

Raising the Bar

Michael Berman reveals how he and partner Thomas Schoos pull double-duty as designers and owners of a successful restaurant in West Hollywood.

Tell us a little about O-Bar. How did you find the location? What was the inspiration behind O-Bar and the atmosphere you created?

We actually found O-Bar by accident. I live nearby and noticed that the previous restaurant, called Felt, had closed down. I was with Thomas Schoos, my business partner, at a dinner meeting that night discussing a location someone wanted us to design on Melrose Avenue. I turned to Thomas and told him that Felt had closed. One of the men at this meeting happened to be the owner of the building. From there, everything just fell together.

We needed to get O-Bar open very quickly. I looked around the neighborhood and tried to analyze why some places had been there for years, while others were closing up. We decided that, because of our location, we needed to be a sort of high-end neighborhood place. Our goal was to be a place nice enough for a celebration, but casual enough to stop in for a burger.

If you look around O-Bar, you'll notice we used a lot of natural elements in a modern setting. Rocks and iron cover the walls, the bar top is lighted, recycled glass and small water features can be found throughout the restaurant. The chandeliers are made of a stone called selenite (a type of gypsum), which our crew chipped apart and assembled themselves.

What guided your decision to purchase and run your own restaurant/bar?

We had opened some very successful restaurants for other people and were finding that we liked the hospitality industry. We also like the idea that we can really be part of a community — something you don't feel too often in Los Angeles. We have a chance to give back by hosting charity events, catering fundraisers and donating dinners for silent auctions.

How much time do you spend on-site?

I was at O-Bar every night for the first two years, but have now tapered off a lot. Our office is right next door so we're around all day and at least part of the evening.

What obstacles, if any, have you experienced while operating a restaurant and bar, and still owning and running your design firm? What kind of surprises have you encountered since O-Bar opened?

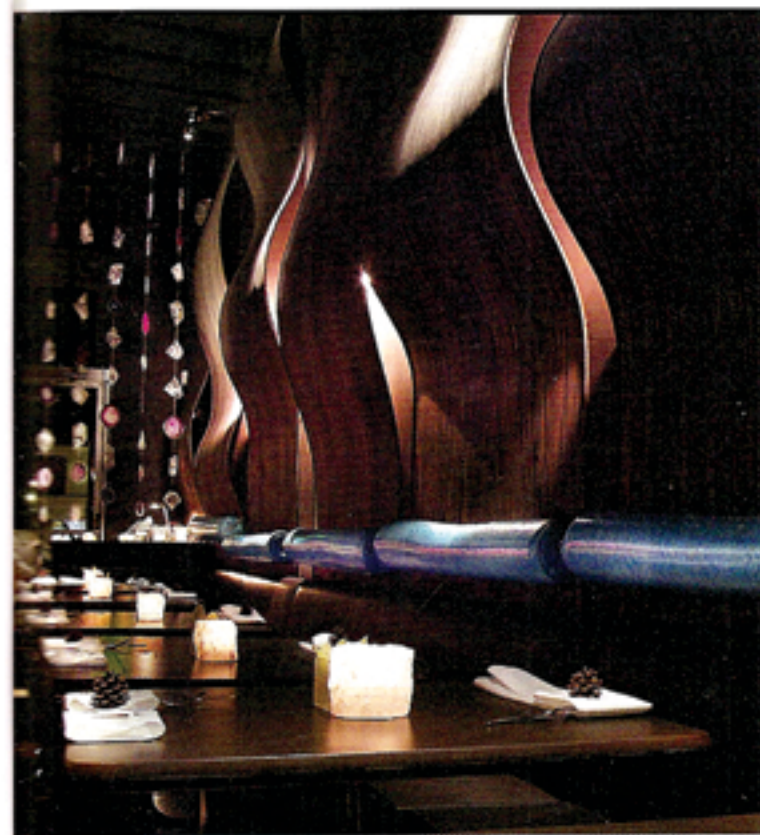
Neither Thomas nor I had ever worked in a restaurant before and I spent the first two years learning all that I could. Things like grease traps and food costs were pretty much foreign to us before that. Restaurant accounting and being patient with a customer who wants to yell were all big lessons for us. Fortunately, we have had some really great managers to keep things running. Since we only operate, as op-

posed to manage, the restaurant, for us it's like having company come over every night. We can throw a party whenever we want.

You first delved into the restaurant designing business with Tao in New York and Koi in Los Angeles. How did these projects come about and how have your past restaurant projects been reflected in your current?



Above: O-Bar Restaurant, located on Santa Monica Blvd. in West Hollywood; Right: The interior of O-Bar Restaurant features fabric-draped walls, quartz votive candles and elegant chandeliers; Opposite page: O-Bar's veneered wall treatments feature arcs and curves.



Someone who has been to several of our projects might recognize certain elements: We like to use candles and put new and unlikely finishes on old pieces. However, we really try to make each restaurant individual: Tao, Koi, Citizen Smith, O-Bar, the Penthouse, the Wilshire, Table Eight and Empress all have their own personality. You might recognize a similar chair, but the overall vibe is unique in each place.

Now that you have owned and operated O-Bar for approximately four years, do you have any plans to open new restaurants? If so,

what kind of atmosphere would you like to create?

We are actually in the process of creating a restaurant that will be rolled out to different cities. I can't really say much about it, except that we want it to be fun. There's so much going on in the world today and people should go out to a restaurant or club and just enjoy themselves. We want to help create happy memories. Whenever we get an e-mail or card from someone who says they had the best birthday ever at our place, or their boyfriend proposed at the garden window, or how much fun they had at New Year's Eve — that's what hospitality is all about.

Thomas Schoos Design is owned and operated by Michael Berman and Thomas Schoos. The design firm has designed more than 30 projects, both commercial and residential, since opening its doors in June 2006, including the homes of Ashlee Simpson, Ellen DeGeneres and Tommy Mottola. Projects currently in the works include a limited collection for Arzu Rugs designed by Schoos, Personality Hotels, San Francisco, Luxor Steakhouse and Casino floor, Las Vegas, and Yacht Harbor Tower Hotel, Waikiki, Hawaii.



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