





# Chic Restaurants Designed to Make Everyone Feel Welcome

While bigger cities like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles have world-renowned upscale restaurants and Portland, Oregon, and Austin, Texas, are recognized for their excellent casual dining, Denver has married the best of both, becoming known for its balance of high-caliber food in settings where neither suits nor jeans feel out of place. Once known primarily for its steaks and roadside stops, Denver now offers diners a unique mix of sophisticated menus in chic environments.

“High-quality food in comfortable spaces is how Denver is putting itself on the food map,” said Kimberly Timmons-Beutner of KTI, the interior design firm behind several well-regarded Mile High City restaurants, including Tag, Bubú, Slotted Spoon, and Guard and Grace. Guard and Grace was named best steakhouse in Denver by lifestyle magazine 5280 and more recently, as one of the “seven sexiest restaurants in Denver” by Zagat.

“In the past,” continues Timmons-Beutner, “the only concept of fine dining was a stuffy restaurant with starched white table cloths. Even if the food was spectacular, it was not a comfortable experience for everyone. Now the trend is “casual elegance.” Instead of white table cloths, we are seeing exposed wood table tops and unique, presentation tableware. Designers are doing the same thing that chefs are: using premium ingredients to create something equally enjoyable and more approachable.”

Design is a crucial part of what makes chic new Denver restaurants so welcoming. Guard and Grace maintains a relaxed feel because of the open atmosphere and scrupulous attention to detail. Everything from the glassware to the light fixtures was carefully considered to ensure that every type of patron would feel comfortable.

Front Range restaurants are also embracing the national farm-to-table movement, which highlights knowing how food is made, with a focus on local produce and meat. This trend alone has influenced restaurant design in several ways.

The farm-to-table emphasis on local sourcing plays out in design



**Rebecca  
Aronauer**  
Layer Cake  
Creative

elements, such as found objects used as design focal points and reclaimed spaces being transformed into restaurants. A favorite repurposed space of the KTI staff is Acorn. Located in the Source, one of Denver's newest dining hubs, this one-time steel foundry was just named one of *Bon Appetit's* best restaurants in America.

The farm-to-table movement also fosters a sense of community, with chefs and guests supporting local farmers - and an openness about where food comes from. Designers have taken a cue from both of these values, using long community tables that encourage conversation with other diners as well as the increasingly popular "chef's counter." This feature takes the ethos of openness a step further, with bar-style seating facing an open kitchen, giving diners a chance to watch their food be prepared.

"The open kitchen is a trend that we love," said Amanda Fairbairn of KTI. "The transparency between the chef experience and the guest experience really plays off the farm-to-table movement."

In Denver, as in other cities, many of the top restaurants are run by chef-owners, who have very distinct personalities and ideas. Translating each chef's culinary approach and their unique style makes designing a restaurant an especially collaborative process, according to Timmons-Beutner. "Good restaurant design takes listening to and working with chefs to create a space that corresponds to their food and their personality," she said.

For instance, KTI's design of Guard and Grace was the result of countless conversations with owner and chef Troy Guard of the TAG Restaurant Group. Guard describes the resulting space as, "not mine or hers, but just the best design."

According to Fairbairn, part of the process involves looking at the branding - including logos or menu concepts - to design a restaurant that matches that aesthetic.

"If the restaurant owners have not yet formalized their style, we'll work with them to understand and shape the brand," said Fairbairn. For example, if the chef knows that he or she wants to highlight the restaurant's extensive wine list or fresh fish, then the design will incorporate those themes into the interiors. Often, the restaurant's raw space drives the design. For instance, high ceilings, big windows or timbers on the rafters can become focal points.

Just as each restaurant is unique, so is each guest, a fact that savvy restaurateurs are recognizing with a service-first attitude that includes a readiness to swap ingredients to accommodate special diets. Diners want and expect a unique experience, not an overdone "theme."

"Customers go to special restaurants to have a special night, and that has to come through in the food as well as the design," Timmons-Beutner said.

In a busy restaurant, of course, the uniqueness of the design must be balanced with the space's functionality.

"Every inch of a restaurant has to be useable for the staff," said Timmons-Beutner. "The more thoughtful the design is, the easier their job is, which allows for a stress-free guest experience."

In restaurants, functionality is not a design trend. It's good business design.

KTI's Five Favorite Restaurant Design Trends:

- Chef's counters
- Community tables
- Open kitchens
- Local vendors
- Reclaimed objects as decorative elements

Kimberly MacArthur Graham also contributed to this story. \\



Photos by Daniel O'Connor

#### PREVIOUS PAGE:

*The centerpiece of Guard and Grace is the open kitchen, which creates a sense of transparency that reflects the farm to table movement.*

#### ABOVE TOP:

*A glassed-in wine cellar by the hostess station holds over 3,000 bottles of wine. Of the restaurant's two ASID awards, one was specifically for the hostess station design.*

#### ABOVE BOTTOM:

*The open main dining room combines sculptural seating and a variety of whimsical elements on the ceiling and walls to make each table feel intimate.*