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RESTAURANT HOSPITALITY

Get Set:

Tabletops to Take You Into Tomorrow

Your chef thinks of the plate as a palette for displaying the art of cuisine. Your designer thinks of the tabletop as an extension of the decor. Your dishwasher and your servers each have their own ideas about the tablesetting, too. It needs to be practical, durable, and appropriate for your restaurant's style. Cost is a consideration, and so is availability for reordering.

Consultant **Clark Wolf of Clark Wolf Company, NYC**, adds yet another dimension to tabletop thinking: That of the customer. The tablesetting affects the way customers perceive the food and atmosphere at your restaurant. Comfort counts, and so does style. "I think design and detail are more important than they've ever been in America," he says.

Since 1986, Wolf has consulted on food and hospitality projects ranging from restaurants and nightclubs to hotels, resorts, casinos and specialty food retailers. His client list includes numerous restaurants for Loews Hotel Corporation, such as The Royal Pacific Resort and The Portofino Bay Hotel, both in Orlando. Other credits include Mandalay Bay, Mandalay Resort Group, Las Vegas; Park Place Entertainment in Las Vegas and Atlantic City (Caesar's Palace, Paris Las Vegas and more); and restaurants such as The Gaucho Room at the Loews Miami Beach Hotel, Christopher Marks in Washington, D.C., and the Manhattan Ocean Club among others. Most recently Wolf has begun creating a new tabletop collection, Clark Wolf Designs for Fortessa. His line of tableware is aimed at the consumer market as well as professionals. This crossover of tabletop products reflects a definite trend: "People want a residential feeling when they dine out, and they want professional quality at home," Wolf says.

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By Gail Bellamy

SEA AND BE SEEN: Tabletops at Caffe Aldo Lamberti feature a variety of scene-setting dinnerware to complement the seafood-oriented Italian menu.





New showplates and flatware are part of the updated interior at Caffè Aldo Lamberti. Lamberti favors a simple, contemporary tabletop. Eye-shaped plate: Seti, Fortessa Accentz; Blue-rimmed dinnerware: Fortessa Dimensionz; Flatware: Fortessa Forge Collection; Wine Glasses: Riedel Tyrol Crystal.

Because he believes plates need to function with the flatware as well as the food, Wolf works to create tableware that can tie the restaurant experience together for customers. "What you hold in your hand has an impact on your mind and what you put in your mouth," he says.

The following are pointers that can help when you're making tabletop decisions.

Creating a Comfort Factor: Well-designed tablesettings can add a much-desired comfort component to your restaurant. Earlier this year, Wolf told *RESTAURANT HOSPITALITY* that restaurants providing comfort value will be the ones that attract customers.

For instance, casual settings such as tapas bars are gaining popularity. "Many restaurants around the country are serving a small, a la carte menu, doing lunch in a completely different way—a public residential experience. You need dishware that makes you feel not necessarily like you're in a restaurant, but rather on a couch having a cocktail and a conversation. It's like being at the home of some really successful friends with good taste," Wolf says.

Multi-Dimensional Mini Design Statements: As Wolf sees it, tableware is the last opportunity to adjust the emotional experience that a restaurant provides for its customers. Patrons hold flatware and glassware in their hands, and feel its weight and balance. Dinnerware provides a backdrop for the food and enhances its presentation.

Tableware provides an opportunity to adjust the emotional experience that a restaurant provides for its customers.

Tabletop elements can also provide a depth of experience by adding a touch of the exotic or authentic. "The role of the tabletop is multiple, and it really depends on the rest of the restaurant," Wolf says. "Sometimes the tabletop needs to add to the design of the room, sometimes it just needs to support it and be right, and sometimes it's thematic and you need those other language pieces—French or Italian, for example."

Building Blocks: Your tabletop look also can be updated or supplemented gradually. "The smart restaurateur invests almost invisibly, and tableware is an area where that can be done," Wolf says. "It is affordable, and it can be updated." For

instance, he points out that heavier flatware can be added as a restaurant matures. "When you add tableware, you don't have to replace everything in the property. You can update the look and feel without messing with the budget."

Finally, he points out how hotels have helped steer the tabletop trends today. "A lot of restaurants are hotel-based, and that's another important crossover. Hotels have done their best to shed the rigor and stuffiness of old pattern china and overly ornate flatware. People love to have a fabulous mattress and a brilliant bathtub, but they no longer feel excited about silver chafing dishes."

The Plate as Palette

Independent restaurants, too, are gravitating to tablesettings that make an inviting design statement. At Caffè Aldo Lamberti, the tabletops recently have been updated, as part of a two-year interior renovation project. Owner Aldo Lamberti wanted a clean, modern tablesetting that complemented the decor.

Born in Naples, Italy, Aldo Lamberti opened Ristorante Lamberti in Cherry Hill, N.J., in 1985, followed two years later by the fine dining Caffè Aldo Lamberti. Today, his family of restaurants in the Delaware Valley also includes ten Lamberti's Cucina restaurants, Forno Pizzeria and Grill, and Pastavino.

The 325-seat Caffè Aldo Lamberti stayed open during a two-year remodeling. There's a new wine cellar, and the menu focuses on regional Italian cuisine. Approximately 60% of the menu is devoted to seafood, with a house specialty being whole fresh fish. "On any given day, we have five or six whole fish, which we bone tableside," Lamberti says. The selection changes daily, based on availability.

The interior, too, draws inspiration from the sea and nautical references. The dining areas, Lamberti says, feature "light woods, like those found on a boat, with a nautical feeling. The colors are purples, mustard, terra cotta, and white." The tablesetting features Forge pattern flatware, one of Clark Wolf's designs. **R**