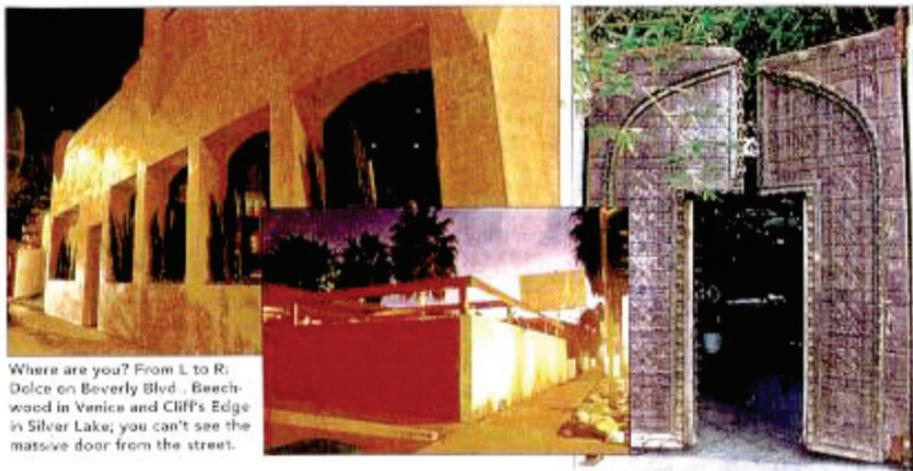


VARIETY WEEKEND

FEBRUARY 3, 2006

EDITION



Where are you? From L to R: Dolce on Beverly Blvd., Beechwood in Venice and Cliff's Edge in Silver Lake; you can't see the massive door from the street.

If you've got it, hide it

Want a hot restaurant? Step one: get rid of the sign

By JADE CHANG

At first, it wasn't that Dodd Mitchell didn't like signs; the designer couldn't afford them.

His first commission, Santa Monica's Lounge 217, was named after its address on Broadway because the design budget left no money for signage.

Since then, Mitchell has put his signature on everything from Dolce to Voda. But if he had his way, he would leave all of them unmarked. Sushi Roku has a sign, against his better judgement, he prefers the way Falcon announces its presence with a Batman-esque projection of its namesake bird.

"You feel like you're doing something bad," he says. "It's a little bit of the dark side."

Anonymity is the kiss of death in Hollywood — unless it allows you to know what everyone else doesn't.

"I'm not a big believer in signs," says Avalon owner Steven Edelman. "Everything in this world is word of mouth and everybody wants to go where the other guy can't."

That's the logic behind Edelman's late-night bistro, Honey, which can be found only after traversing a long and dreary alleyway on the south side of his Hollywood nightclub.

The buzz that Honey received from its incognito opening last October was so effective that Edelman is preparing to open another signless lounge and restaurant. This one is located in the basement of a building that supposedly housed Rudolph Valentino's Hollywood speakeasy.

The picnic steals a play from the Hollywood club scene of the 1930s. Future hotelier Sean MacPherson kicked off the trend with Olive, which had neither sign nor listed phone number.

The schtick retains its potency. Cliff's Edge in Silver Lake prides itself on being virtually invisible. It's at the top of a hill behind a chain-link fence, conveniently

located next to a 99 Cents Only outlet. Inside, however, is a leafy courtyard that is equal parts East LA and East Asia. Co-owner Pierre Casanova also managed the Little Door and Café des Artistes, which remained signless under his reign and are still going strong after 10 and 15 years, respectively. "It's better to focus on what you do than attracting people by having a big, bright sign," he says.

Publicist Jenn Gross has spent a decade representing the ever-shifting list of local hot spots, and says the absence of a sign can be the first, oxymoronic step in earning the media's attention.

"They are usually targeting a very fashion forward kind of a crowd," says Gross, "(one) that is looking to find the undiscovered location and be the first one there."

In fact, putting up a sign where none existed may be a bit of a curse in the restaurant world, though no owner will admit it.

Deep, Iwan Karet's night club in Hollywood and Vine, went belly up not long after a giant sign was erected over the drab green building. After new owners put up an oversized white dot of a sign on what had been Fred Eric's Viola, it folded. The jury's still out on Geisha House, which has just installed a neon sign with the lounge/restaurant's name in Asian-style letters.

The decision to add a sign, says Geisha House co-owner Mike Mahn, came out of an epiphany he reached while walking among the tourists of Hollywood Boulevard — the same people, he realized, who would love to eat at a restaurant they've read about in the gossip columns, if only they knew it was there.

"Here's thousands of people walking around," he says, "and they're the ones that will take the 6 p.m. reservation."

But what about his more famous entertainment clients, the ones who might not want to have their sushi interrupted by autograph requests?

Mahn says it's not a problem. "They eat later."

GOING
OFF
MENU,
PAGE V2