GUEST EDITOR

LAILA GOHAR

Photography TEX BISHOP *Illustrations* ISABELLA COTIER

Laila Gohar works wonders with food. So it's a surprise to hear her say that her work is not really about food at all, but rather about human behaviour. Born in 1988 and raised in Cairo, Egypt, Gohar moved to the States in 2009, working in restaurant kitchens and dipping a tentative toe into food journalism, before success emerged thanks to her catering business Sunday Supper, which captured the attention of New York's art and fashion crowds. Commissions to cater events for the likes of Prada, Hermès and Gucci quickly turned into column inches as word got out about her langoustine towers, artichoke swans, and busts made from butter. From design fairs to fashion parties, she brings food fantasies to life in environments where food is not usually centre stage. This is what she means when she refers to her work as a provocation, inspiring feelings in an increasingly anodyne world. Her ephemeral installations are designed to amuse and bemuse guests, who snap and post, telling the world: 'I was at the event, in the room, in front of the 15m tiramisu'. For her guest editorship, Gohar has focused her attention on restaurants. Her lens is not on the food they serve, as much as the feeling of hospitality they engender and the magic they inspire, which, she argues, is at the core of her mercurial practice and life's more wonderful moments beyond. Tuck in

Laila Gohar is never not on the move. When Wallpaper* first visits her in New York, she is preparing to leave for two months, travelling first to Istanbul and then to Paris, where her boyfriend, chef Ignacio Mattos, will work for a few weeks. 'Then on to Greece for a bit of a vacation,' she says, adding, 'I am super happy, but it doesn't always feel like a vacation,' referring to the reality of travelling with her baby son in tow.

Gohar has barely caught her breath since recently moving studios in Manhattan. 'It's bittersweet,' she says. 'My old studio was on a small street off Madison, between Two Bridges and Chinatown; a really peculiar little zone with a desolate 'end of the world' vibe. The block was shaped like a slice of pizza. My studio was tiny – the whole building was just 900 sq ft, with two floors on top of each other. It looked like an ugly little castle, and it had a very singular energy, with big windows looking on to the street, so there were always people poking their heads in to look at what we were doing.' After seven years of rapid growth, her team outgrew their original home. Charm evolved into mild claustrophobia, and it was time to move on. Now, she has a new, shiny 'big girl studio' in Tribeca: 'It's massive, with a lot of light. It's a space that I'll grow into.'

Although Gohar now most commonly works with food in her artistic practice, it wasn't so much the cuisine of her childhood that inspired her to take this route, but rather the hospitality of the culture, and the dinner parties that her parents would host at home. 'Coming from Cairo has definitely influenced my love for food – not Egyptian cuisine as much as the importance of hospitality,' she says. 'I've carried that with me, and it has shaped my views on hosting and entertaining with generosity. These are the pillars of my practice and culture.'

By way of example, she recalls childhood dinners spent at a 'big, bustling family restaurant in Cairo, called Andrea, like the girl's name. They would make rotisserie chicken and quail, and millions of different salads and vegetables. I spent a lot of my childhood there, and that really defined my views on what makes for a great restaurant experience. Of course, the food is important, but really it's about how the place makes you feel, and there are a lot of different factors that come into that.'

Against a backdrop of difficult times for the global restaurant industry, Gohar has chosen to dedicate her guest editorship to exploring the ingredients that make for a special dining experience.

In 2022, with her sister Nadia, Gohar co-founded Gohar World, a collection of delightfully surreal and fantastical tabletop objects and design items allowing fans to bring a serving of her idiosyncratic style into their own homes. Gohar's intuition paid off: it turns out that people, tired of conventional good taste, were looking for a soupçon of the weird and wonderful.

She has recently expanded the offering, launching select edible pantry goods, such as olive oil from a small producer in Lebanon, tinned fish from Spain, and tea from South Korea. A lot goes into serving up these treats as part of the Gohar World range. 'Food logistics can be complicated,' she says. 'But that's why we do it. A big part of our mission was to work with small artisans, farmers and food producers that do things in a way that is both meaningful and responsible. We set out to find producers that we could meet and see where and how the produce is being grown, so the supply chains are totally transparent.' 'We establish a line of communication to ensure the process and quality is in tandem with everything else that we do.'

It's a careful ethos that also extends to Gohar's creative process. In an increasingly digital era, she takes great satisfaction in working with her hands, unplugging when she can and operating in as analogue a fashion as possible. 'I don't really ever use a computer,' she says. 'I do what I need to do on the phone, and I wish I could use that less. I much prefer real-life communication, making prototypes with my hands. I hire people that feel the same way, who are capable of designing with a pen and paper.'

She's managing to keep the creep of AI into every facet of life at bay for now, but she does say, 'I think it's archaic to assume that these new tools are going to limit our creativity. We have to approach them as tools that can help boost our creativity, not take away from it. We must protect our humanity and diversity, what makes us unique as people, and we must cherish these powers however we can.' Indeed, she considers creativity for future generations 'extremely important. It's what keeps me alive. I think it's a matter of life or death'.

Last month, Gohar's friend, fashion designer Simone Rocha, was visiting New York to give a talk about her love for the work of artist Louise Bourgeois. During the talk, Rocha called out the 'Bread Bed', made by Gohar as an art piece for an exhibition that Rocha had curated. The value that she places on such collaborations is evident in her role as a guest editor, for which she asked a selection of friends and peers, including Rocha, India Mahdavi and Francis Mallmann, to contribute some of their own restaurant reflections. 'Cross-disciplinary collaboration can be incredible. There are some people, like Simone, that I have collaborated with over the years across a variety of different projects, all of which have been so meaningful because we have a shared language. Working together is a nourishing process; when I finish these projects, I feel energised.'

Gohar often wears Rocha's dresses, with their romantically dreamy silhouettes, when cooking or flying (some of her most treasured pieces now sporting rips and tears from so much wear) as much as a statement of her approach to life as her love of Rocha's designs: 'I don't really differentiate between clothes for when I'm working or when I'm going out. In the same way, I don't really believe in saving nice things for an occasion. Your nicest porcelain should be used whenever you can because every day is an occasion. Not to sound corny, but I believe that there is something to be celebrated every day. And, not to get too dark, but tomorrow is never guaranteed. To me, it feels important to use beautiful things every day.'

For now, Gohar is keen to continue following the current while the going is good. 'I'm very instinctive and intuitive. I never have a big five-year plan, I just make small decisions every day that I think contribute to leaning in one direction or another.

'I've always been very ambitious and I've always had a lot of ideas and discipline, but there was never a very clear roadmap as such. My career has been non-linear because what I do doesn't really exist as a career. Unlike becoming a doctor, or even a painter or an editor, where you have a career ladder that you can climb and an industry that recognises your work, I'm taking things as they come.'

As for the interior of her new studio space, she prefers, she says, to let the look and style take shape slowly and organically over time. 'I think the space that you're working in can have such an effect on your work,' she adds, as if foreseeing a buoyant time ahead. »

WRITER: TILLY MACALISTER-SMITH

Above and previous page, Laila Gohar photographed by Tex Bishop in London in August 2024

'OW58 T' chair, £1,747, by Ole Wanscher, for Carl Hansen & Søn, from Aram. 'Patrician' water glass, £90, by Josef Hoffmann, for J&L Lobmeyr, from Bonadea. 'Double Rouche Florence Furnace' white dinner plate, £130, by Ginori 1735 and Buccellati. 'America' silver-plated tablespoon, £90, by Christofle. 'Linen Sateen' tablecloth, from £175, by L'Objet

Food for thought

Delicious memories of an Egyptian childhood restaurant

I grew up in the heart of bustling Cairo. Just outside the city, in an agricultural area overlooking the pyramids of Giza, there used to be a mythical restaurant called Andrea. The restaurant sat on a farm, and felt like a tranquil oasis far from the chaos of the city. Andrea specialised in roast chicken and quail. There was an area dedicated to a giant vertical rotisserie where, at times, up to 100 birds would slowly spin, sizzle and spit. As a child, I would watch in wonder, marvelling at the sight, smell and sounds.

Near the rotisserie was a brick oven where two ladies would sit on the floor and make Egyptian-style pita, which is flipped in bran husk before it goes into the oven. The pitas would come out like puffed-up little pillows, and I couldn't get my tiny hands on them fast enough. A nibble would release a stream of steam straight onto my face, often slightly burning my upper lip. A little pain and a lot of pleasure. I also remember that waiters would bring all the salads and mezze to the table without being asked. Every table got all of the little plates, leaving you only with the choice of how many chicken and quail you wanted for the table. Of all the salads, I was especially fond of the boiled beets doused in vinegar – I remember my father showing me that I could dot my lips and cheeks with the beets to tint them red. To this day, every time I eat a beet, I press it to my lips in the hope of tinting them a little bit red.

The waiters that worked at Andrea were career waiters. Often their fathers had also been waiters at the same restaurant. They knew us all by name, and greeted the adults with a firm but friendly handshake. These were men who took pride in service. This wasn't a job they took between other jobs, or if another career didn't work out. The first time I travelled to Mexico, many years later, I heard waiters responding by saying *'para servirle'*, an expression that means 'here to serve you'. This took me back to the Andrea of decades before. I find the beauty of service is often lost on us these days.

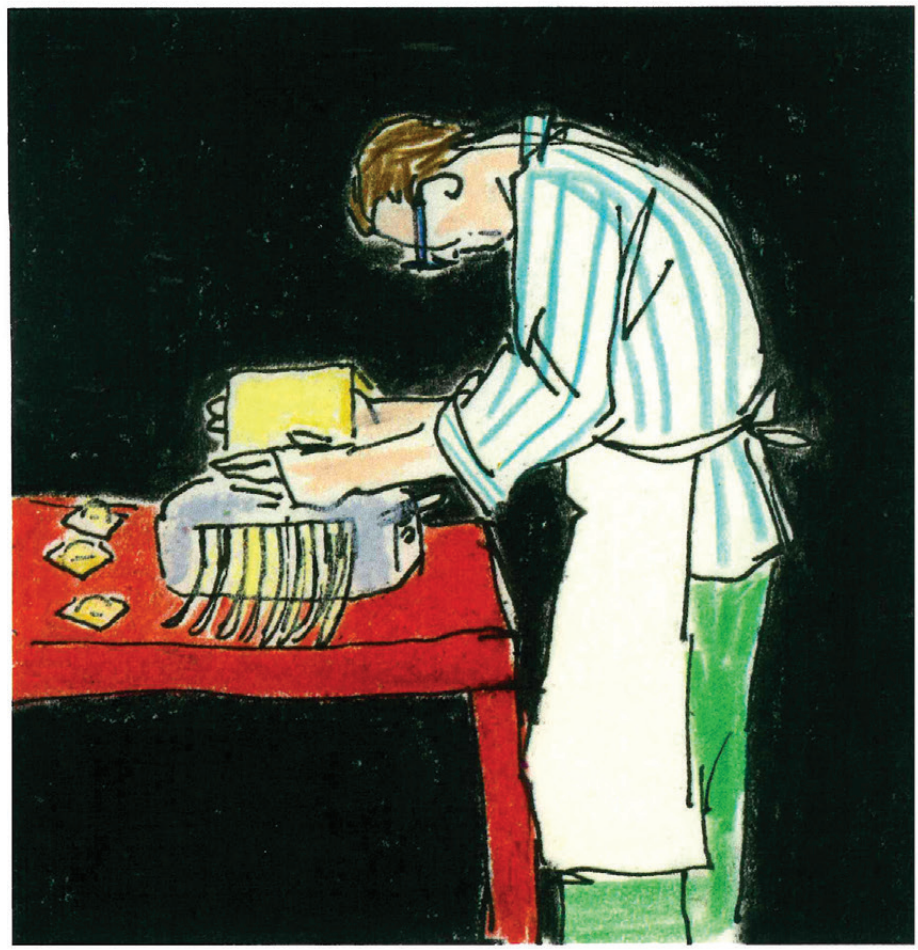
All around Andrea were vignettes of beauty, whether it be abundant but simple arrangements of wheat in tall, elegant cyan pottery vases, or large platters piled with peeled oranges on ice that would be dropped in the centre of the table at the end of the meal. A good restaurant is not about the food. Sure, the food plays a part, but a great restaurant is one that makes you feel good, where all the elements – the food, the service, the setting, and the ambience – feel like musical notes in perfect harmony.

I have a real aversion to 'best of' lists, especially when it comes to food. Also, there is nothing more obnoxious than a maître d' at a New York restaurant looking you straight in the face and telling you it will be a two-hour wait for a table, and asking if you would like your name added to the list. So instead of compiling a 'best of' list, I've asked some of my favourite people – restaurateurs, designers, artists and, most importantly, friends – to recall some of their most memorable dining places, past or present. Some of these places don't exist anymore, so the point isn't to try and hurry off to them, but simply to take a moment to appreciate what makes something truly great. »

Laila Gohar (in the middle eating bread) enjoying a childhood meal in Egypt with her family

Clare de Boer

Chef, New York



I love restaurants that feel effortless. This is not to say that restaurants should make no effort, but that I don't want to be aware of their mechanics, especially when they are specifically aimed at pleasing me.

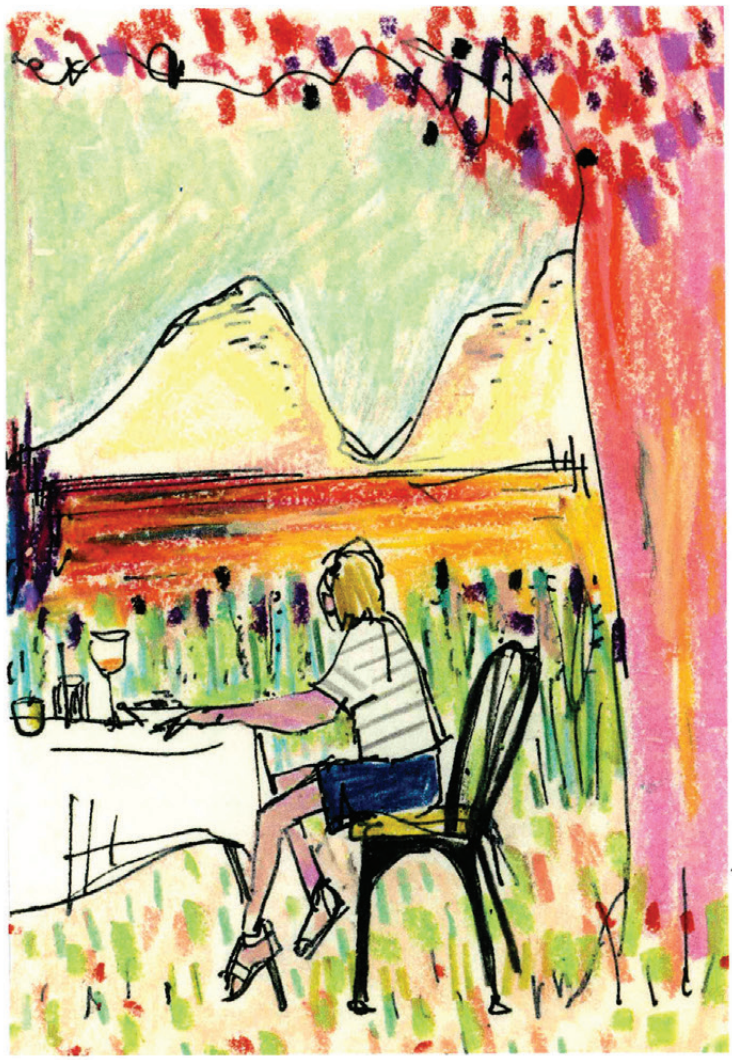
Many fine dining restaurants are so good at food and service that they make it seem effortless, but I'm not usually after fine dining. I like a cold beer, simple food and to have my plate cleared when I'm done. Ideally, this is somewhere that the people cooking and serving seem to be enjoying themselves. I like the restaurant team to be busy but relaxed, so I can largely be ignored to go about my business in a relaxed way, too.

It takes time for restaurants to develop ease and confidence, especially in ecosystems foaming with hype and compelled by the competitive pursuit for relevance. In New York, where I live, this tends to mean I like places that are busy, old and worn – past their 'prime', perhaps, or at least assured enough in their customer base that they don't give a monkey's uncle what I think. I want to eat in restaurants that are far from the glare of a review. These are restaurants that know themselves and know that what they do is good and that this is enough, so they leave their guests to have a nice dinner.

My local Italian deli, Un Posto Italiano in Park Slope, is exactly this. The owner, Mariuccia Pisani, knows that her fresh pasta and paninis are exquisite, so order and eat them as they come. I get the sense that she doesn't come to work with the aim of pleasing people, but rather to uphold her vision and values. She hums (rightly) with pride for her San Marzano tomatoes and aged Parmesan.

Francis Mallmann

Chef, Patagonia



One day, a seed was planted in my heart. I was 11 years old, sitting with my two brothers and sister on the back of my father's truck, heading for lunch at Le Petit Restaurant in Bariloche, Patagonia. It was the mid-1960s, and the restaurant was owned by the chef Baroness Ruth von Ellrichshausen.

Ruth always dressed beautifully. Together with her husband Alfred, they were an important part of our childhood. We enjoyed Christmas, Easter and other elegant lunches throughout our youth – highlights in our mountain upbringing. Despite being children, at such beautiful tables, we were treated as adults. We had a splash of wine, napkins filled with small flowers, handwritten ink menus with watercolours. I remember fruit and vegetables from their garden: rhubarb, endives, mâche lettuce and other exotic ingredients that we would rarely eat in our own lovely home, where lunches were more typically potatoes, carrots and squash.

That summer day, by the Nahuel Huapi lake, the table was set under an old shady tree. I sat there, soaking up the white linen table-setting, to a soundtrack of Vivaldi and César Franck, melting into the cushioned chair. I can't remember the menu, but the theatrics of lunch became a soft arrow to my heart. I knew then I wanted to be a chef.

Because, at the table, everyday we celebrate life and hope. That day the mise-en-scene took over my life like a huge condor that grabbed me by my blazer and took me on a never-ending flight right up to the present. If that gesture of a shared table celebrating beauty could encourage the dreams of a kid like me, then anything is possible. Thank you, Ruth, for this dream-like voyage through the world of cooking.

Tamar Adler

Food writer, Hudson, NY

The meal we had the day we got engaged has stayed with me. It was a lunch at Asador Astillero in Getaria, a professional, business-like affair frequented by business-like Basques, at the very end of a business-like pier. I always enjoy places like that – ones that don't romanticise what's implicitly romantic. I like clean, plain tables, sturdy chairs – nothing perfunctory, of course, but nothing indulgent either. Restaurants in Milan often have this quality. So do some in Genoa and the Basque Country.

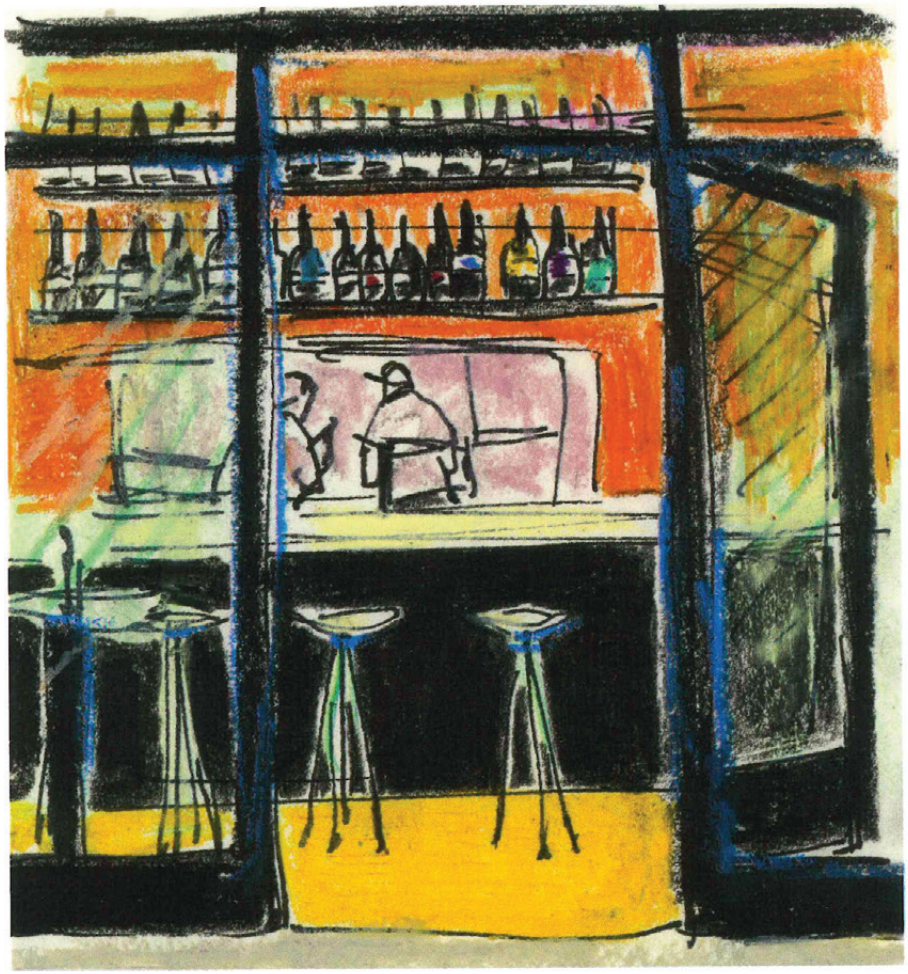
That morning we had made a pilgrimage to the Balenciaga museum in Getaria, Cristobal Balenciaga's hometown. Afterwards, we followed various people's directions and found ourselves the beneficiaries of the last table at Asador Astillero. After a bit of handholding, as we struggled with the names of dishes in Basque, we landed on percebes – goose barnacles – and rodaballo – a huge turbot cooked over fruit wood and served dripping in olive oil and fried garlic. These are two of the most famous dishes of the lands around the Bay of Biscay. We drank txakoli, which is from Getaria. Later that day, after a long and beautiful descent into Deba, we were again fate-kissed. We got a hotel room in town. We dropped our things, ate cheese and bread and drank local cider. We went to the beach and hopped around, finding shells. And then we got engaged.

Someone asked Pete if he had planned the engagement, and his answer had just been to recite the day we'd had, especially the meal at Astillero – as though after a meal of percebes, rodaballo, txakoli, just the two of us, alone in a sea of gracious Basques, beside the gracious sea, of course we decided to get married.

There are other meals. The plateau de fruits de mer that we ate later on the same trip at Chez Albert in Biarritz, or a year later, a similarly unexpected lunch – exploring a mountainside on bicycles – of preserved duck and salad and whatever light red wine they were pouring. The point is the way that restaurant meals can mark time. They are spiritual milestones. Often it is their fullness that inspires action – admitting that you love someone, making momentous decisions, understanding that you've touched, for a moment, the completeness of what life has to offer. That is, I think, what the great restaurants can offer.

Nacho Alegre

Creative director, Barcelona



As the former owner of a failed restaurant and the current owner of a yet-to-be-successful bar, I've dedicated plenty of time to the question of 'what makes a restaurant experience exceptional'. Probably not enough, which is a shame because otherwise my CV would look very different. I do like and look for uniqueness, in any of its forms. I think it's when one of the parts is absolutely special and authentic – whether it's the venue, the food or the service – that magic happens.

We should cherish uniqueness. We tend to take it for granted. But one thing I'm beginning to understand is that projects succeed not because of what makes them special but despite it. The standard tends to work. Boring is good for business. Everything that is out of the ordinary makes things more difficult. And in food, this is probably even more true than in other areas of life.

Of all the restaurants in Barcelona, 99 per cent have the same eight or nine dishes. Not having them on your menu is a threat to your economics. There's a concept in design called MAYA, which stands for 'most advanced yet acceptable'. It suggests that designers should push the boundaries of innovation to the edge of what consumers are comfortable with, and not further, otherwise you run the risk of disengaging with them. The problem is that most creative people enjoy both creating and experiencing things that are far beyond that point.

A couple of years ago I was having dinner with my now ex-father-in-law, who is an intelligent person but also really enjoys not just fine dining but any kind of exceptional dining experience. I had discovered this one place and I proudly showed it to him. The second night in a row that we ate dinner there, he said to me: 'This place is too good; you had better enjoy it for the rest of the summer because next year it won't be here'. And, of course, he was right!

India Mahdavi

Designer, Paris

My first evening at Adrère Amellal, in the Egyptian oasis of Siwa, was an unforgettable experience. When I arrived in the pitch-black night, I was guided by gas lights and bonfires through the stars and the silence. We were led to the most beautiful setting of a rock formation creating a natural open-sky dining room with a spectacular view over a white mountain. It was a chilly evening, as it can be in the desert, and as we sat, I could feel the gentle warmth of the braseros under the tablecloth. The table-setting was sophisticated and simple at the same time. What came after was nothing less than magical. I felt I belonged to planet Earth. To the universe.

Founded by Dr Mounir Neamatalla, Adrère Amellal is an ecolodge built from kershef – a mixture of salt and mud – set in the most beautiful, remote landscape. It resembles a vernacular village at the foot of the white mountain of Adrère Amellal, facing the Sahara desert. All the vegetables are picked from surrounding organic gardens. The food is cooked in wooden ovens and served in earth pots glazed with honey and egg yolk, which was a technique used by the pharaohs. The cuisine is a modern take on ancient Egyptian food, reviving flavours with sycamore fruit, dates or minted basil, all of which are locally available. Every evening, dinner is served in a different location chosen according to moonlight with a ceiling of stars above. The grounds are lit by candles and bonfires, engaging all the senses and creating a moment of magic that remains forever.

To me, a good restaurant involves three types of comfort: visual, physical and emotional. Authenticity is important, as is local produce, good service, and anything that enhances the experience. Customers want to feel the care and love that is put into a restaurant. Sometimes, paying small attention to details can add up to create a suspended moment of happiness.

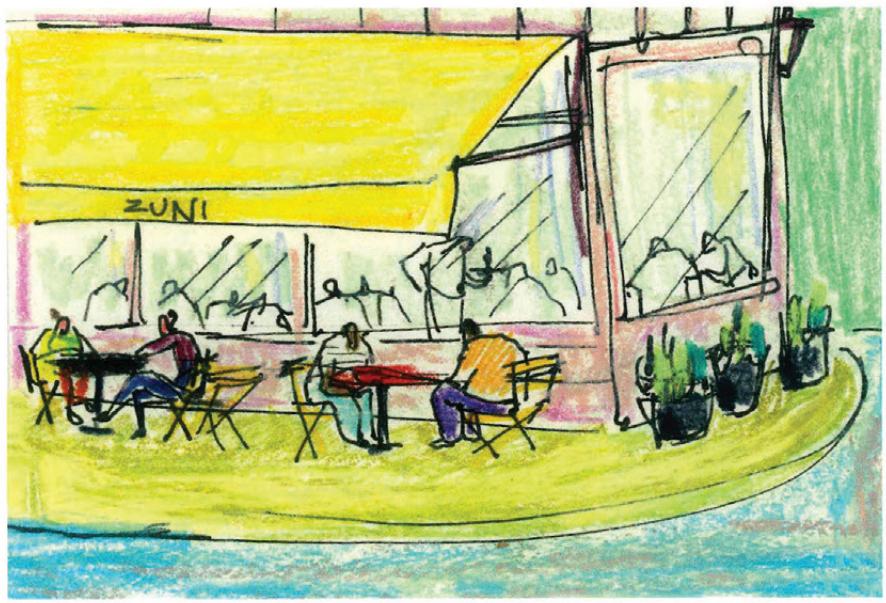
Simone Rocha

Fashion designer, London

When faced with only picking one meal in a restaurant, I find it hard to choose. But I have always loved La Chaumière, tucked in off the side of the road up a mountain above Nice. The feeling of arriving at dusk after a salty day in the sea and finding its tiny sign in lights is always magical. I've been many times over the last 20 years with my family and friends, from being a kid rolling around in the boot of the car on the way back down, to bringing my daughters and them drawing on the table. I love the room. It is simple, with stone floors, small tables with white tablecloths (my favourite), and metal chairs with woven wicker bases. The room centres around one open fire with a wooden block in front where the meat is prepared. It is very relaxed and feels low key. You could be in someone's living room. Everything is cooked on the fire, essentially magical meat and potatoes. To start, I would recommend the giant wicker basket of crisp crudités. Then the côte de boeuf and potatoes. And finally the apple tart, which is accompanied by a massive bucket of cream that is spooned onto your plate. Perfect!

Ignacio Mattos

Chef, New York



I am always drawn to restaurants that are reliable, casual and give you an intense feeling of comfort. Of course, there are those 'special occasion' restaurants that can inspire you on another level. The experience here is much deeper, with an attention to detail that has the power to surprise and leave you in awe.

I was fortunate enough to work with Judy Rodgers at Zuni Café, which is now owned by Gilbert Pilgram. It is still one of the most magnificent restaurants I've worked and dined in. I'm not a big fan of nostalgia, but I often think back to the consideration she put into all parts of conceiving Zuni. The location, the materials, the light, the sound and the menu all came together to play key roles in the way that guests experienced and interacted with the space.

I believe that people truly make a place, and Judy's integrity, values and focus on ingredients left a huge impact on me. Her meticulous attention to every subtle detail was present: in the service; how food was presented; the flowers; the art; and the music. This kind of intentionality creates a meal that is an experience in its own right. The hospitality is raw, restorative and personal. It has the power to make guests feel vulnerable, and that vulnerability leaves us open and willing to try something that can truly blow us away.

The people that I learned from – Judy, Alice Waters, Francis Mallmann, and more – are present in the experiences that I aim to create in my own restaurants. Their lessons of romance, detail, relationship-building and beauty all show up subtly in the decisions that I make when building my own sense of place. This timeless quality is the power of hospitality. Whether it is your neighbourhood spot, a tiny restaurant encountered on your travels, or a fine dining temple, the best restaurants each have something to say that is true to them.

Jasper Morrison

Designer, St Leonards-on-Sea, UK

Apparently, you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but I know within a few seconds of entering a restaurant if I'm going to like it or not. At least on the atmospheric side of things. The cooking is another matter, but quite often there's a relationship between the look and feel of a place and the quality of the cooking. My all-time favourite place that I've eaten in was a tiny, one-room trattoria inside a local train station in the small Tuscan village of Sant'Angelo in Scalo. The only reason it existed was to serve as a canteen for the vineyard workers at the large winery there. They served two types of pasta each day and a rough red wine in a ceramic jug. It was perfect.

Laila Gohar

Jean-Philippe Delhomme

Illustrator, Paris

I only like restaurants that I'm friends with. I hate those places where they greet you with a suspicious: 'Do you have a reservation?' It feels like boarding a plane with the flight attendant looking at your ticket and saying: 'Let me check with the company'.

The freedom to walk in somewhere on an impulse and feel welcome might be more valuable than the food – up to a certain limit. There is a wonderful, very small, discreet Japanese restaurant in East Williamsburg, which was one of my favourite places in the world. You could always find a seat at 9.30pm on a Monday night, but now there's a constant queue. I can't go anywhere where you have to queue, besides passport renewal. I know that, in New York, waiting half an hour in line, holding a giant latte and a dog leash in one hand, a phone in the other, to buy a croissant baked by a former fashion photographer, is as much of an activity as doing yoga. Most people do both. But it takes too much out of me. I'd rather be painting.

I love restaurants where they don't explain the meals, restaurants where they put your plate on the table and... no words. Where they don't stay around to give you a little lecture on the mix of ingredients involved. Is it to make people dream about the provenance of a potato?

I can love a painting in a museum without being told about its medium. It's different if you witness the artist in their studio. I can remember going for dinner at Laila's apartment and seeing her foraging and cooking five things at the same time, with all the burners on and the oven, too, while joking and sipping wine. Everything will be unpredictable, in abundance, on the table. Here is a lesson in cooking or painting more freely. The only chef restaurant I love is Pierre Touitou's 19 Saint Roch. We go with Agnès, his mother, and Pierre looks after us. I like to feel like an old person at a boxing match, being protected from the crowd by the champion himself.

John Pawson

Architectural designer, London

The experience of eating at a restaurant is the sum of so many parts. It encompasses the specificity of the occasion, the physical space, the quality of the light, the nature of the food and how it is served, the character of the human interactions – with people you know and those you don't – and the atmosphere, which is both the accumulation of all these things and something distinct in itself. Feeling at ease is always important to me. This derives in large part from the feeling that those around me are also at ease, but can also be disrupted by something as singular as strong perfume or certain sounds. I am generally a person of simple tastes: I can find profound pleasure in something as simple as a bowl of soup or a plate of cheese. But at the same time, my mind is currently full of memories of three exceptional meals that I recently ate in Copenhagen: one at Kong Hans Kaelder, one at Sushi Anaba, and the other at Noma. All were exemplary in every detail – a succession of honed sensations, each of them the outcome of unstinting commitments of intellectual and physical endeavour.

The key ingredients

What brings magic to the restaurant experience

The restaurant industry has had it tough. Those that were resourceful and resilient enough to withstand shuttering for good during the pandemic embraced myriad ways to still cater for their customers, turning menus into recipe boxes, and knocking up hatches and dispatches for meals on wheels. When we took off our masks, we expected distance from our fellow diners; in many places, covers were halved overnight. Suddenly we were sharing restaurants with a revolving cast of leather-clad bikers, shouting numbers at the servers like a bingo caller. Still today, it can seem like more brown bags than plates emerge from the kitchen.

Food costs and energy prices have rocketed, thanks to wars and climate crises. Supply chains have crumbled. There's a dearth of staff for kitchens and service. Personal finances have been decimated. Yet we still expect more. Some customers stand on their chairs to photograph their food, then complain it's cold. Others sit and scroll, barely looking at the food that's put in front of them, let alone their companions. Tripadvisor revenge reviews hover like a sword of Damocles. No shows abound.

What happened to humanity? Restaurants have always been places where people come together around food for a good time. Today, we need these times in our lives as an antidote to the chaos and fear, the disconnection and dysfunction that exist all around us. Restaurants are safe places for succour and celebration, where life outside can be paused for a meal. It's important we re-establish that lost sense of trust between restaurants and diners – and let's be clear: this is a symbiotic relationship and responsibility; we need each other to survive.

We also need each other to perform the magic that a good restaurant experience can deliver. With that in mind, we sat down with Gohar to discuss the key ingredients for bringing warmth and humanity into a restaurant experience.

Wallpaper* Let's start at the beginning shall we: bookings. Is any restaurant really good enough to merit booking a year ahead?
Laila Gohar Only in extreme circumstances, such as big celebrations and big groups, am I willing to make a reservation weeks in advance. Dining out is fun for its spontaneity. I like places that are able to balance advance bookings with enough seats for walk-ins, too. And an important note to all diners: if you make a reservation, you are duty bound to show up or cancel quickly. No shows ruin the fun for everyone. »

Opposite, 'America' silver-plated tablespoon, £90, by Christofle. 'Double Rouche Florence Furnace' white soup plate, £130, by Ginori 1735 and Buccellati. 'Patrician' water glass, £90, by Josef Hoffmann, for J&L Lobmeyr, from Bonadea. 'Linen Sateen' tablecloth, from £175, by L'Objet

Following page, left, 'Albi' dinner plate, £70; 'America' silver-plated fork, £90, both by Christofle. Opaline plate cover with baroque pearls, £72, from Gohar World. 'Linen Sateen' tablecloth, from £175, by L'Objet. Right, 'Perles' silver-plated knife, £140, by Christofle. 'Linen Sateen' tablecloth, from £175, by L'Objet

For stockists, see page 305

Styling assistant: Rosanna Bruce

Laila Gohar

Laila Gohar

'Food and wine stains at the end of a meal are not evidence of careless eaters, they are wonderful signs of a good time'

W* Do you think that how you are greeted at a restaurant sets the tone for the whole experience?
LG You only get one chance to make a first impression and being greeted warmly by someone switches the mood. You're stepping over a threshold into their world. I don't like being made to feel stupid for trying to get a table at short notice or being asked if I would like to be put on a waiting list for two hours. A restaurant can make everyone feel welcome, even if they're turning you away.

W* How do you feel about fixed versus loose furniture?
LG Restaurants where all the furniture is fixed can feel a bit stiff. I enjoy being able to pull my chair closer to someone I'm chatting to. But it's important not to take the piss; rearranging furniture on behalf of the staff is a step too far.

W* How do you feel about dark and moody lighting? Do you prefer to be able to see food and friends?
LG Lighting in layers – room, people, table, food – is a formula that works. Nobody looks good close-up under a spotlight. Real candles – not tealights and never battery-powered – are excellent for atmosphere, so long as diners don't start playing with the wax.

W* Does music add to the atmosphere?
LG I'm not a fan of music in dining rooms, particularly in the US where we talk loudly enough and tend to screech to compete over any music and each other. Music can be good early on before it gets busy, but a restaurant should note when it's time to let the chatter and clink of glasses and plates take over. This is my favourite soundtrack for a restaurant.

W* We've noticed a trend for branded fragrances in restaurants. Olfactory overload?
LG Our sense of smell and taste are so linked, it's important not to overpower the former while trying to excite the latter. There are very few food or cooking smells that are so bad, they need to be masked.

W* Tablecloths or tabletops?
LG I love tablecloths. For me, they are one of the aspects that make eating out feel special. A white bistro-style, pressed, stiff cotton tablecloth is so tactile. I think of it as a blank canvas before the meal begins. Food and wine stains at the end of a meal are not evidence of careless eaters, they are wonderful signs of a good time.

W* How much detail do you want a menu to divulge?
LG Key ingredients, cooking methods and accompaniments are sensible rather than stark lists or florid descriptions. I saw salt listed as part of a dish on a menu recently, and that felt a little too far. I feel allergens are better communicated by people, not menus. Handwritten menus are a nice way of bringing a human hand to the experience. It suggests someone who cares is in charge.

W* What makes a good server?
LG It takes a special kind of person to be able to serve beautifully. It's not for everyone – I know I'd be terrible. Serving naturally is a gift – it means being able to intuit someone's needs before even they know what they want. Treating service as a means to an income rarely works. It's impossible to be generous if you hate your job.

W* It feels like all restaurants have open kitchens these days. Do we only trust food that we can see being cooked?
LG Kitchens are pressurised environments and though open kitchens sometimes make for good theatre, they can also make chefs feel like lab rats. It's not a vibe at all to expect chefs to perform to the public. Let's bring back walls and dignity!

W* We're mystified in the US by how often empty plates get cleared one-by-one as diners finish, rather than waiting until the whole table is done. How do you feel about this?
LG I agree. Clearing single plates makes everyone feel bad for eating too quickly or too slowly. Clearing tables when everyone is finished helps to make the group feel like companions rather than competitors.

W* A final thought?
LG I love restaurants that are beautiful, that are romantic, that make you dream. Restaurants have the power to transport you beyond time and place. It can be anything from a sidewalk gyro stall in Crete to a fine dining temple in Burgundy. A good restaurant is an invitation to dream. ✱