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Designing Dining

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Designing Dining

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WINE

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Series Cabernet blends are Kenwood and Chateau Ste Michelle (both around \$60 per bottle in the US). And Taittinger has long been adorning its vintage Champagnes with art by painters Victor Vasarely and Roy Lichtenstein.

Off the beaten artistic path but every bit as classy, the Staglin Family Vineyard from Napa Valley, which produces excellent Chardonnay and Cabernet, features the sculpture 'Winged Woman Walking' by Stephen de Staebler on its labels, while Didier Dagenau, from the Loire Valley, uses magnified photos as the basis for his Pouilly-Fumé labels.

Music lovers need not feel left out. The Bava family of Italy's Piedmont region believes there is an emotional link between tastes and sounds — an affinity between stringed instruments and red wine on one hand, and brass instruments and white wine on the other. Its Bava Gavi features a hunting horn on the label while the barrique-aged Barbera d'Asti is called 'Stradivario' and features a violin. And in the ultimate curtsy to fashion the Frescobaldi family of Tuscany produced its 1993 Brunello di Montalcino with a red silk label and neck ribbon and packed it in black lacquer boxes.

All of this sounds like good fun and niche marketing — but there is also a serious side to the 'Designer Wine' phenomenon which involves French and American wine making traditions. In recent times some canny French producers have been subtly changing the style of their wines to suit American tastes — and one taste in particular. The object of their desire is one Robert Parker, wine critic, publisher and author, whose recommendations carry enormous clout in the USA. Parker, whose nose is insured for \$1m (it would, wouldn't it?), awards points out of 100 to thousands of wines and these scores are followed diligently by millions of American wine buyers who look for them in stores and on restaurant wine lists. Parker has a sort of George Bush approach to wines. He likes them big and fruity and powerful and is often unimpressed by the

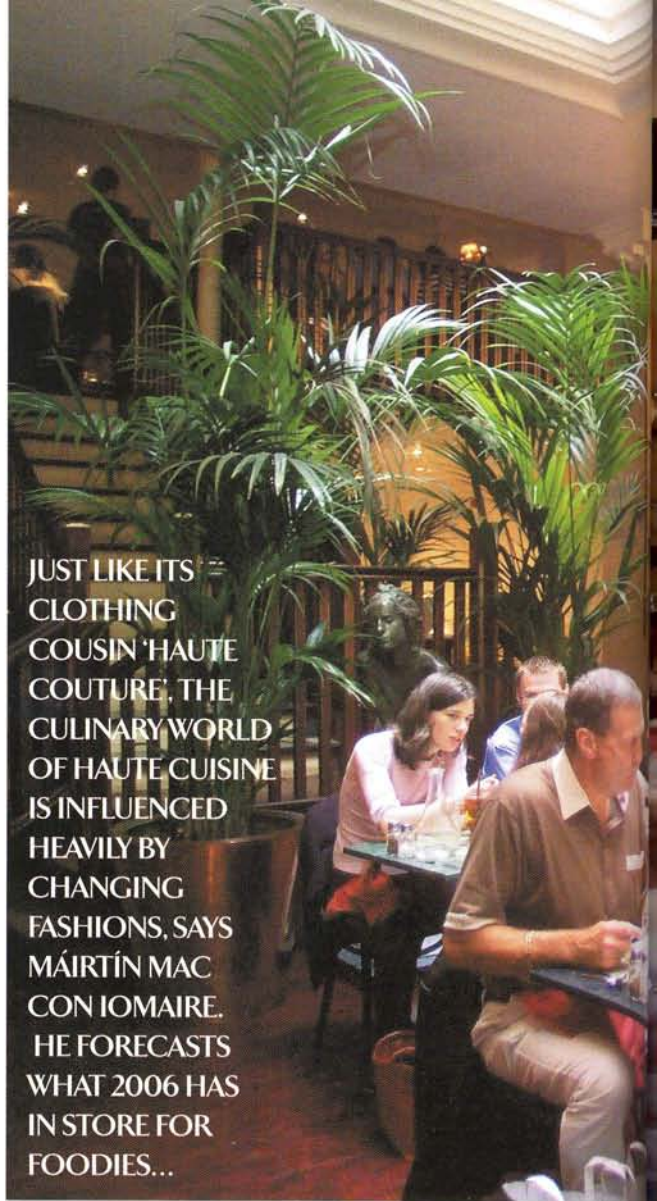
subtlety of French wines in particular.

A high score from Parker can add 20% to the price in the shop and some French producers have seen an opening to gain sales and profits by making 'Parker Wines'. The issue came into the spotlight last year with a public spat between Parker and the English wine writer Jancis Robinson over the merits of a 2003 Chateau Pavie, a Premier Grand Cru Classe estate in St Emilion which happens to be owned by a millionaire businessman called Gerard Perse. Parker described the wine as 'sublime' and gave it a score of 96. Robinson however was scathing and described the Pavie as 'completely unappetising', 'porty sweet' and 'ridiculous'. She scored it at 12 out of 20. Both critics began bitching about each other in columns and websites and Ch. Pavie wallowed in the publicity, eventually releasing the wine at a premium price of €1,300 a case. It was snapped up by Parker fans.

The more serious debate however occurred in the small restaurants and cellars of Bordeaux where there is a strong feeling that some French wine makers are selling out to the American cultural hegemony by making 'McDonalds Wines', designed for the American palate and abandoning their own heritage and tradition. They point to some recent St Emilions which are getting to taste like New World bottles with the big, heavy blockbuster tastes beloved of Parker. On the other side of the argument are French producers who are losing market share and say that, in order to survive, they must produce what the market demands.

This battle between the 'terroirists' and 'marketeers' is likely to continue as the European wine industry attempts to cope with New World competition and the opportunities which exist in the enormous American market.

Within the 'Designer Wines' niche however the French, who have practically patented 'style', should be in a strong position to match their Californian rivals in terms of image, exclusivity — and fat margins. ♦



JUST LIKE ITS CLOTHING COUSIN 'HAUTE COUTURE', THE CULINARY WORLD OF HAUTE CUISINE IS INFLUENCED HEAVILY BY CHANGING FASHIONS, SAYS MÁIRTÍN MAC CON IOMAIRÉ. HE FORECASTS WHAT 2006 HAS IN STORE FOR FOODIES...

Sam Goldwyn advised 'never make forecasts, especially about the future' but with that in mind, let's ponder the trends in dining out in 2006. For the first time in our history, we Irish spend more on food to eat outside the home than we do on dining at home. This illustrates the transformation that has happened in Ireland over the last decade. A recent Campbell Catering report on the eating out market in Ireland shows that although we are going through a time of revolutionary change, driven by affluence, demographics and lifestyle, 'Meat and Two Veg' is still the favourite food (particularly among the 55-74 age group), although Chinese food has become a firm favourite among the 15-34 year olds. Dublin's Parnell Street, I predict, is on course to become Ireland's first Chinatown.

Within the world of fashion there is a colour council who decide annually on what the colours will be for the forthcoming season (actually they work three seasons in advance), this information is disseminated semi-annually at Premier Vision (Paris's fabric fair) and the designers draw inspiration from it at will. Trends in food tend to take a little longer to establish than fashion in clothing but, once adopted, they tend to last. Naturally there are always fads or gimmicks in dining out, as in fashion, that appear and disappear nearly as fast. One that springs to mind is the current fad in New York for restaurants where you eat in beds instead of at tables. One that is slowly growing and may last longer is the 'eat in the dark' restaurant where food is served by blind people, and sighted people are meant to experience an enhanced dining experience as they rely on only four of the five senses.

Food like clothing has its standard classics that never go out of fashion. Other foods, like style trends, are cyclical and are established in a slightly different variant each time. Prawn cocktail, flared-jeans, made a retro return in recent years but not quite as it has been served in the '70s and '80s. Trends in both food and fashion tend to be shaped by the upper end of the market whether in 'haute cuisine' or 'haute couture' and are then filtered down to the mainstream.

DESIGNING DINING

FOOD

Spanish wines are also growing in popularity, as the public learn that not all Spanish wine is Rioja. Drawing on the theme of queuing for quality, places on the two year waiting list for Ferran Adria's restaurant El Bulli are becoming a scarce commodity with rumours that he is no longer taking bookings and will close in two years' time.

VARIETY IS THE SPICE OF LIFE

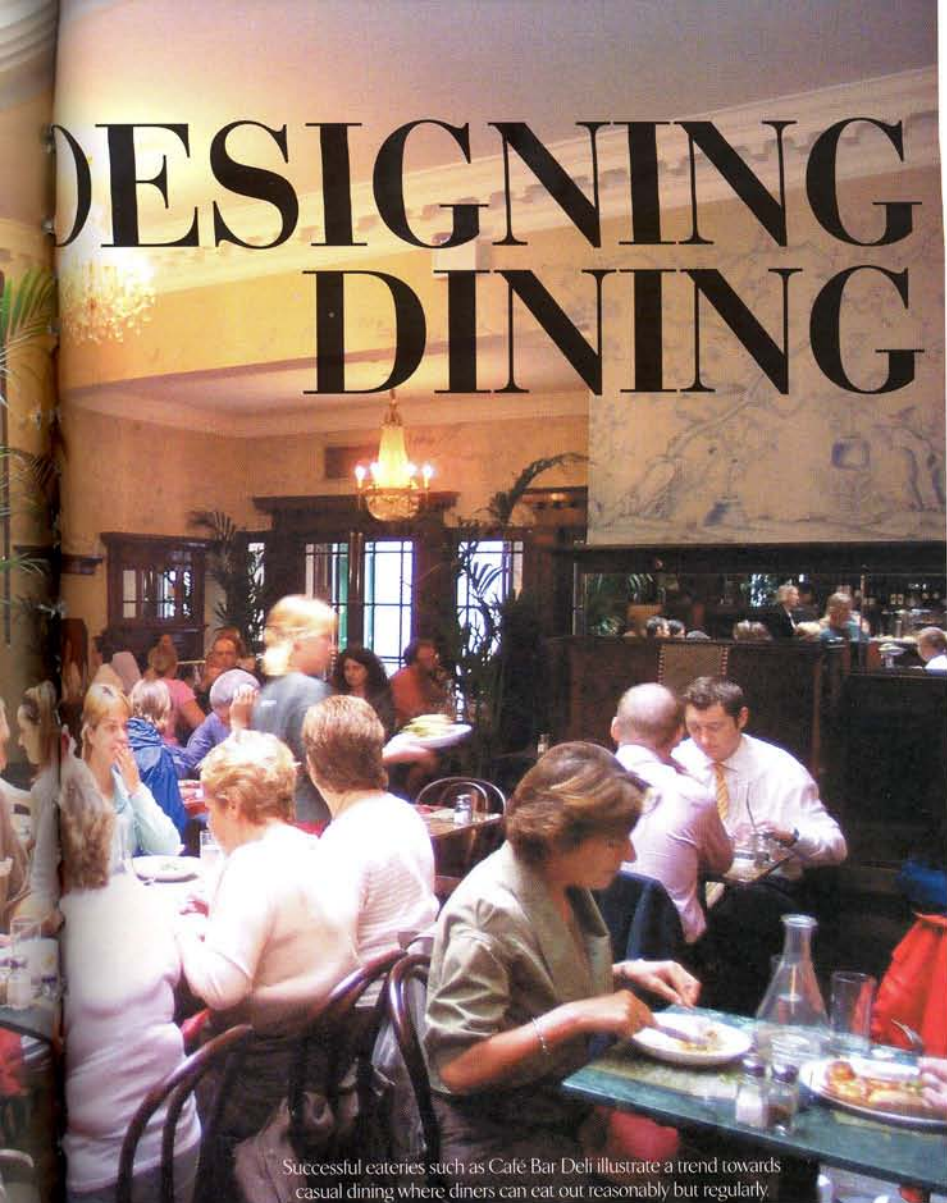
Richard Corrigan and Fergus Henderson have already popularised offal in Britain and there is a growth in what they call 'variety meats' on the menus across the Atlantic. Offal and wild foods will remain in vogue.

If the food industry had a colour council, I suggest the colours for 2006 would be earthy tones, hues of brown, beige, burnt orange and light purples. These will be seen in earthy dishes like bangers and mash, braised lamb shanks, beef olives, fish with red wine sauce, braised sweetbreads, roast root vegetables (salsify, beetroot, parsnips, carrots and turnips), braised red cabbage, kidney soup, liver and onions, butternut squash risotto, fava beans, artisan cheese dishes etc. The rise in 'Gastropubs' serving such dishes will continue, with 63% of the Irish population considering pubs to provide value for money, second only to restaurants at work (64%). In the ratings for overall quality of food, pubs (73%) came second to restaurants (81%).

A recent study, *Food for Thought* commissioned by Campbell Catering, shows that the majority of Irish people (41%), labelled 'Healthy Balancers', don't worry about what they eat or drink as they eat enough healthy things such as fruit or vegetables (smoothie and juice bar enthusiasts). The second largest grouping (29%), labelled 'Hedonists', eat and drink the things they enjoy and don't worry about it. The same report illustrates that regardless of the constant barrage in the media on dieting, only 11% of the population are on a diet. Of these women (17%) are more likely to diet than men (six per cent), and the 65-74 age group (17%) are the most likely to be on a diet. The trend for healthy eating, smoothies, juice bars, farmers markets, artisan bakers and organic food (although comparatively small) will continue to rise.

With the rise in the number of Central and Eastern Europeans living in Ireland, there is bound to be some cross-cultural fertilisation so look out for Borscht, Russian Salad, Coulibiac, and Goulash on a menu near you soon. My final prediction for the future, though not as early as 2006, is that Polish chefs trained in Ireland's best restaurants will return home and open top quality establishments that will become the pride of their home country. ♦

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Successful eateries such as Café Bar Deli illustrate a trend towards casual dining where diners can eat out reasonably but regularly.

diluted form. Trends such as 'fusion food', which was magical in the hands of the likes of Peter Gordon, often became vulgar and ridiculous when attempted by mainstream imitators. Current excitement for 'molecular gastronomy', although awe-inspiring in the hands of Heston Blumenthal at The Fat Duck or Ferran Adria at El Bulli, is poised to offend, bemuse and bewilder future diners when attempted by lesser sympathetic or capable cooks.

The trends for 2006 can be broken down into concepts, influences, commodities and colours. The overriding concept is simplicity, back to basics, good flavour and quality. This can be seen at a number of levels. At the upper end of the market there is a move away from formal table settings (linen table cloths and silver cutlery) towards a concentration on the quality of food and service on offer. People are more affluent these days but more casual in dress and etiquette. The new elite like to dress informally, eat out regularly and display both their wealth and knowledge subtly in their choice of food and wine. Expensive Italian and Californian wines from boutique producers are in vogue. There is also a growth in the marriage of food with wine, with many choosing to opt for two half bottles that will match each course, or

restaurants offering a larger selection of wines by the glass. The success of Town Bar and Grill, L'Gueuleton, Dax, Café Bar Deli, Dunne and Crezzenzi's, and the anticipated arrival of Charles and Patrick Guilbaud's new venture in Dublin illustrate the move towards places where you can eat out reasonably but regularly. In New York, Danny Meyer, of Union Square Café and Gramercy Tavern fame, has opened The Shake Shack where he sells top quality hamburgers, hot dogs, custard and milkshakes to a receptive audience for a reasonable price. His success shows that people are willing to queue for what they perceive to be quality.

The influence of Spanish, Moorish and Middle Eastern cooking will continue to spread in 2006. By this I don't mean merely Paella and Tagines, but the exciting cooking of the Basque and Catalan cooks who are currently eclipsing their French and Italian counterparts in the culinary arts. As this influence filters down look out for more tapas and pinchitos on offer, but in innovative variations like deep fried artichoke hearts, Jabugo ham, or botarga.