



Saké Restaurant & Bar

Placing a modern Japanese restaurant in the heart of a heritage-listed sandstone building was a challenge for designer Rachel Luchetti

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tuart Krelle (business partner) and I already had a relationship with the client, John Szangolies, after doing some work on the Bavarian Bier Café roll-out for him. He came back from an overseas trip and was keen to start a large yet intimate modern Japanese restaurant. The site, in the Argyle Stores at The Rocks, is one of the oldest buildings in Sydney. It had been used as a function venue and was pretty much a blank canvas. We knew there would be issues due to the

significance of the structure but we really enjoy working with heritage buildings.

“We had to go into a lot of detail on interior elements just to get a development application. Fortunately, the landlord (the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority) shared the same objective as us—to celebrate this historic building. It felt like we were on the same team.

“The space is about 550 square metres and seats about 220 people. Part of the challenge was to give a sense of intimacy in such a large restaurant. We created a series of private dining rooms with various seating options from six to 22 people. There’s also a bit of flexibility in the main space where one area can be used for private dining or opened up to become part of the general dining area.

“While the building is sandstone and doesn’t receive much light, it does have that nice sense of escapism from the city. We used narrow beamed downlights over the tables to light the food without casting shadows on people’s faces. There are also custom light diffusers in the general dining space where the tables get moved around. These suspended, timber and rice paper squares hang beneath the downlights and double as sound baffles. The Cherry Blossom rooms have pendant lights for Lucifer that we sourced from Ke-Zu (www.kezu.com.au). They are made of timber veneer cut into strips and create a nice shadow play.

“We custom designed all the furniture, except for the main dining chairs, and had it all made locally. The shapes were inspired by Japanese joinery techniques that create strength without relying on screw fixings. We designed the general layout for the kitchen and had kitchen contractors Triple X put together the detailed design components.

“The bar front is covered with bronze-coloured stainless steel that is mirrored at the sushi counter. The bar area has a light timber setting to differentiate it from the rest of the space but everything else is smoked-oak timber, even the tatami seats on the raised platforms. In such a large space it’s important to create cohesion rather than separation. Saké has an atmosphere that’s not too stuffy or sedate. It’s approachable, sophisticated and a great place to eat.” ○

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