Red Spice Road

WORDS: KERRYN RAMSEY PHOTOGRAPH: LYNTON CRABB

When a former food hall was to be converted into a modern restaurant, it was given a dramatic transformation by interior designer Craig Weatherby

"I was working with the owners on other projects when they asked me to come to Melbourne and look at the Red Spice Road site. It was a vacant premises. The brief was to create a modern Australian/Asian interior that looked nothing like a traditional Chinese restaurant. We wanted to incorporate the feel, richness and flavour of Asia within a contemporary interior. The owners had a lot of good ideas but they gave me a fairly free hand. We had to work around what was already existing structurally and incorporate that into the design. There was an existing kitchen but it was old and rundown so that was ripped out. We started again with all new kitchen equipment, floor finishes, services and exhausts. The floor was terrazzo but we added timber flooring for the bar area.

"It is a large restaurant that seats about 200 people in six different areas. Each space has its own theme and there is a procession as you walk through the restaurant. From the entry, you approach the dark-lit bar with dramatic cross-shaped pendant lights from Inlite (www.inlite.com.au) in raw red. The bar also has bi-fold doors that can be opened on a summer's afternoon to create an entirely different effect.

"The Lantern Room has a large 60-seat communal dining table with a gigantic red lantern overhead. The owners commissioned a lot of artwork after giving the artists a rundown on the feel they wanted in the restaurant. The triptych by David Bromley at the end of the room has become a really significant feature.

"The Long Room—which also seats 60—features large white textured pendant lights over two long rectangular tables. We had a number of authentic Chinese screens and then treated them acoustically. These were hung from the ceiling and around the walls. It makes the space, though large, feel very intimate.

"All the different areas are tied together with the furniture. We designed the chairs and tables so there's a theme running through each space. In fact, pretty much everything except for a few light fittings was designed specifically for the restaurant. About six months was spent on planning. During construction we were on site for about 14 weeks. The only difficulty stemmed from designing so many things and having them made overseas. Sometimes the manufacturer interpreted the design differently to what we intended. It took quite a bit of argy bargy to get it right but the result is a finely tuned mix of modern and old, Asian and Australian. I have eaten there on numerous occasions and the food is insanely good. I think the food and interior really complement each other—they're spicy, creative and have a lot of energy." ○

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