

# Sur le Trottoir de New York

Qu'est-ce que c'est?

Even the most jaded New Yorker knows that a 100-year-old, 160-seat Parisian railroad station brasserie doesn't just plunk itself down in lower Manhattan because somebody thinks it's a good idea. Hence the uncommon sight of the *cognoscenti* in trendy SoHo peering with childlike wonder into the windows at 80 Spring Street. As if to say *Voilà!*, veteran restaurateur Keith McNally created Balthazar in April of this year, doing a remarkably convincing job of giving New York a Parisian brasserie that has quickly won over such fashion setters as Anna Wintour, Eric Fischl, Christy Turlington, Bret Ellis, Andre Serrano and even Ruth Reichl, restaurant critic of *The New York Times*. Architects and interior designers will be particularly intrigued that McNally has done so without their help, except in managing the engineering and filing the drawings.

Of course, the design community may be excused for letting out a collective groan. Who needs yet another "client" who appears to be usurping credit for the work of a professional designer? Yet habitués of the popular restaurants McNally has created over the past 15 years, including Odeon, Café Luxembourg, Nell's (none of which he still owns), Lucky Strike and another memorable new addition to the Big Apple, Pravda, tell a different story. The Francophile restaurateur, who has spent many years in Paris, really does design his own restaurants, displaying a knack for giving a new space a strong sense of place under a brooding patina of age.

Can architects and interior designers learn about creating satisfying environments from a talented non-professional designer like McNally? While his methods combine experience, intuition and inspiration in ways that don't correspond directly to the programming, planning, design and construction documentation of design practice, he follows many useful techniques that bear repeating. Whatever else designers may think of his work, it's hard to argue with a successful "client."

First of all, McNally knows his "client's" business—food service—inside out as a restaurateur must, so that when a specific opportunity arises, he isn't reinventing the wheel in getting off to a quick start. "In the back of my mind I keep ideas about restaurants I'd like to put into practice," McNally indicates. "When I see a space I like, I sum up the best of my ideas and deal with the possibilities of the space."

McNally quickly assembled a team to develop a program for Balthazar in what was once a leather tannery. Sitting down with chefs Riad Nasr and Lee Hanson, he sketched out a vision for the new restaurant in which the design would be matched by the ser-

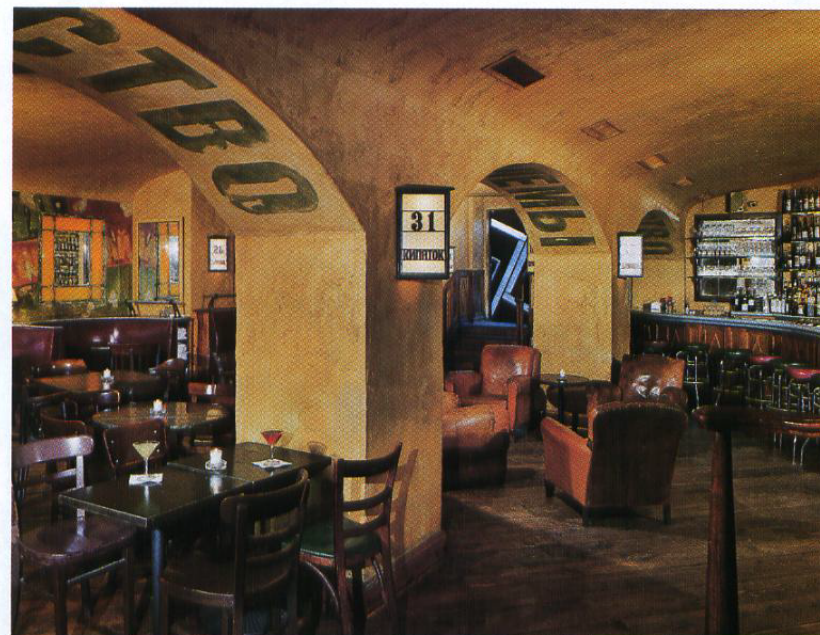
**Restaurateur Keith McNally creates Balthazar and Pravda restaurants in New York's cutting-edge SoHo—but where are the architects or interior designers?**

By Roger Yee



*C'est New York? The feeling at Balthazar, a Parisian-style brasserie in lower Manhattan's trendy SoHo neighborhood, is distinctly French, the result of a meticulously crafted environment assembled by restaurateur Keith McNally without an architect or interior designer. As views of the exterior (above) and dining room (opposite) indicate, McNally respects many of the same principles designers honor, including a good floor plan, balanced proportions and appropriate furnishings.*

vice and cuisine. The traditional, simple but hearty, 'round-the-clock brasserie fare had to be superb, he told the two, who trained with chef Daniel Boulud of Daniel. "I wanted a large downtown brasserie," McNally admits, "where the food would be exceptional."



*Greetings, comrade: A subterranean space has been transformed into Pravda (above), a bar with food service, through an inspired use of constructed ceiling vaults, patinated walls, Soviet-style graphics and dramatic lighting. A favorite of locals, including many students of architecture and interior design, it stays open until 3-4 a.m. Restaurateur McNally rented the space because it reminded him of a Russian Constructivist set he had seen in a play.*

The actual planning and design grew out of McNally's wish to capture the essence of a Parisian brasserie without actually copying one or cobbling together a pastiche from many. "There are certain brasseries in Paris that I love, but picking an existing place as a model never works," he cautions. "Anyway, I find that my original ideas always change in the course of construction. I draw on napkins and build up the texture of the design piece by piece. I'm lucky to have people around me who work the way I do."

## Why "real" restaurant interiors should avoid perfection

To judge from Balthazar, McNally is fortunate indeed. Working closely with the members of his project team—contractors, artisans, suppliers and staff—from the start allows him to quickly develop, test and refine a spatial concept into an interior design, a virtue that can pay dividends for any design project. "I like to create layouts," he says. "I hand over my rough drawings to the contractors to bring back as measured drawings."

Time is always of the essence for a restaurateur because of the need for cash flow and the fact that a typical McNally restaurant is built from scratch. Venerable as Balthazar looks, it is brand new, from its ceramic tiled floor, which has been raised to grade level as a convenience to customers and a way to improve the room's proportions, to the ceiling, which has been divided into bays by

false plywood beams covered in pressed tin panels. The ability to manage small details without losing the big picture or the attention of the project team helps McNally—an acknowledged control freak—to succeed.

If God shows up in the details as Mies van der Rohe once declared, then the Almighty's presence is palpable at Balthazar. Layer after layer of materials old and new are used to replicate the rich texture of a century-old space in the wide-open dining room of banquettes, columns and a bar. Some of the frosted glass panels, for example, were found in Lilles, while others have been sand blasted here to match. Tables combine bases from Paris with tops from New York, appropriately distressed or as McNally cheerfully says, "beat up." The bar from New York's Harlem is topped with a new, cast pewter counter from France and flanked by a pair of caryatids that are the work of a sculptor in Brooklyn. Vast framed mirrors are made of small, aged mirrors bought in the Northeast and pieced together like mosaics. Most of the tableware and accessories are French.

Such attention to detail can obviously get out of hand. "You can't let the design compete too much with the customers," McNally warns. "It mustn't appear too designed. In fact, I prefer things to look somewhat haphazard. Even if people don't absorb all the details, they'll get the feeling." Balthazar seems to have made believers of its hip, young patrons, serving them lunch, dinner and late-night supper on weekend nights until 3 a.m. by featuring such dishes as savory tarts, pan-seared *foie gras*, fricassee of rabbit, perfectly aged *steak au poivre*, grilled fish, *fruits de mer* and *bouillabaisse* (entrees range from \$14-24), all accompanied by crusty, chewy bread baked and sold at the next door

Balthazar *boulangerie* run by Paula Oland.

Does McNally have any secrets for designers about creating good environments? The restaurateur can be forgiven for passing on this question, having avoided designers because he enjoys designing—and detests what he calls the "studied look." "I build places I'd want to go to," he offers. Consider Pravda, his popular 90- to 160-seat bar with food, just around the corner from Balthazar at 281 Lafayette Street. McNally rented the subterranean space because it reminded him of a Russian Constructivist set he had seen in a play at London's Old Vic 10 years ago. "I liked the idea of a revolutionary speakeasy," he recalls, "which I dramatized by installing a vaulted ceiling."

You enter Pravda half expecting to run into a thirtysomething Vladimir Lenin, fresh from exile in Siberia and plotting his moment in history. Coincidence or not, the place is filled with young men sporting goatees. ♦

### PROJECT SUMMARY: BALTHAZAR

Location: New York, NY. Total floor area: 4,000 sq. ft. plus 3,000 sq. ft. basement. Seating capacity: 160. Client: Keith McNally. Architect of record: Richard Lewis. Designer: Keith McNally. General contractor: Ian McPheeley. Photographer: Elliot Fine.

### PROJECT SUMMARY: PRAVDA

Location: New York, NY. Total floor area: 2,400 sq. ft. Seating capacity: 90-160. Client: Keith McNally. Architect of record: Richard Lewis. Designer: Keith McNally. General contractor: Ian McPheeley. Photographer: Elliot Fine.