbara Lazaroff, fabricated by Payne + Bartels

Floor tile: imported from Japan by designer through Import Tile Center, installed by Frank Rodriguez

Table bases: Falcon

Electrical and neon work: Tri-Star Electrical

Plaster work: Ralph Wyatt

Black slate counter tops and bus station tops: S.H. Radack & Associates

Lacquered work and staining: Oscar's Painting

Mirror and glass: S + H Glass

Skylight: designed by Barbara Lazaroff, fabricated by Semco

Orchid and bromeliad garden: installation by

Melinda Taylor and Douglas Raglin

Flower arrangements: Barbara Lazaroff

Brick wood-burning oven: custom by Barbara Lazaroff

Fan-shaped artwork: Miriam Wosk

Oriental artifacts: purchased by the designer in the Orient

Contemporary vases: Anna Silver, Henry Zeringue, Platt

Enameled metal sculpture: Dorothy Gillespie/Gallery West

Epoxy resin devil sculpture on dining counter: Eugene Jardin

Painting on bar counter: by Barbara Lazaroff, application by Danny Alonso











them two inches smaller than normal and shopped for smaller than normal chairs. I had sat down and calculated what the projected sales would be for a certain number of people at Chinois' average price of \$36 per person. I knew that, unless we were to seat approximately 90 people at each of our two nightly turnovers and also at lunch, it wasn't worth doing the restaurant."

The main thing she as designer had to remember, she notes, is that Chinois, like Spago, is basically a high-volume restaurant. "Spago started it really," she says, "offering incredibly high quality for a relatively low price. But when you're in the high-volume business, you have to be very aware of how many people are going to sit there for how long. Note I don't have upholstered chairs!"

She also had to think of how to maintain it – not just its cleaning and refurbishment but also its high-energy appeal. "The big thing is not to make a restaurant a hit for one year, because everyone's fickle and will try out the new place that first year. The big thing is to

slightly but more healthful for the chef – instead of inside the hood as some are doing now. You also have to be careful where you locate your air conditioning. Sometimes designers place it near the pick-up area, and the plates and food sit there for a minute getting cold. Yet, if you don't have it close enough to where the diners are, they're going to roast. You also have to provide enough functional light for the chef – and that means lighting the grill as well as the rack above it and not creating any hot spots which can be tiring on the chef's eyes. And you have to do this without ruining the aesthetics of the dining area."

"The whole thing about restaurants that many designers forget," she says, "is that you have to talk to the chef. Chefs work differently and there are basic things the designer should understand about the way a particular chef works, how he or she likes work areas to relate to the cooking area. And the designer should always talk to the manager during the early planning stage about what he or she needs in terms of phones and electrical sup-

"If you want the community to be interested in your restaurant, you've got to be interested in the community." – Barbara Lazaroff

make it a hit for that second, third and fourth year," she says. "I think it's important to have elements of surprise all the time - like changing the flowers, the artwork, the menu. I like the idea of a sense of show, and of being a little avant garde, although, if you're too far ahead of the *zeitgeist*, people aren't going to understand it."

Part of the sense of show at Chinois, as it is at Spago, is the exposed kitchen. It allows the chef's preparation of specialties such as sizzling catfish, duck in elephant-heart plum sauce, Mongolian lamb, curried oysters and the *crème brûlée* desserts to provide a festive warmth for even single diners. Yet such exposed kitchens, inspired by European bistros and made increasingly popular in the Southland by the Lazaroff/Puck ventures, pose a special challenge to the designer, she says. "The ventilation has to be excellent, of course, and that presents a noise problem for the diners. And then there's the problem of where to place the make-up air, which I believe should be in front of the hood – less

port systems. These things should be placed in the most aesthetic way possible at the start. If you wait until installation, you have to start busting things up."

It seems somewhat incongruous to speak to Barbara Lazaroff about such seminal planning now, two years after the opening of Chinois. Today it would seem that the only thing this designer and her chef husband had ever had on their minds was remembering their celebrity clients' favorite wines and children's names. At the time of this interview, in fact, she was planning yet one more benefit, an anti-child-abuse dinner with Elizabeth Taylor and Joan Rivers. But that brings up one last point that she wants to make regarding any successful restaurant – especially if it is going to attract a celebrity clientele. "It really has more to do with designer/owners that just designers," she concludes. "But it's the fact that, no matter how good the design, if you want the community to be interested in your restaurant, you've got to be interested in the community." – Carol Soucek King





- *If the Land of Oz had a restaurant, it would probably look like Chinois - the hot new L.A. dine-spot. The dazzling interior - a fantasy of mosaics work-of-art furniture and fixtures, imported Buddahs, cloisonné cranes - is the dream of artist Barbara Lazaroff.* - VOGUE

- *Chinois cannot be ignored. In the town that invented the concept of restaurant-as-theater, this place caused quite a stir when it opened.* - GQ

- *Chinois is theater. And it's no surprise, since its designer, Barbara Lazaroff, designed stage settings in New York City. She has created a Fellini-esque fantasy of a Chinese restaurant in Chinois. California has not had a theatrical restaurant like this or, for that matter, has America."* - HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

- *Once again, this Wolfgang Puck original French-California-Japanese-Chinese ranks number one as the most popular restaurant in town, with cosmic design by Barbara Lazaroff. This "quintessential California restaurant" is called the "most original", "most sophisticated" restaurant in Southern California, a "unique showplace."* - ZAGAT GUIDE

- *Lazaroff oversees the day-to-day operation of the business with an unyielding sense of how things need to be.* - ORANGE COAST MAGAZINE



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