



Yar

What happens when one of Melbourne's bright young things gets given carte blanche with the interior of a Southbank Japanese/Korean restaurant? Yar, that's what...

Text: Sophie Gebhardt

Photos: Michael Downes, Urban Angles

Yar, at 2 Queensbridge Square, Southbank, is what you might call a 'signature' work, in the sense that David Saunders, of S2 design, has writ his design philosophy loud across the four levels. But this signature is not about the way the place looks as much as it's about how it comes to look that way — the principles behind the choice of colour, texture, and the materials that are used.

Yar is now described as "Australia's largest Japanese/Korean restaurant", capable of seating 300 people. But it was just a huge concrete shell when handed over to David. The only brief from the client was in terms of the placement of and fittings for the kitchen, and that the restaurant's interior should be unique without costing the earth. This latter requirement fits neatly with David's philosophy, which is all about paring back, reducing the amount of materials used, recycling materials destined for other purposes. As a result, the many-layered Yar is full of intriguing detail; each level has a particular feel and a particular creative touch, yet is never a hodge-podge or jumble. A red and green paint scheme dominates, which David describes as "Asian with a twist", and this scheme ties the different levels together without becoming overpowering at any point.

East Meets 'Pop'

Throughout the restaurant are works of art by Daniel Truscott, an artist who David collaborates with on a regular basis. And I can see why. Truscott seems capable of just about anything, from the Japanese brush painting inspired stencils of *koi* that decorate the concrete columns, to the paintings of the giant *kokeshi* dolls on the toilet doors (they're something like a Japanese version of the Russian doll — garish and rotund). Then there are the battleship-grey stencils of helicopters across the ceiling of the toilets themselves, which not only give a pop-cultural nod to the Korean War (well, that's my reading of them, anyway), but also periodically rumble to life with the sound of cars from the car-park overhead.

The fascinating thing about Truscott's work is that it moves from the sublimely beautiful through the full spectrum to kitsch, all of which is incorporated into Yar at some point. Given that Asia, and perhaps Japan more than any other country, spans this spectrum of artistic production in ways the West can only dream of, Truscott's use of a multiplicity of styles is itself a part of the restaurant's cultural referencing.

For a bit of an Asia buff like myself, particularly in terms of the richness of its interior design and the decorative nature of even the most functional object, Yar is something like a treasure trove of inspired creations. Upstairs David has used sushi mats as lampshades, seagrass matting on the walls. The large red and green geometric wall hangings represent the folds of an origami whale, which then hangs, in its completed state, above the upper dining area. And David's use of a Korean engineering textbook from the 1940s as wallpaper is not merely a touch of design genius — the book belonged to one of Yar's owners. Such details then, are not just stylistic appropriations, but make connections to the cultural and personal genesis of the restaurant.





Back to Basics

Over the bar upstairs the ceiling is merely the struts of a ceiling; again, this is an element of David's principle of not using unnecessary materials. The bare hardwood sits well with the blood-red tiles behind the bar and the polished concrete of the massive columns that prevent the carpark from coming down on our heads. There's a strong sense of the industrial without the coldness that often accompanies that style. In fact, quite the reverse, as this huge space is a warm space, much of which is due to the colour scheme and the glow of the materials. There are numerous nooks for private dining, or larger areas for big groups. Curtains of brightly coloured ribbon, dyed to David's specifications, enclose the various eating areas, but do not act as constraints on the sense of space.

Downstairs, the eating area is something like the covered food halls that are found throughout Asia, with communal tables, bench seating, and an attention to detail that makes this much more than an imitation. For example, the pendant lights over the communal table hang from a huge recycled iron bark beam (once part of a bridge). Elsewhere recycled or locally sourced plantation timber has been used to great effect. Either highly lacquered, such as in the tables and chairs of laminated bamboo, or with the deep timbre of age, the wooden surfaces invite the touch.

A smattering of highly polished stonework throughout the restaurant also taps into the overall theme, as it is resonant of the black lacquered wood used in Asian furniture and knick-knacks, and, of course, the stone of alters and temples. David has used Caesarstone's 'Night Sky' around the EcoSmart fireplace on the second level, and it's a bit like an altar — intentionally I'm sure. This area offers patrons an alternative to traditional dining, with a comfy black leather lounge as seating: a place to partake of pre-dinner drinks or appetisers, sinking in to the glow of the fire as it reflects in the surface of the stone.

Get Yer Yar Yars Out

It's hard to believe that not so long ago this place was a concrete shell, as Yar has a feeling of depth to it that is rare in a new venue. Which is not to say the restaurant is not also modern: it is, but the layers of cultural references, the layers of the restaurant itself, contribute to a rich historical texture that belies Yar's contemporary urban surrounds. S2 design has achieved something quite remarkable, and I'd encourage a visit, as it's a bit like a treasure hunt, or a tour of a really wacky art gallery. And while you're there, sample some of the food prepared by the Japanese and Korean master chefs. By all accounts it is very, very good.



Yar: 2 Queensbridge Square, Southbank VIC
(03) 9699 3556 or (03) 9699 3557

S2 design: (03) 9534 9181 or
enquiry@s2design.com.au

CaesarStone Quartz Surfaces: (02) 8339 7400
or sales@caesarstone.com.au