

A NEW SPARKLE: DESIGN

How do you look? It's his

Dodd Mitchell is the reason hip restaurants are dressed in leather and shooting fire. And that's just the beginning.

By VALLI HERMAN
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It could be a hallucinogenic vision, maybe an opium den inside a strip joint: Mirrored ceilings reflect red lights, peacock feathers tease tear-dropper lapp crystals, and huge tassels shimmy at the corners of a bar that's peppered in foreign currency and dressed to thrill. — It's wearing a burgundy leather corset.

But no, this place is real: a restaurant called Chi at the West Hollywood Hyatt. It's the latest creation of Dodd Mitchell, the hottest restaurant designer in Los Angeles, a man who is almost single-handedly reviving the Sunset Strip with credits including Le Dome, Katana, Falcon and the Balboa Lounge.

Mitchell has added fire, water, leather and stone to more than two dozen restaurants and bars from Santa Monica to Beverly Hills and beyond, and the names read like a stylish traveler's must-see list: Dolce, Voda, Lounge 217, Linq, Gaucho Grill, Sushi Roku, Avenue, China One, the Crescent Lounge and Sleep.

He has created a particular L.A. look, or at least, a delirious L.A. style, since no two of his creations look the same. With hotel and restaurant projects on the books in New York, Miami and Las Vegas, Mitchell seems destined to become a brand name. Maybe soon. Today, he's shooting a pilot TV show called "Dodd Mitchell Makes Ower America," where he gives the full-on treatment to a celebrity's hometown hangout.

"I'm nervous as hell about it," he said, pulling a seat up to a padded-leather table. "I didn't know I was interesting like that."

Ashton, Justin and Jennifer

MITCHELL, a boyish if slightly frayed 37, is already mentioned in the same breath as his celebrity investors, including Ashton Kutcher at Dolce and Justin Timberlake and Jennifer Tilly at Chi.

His most demure ideas include walls covered with hundreds of heavy black railroad spikes at Katana and a grand red staircase leading to the second floor of Zen Grill, where the honeycomb ceiling took six months to complete. He got the idea looking at the underside of a cocktail umbrella.

His most outrageous ideas? Maybe that's not the best way to put it. He's got to take the bottoms of liquor bottles at Dolce. Or the cozy side-by-side toilets in the elegant Linq ladies room. Or that fire pit at Chi, which he says was inspired by the contours of a certain part of the female anatomy.

Four Mitchell-designed restaurants have opened in the last month alone. And it's clear the designer's trademarks are becoming more brazen. At Cinch, a French-Japanese restaurant and lounge in Santa Monica, heavy brass chains separate the dining room and lounge. At the contemporary garden with fire-breathing figures.

At Le Dome, Mitchell has so completely made over the 25-year-old institution that it's unrecognizable. Not even the dome was spared in the radical redesign — a time-traveling riff on medieval Europe, log cabin America and movie-set Hollywood. Mitchell complains about the result, since not all of his ideas were put into place.

And it's true: The many rooms add up to a schizophrenic effect. There's the Mediterranean stone-walled corridor, with its dark leather banquettes. The dungeon-like back room, with stone and suede walls and an incongruous crystal chandelier. There's the log cabin room, with its stretch-helm replace. And the bar: a circular space-age affair, surrounded by Gothic Tuscany.

"There's something a little off about everything here," he says, calling the work a "cluster of styles."

Like many of his projects, Mitchell had a hand in designing the Le Dome menu, too, and it includes the spicy "Tilly Thai martini," named for Jennifer Tilly, who was, until two weeks ago, his fiancée.

Tilly is also an investor in Chi, his most audacious and, in some ways, oddly personal, creation. Mitchell designed the table settings, graphics, uniforms and even the bodies of the hired help. The Chi logo, in temporary tattoo form, is applied to waiters' forearms and the waitresses' lower backs, because, Mitchell said, "guys are pigs," and look at the waitresses as they leave.

"Every time they serve food or walk away, you get brand recognition," said the designer, seeming amused by the idea. "Sometimes it surprises me. All this stuff comes out of my head."

An L.A. creation: himself

THAT'S literally true. Mitchell has had no formal training. His approach isn't derived from any academic aesthetic; it's almost entirely his personal psychology.

Not long ago, Mitchell was like all the other hopeful L.A. guys struggling to get past the velvet ropes and into places like the ones he now designs. He was the son of a prizefighter and a hairdresser, and grew up in cities across the Southwest oil patch as the family following a petroleum engineer stepfather. He quit high



LOUI SHERRILL/LOS ANGELES TIMES

AT CHI: Dodd Mitchell didn't stop at designing the room. He put the restaurant's logo on the bodies of the wait staff.

school and came to L.A. At 19, he got a job sweeping up sets, and eventually, began designing them.

His big break came 10 years ago; the low-budget interior of Lounge 217 in Santa Monica. Friends of friends knew a go-getter set designer who was quick and fast, and knew Hollywood lighting tricks that could make the palest night crawler glow with health.

"Though clients speak of maddening last-minute design changes, they also marvel at his intense commitment. While building the first Sushi Roku in 1995, Mitchell practically lived on site, sleeping on plywood boards as he and one of the restaurant's partners, Philip Cummins, waited for the cement to dry. The designer was so intent on seeing his vision realized, Cummins said that Mitchell lent back his salary to help finance the finishing touches.

"Some designers give you a concept and leave you," said Art Davis, co-owner of Chi at the Hyatt. "I've never seen a designer so involved in every aspect of it. He even wants to be involved in the food." Davis, an owner of the hot clubs A.D., The Gate and The Lounge, appreciates how design affects mood, the scene and expectations. "You think, 'I must be high style if I'm sitting here,'" Davis said.

Michael Baker, the former creative services director at the Pacific Design Center, shares that notion of Mitchell's work. "There's a lot of drama and a lot of sex appeal to his style," he says. "It's got the candles going and the leather seating. It's very warm and inviting."

Mitchell has made a signature of using leather in unusual places. The curtains at Avenue are suede, the tablecloths at Dolce are snug black leather. His fascination with fire dates to childhood, when he ignited a few things he shouldn't have. The stone? He likes the idea that thousands of people before him have looked at the same rock, that history and permanence thing. And all of these elements, of course, have a tactile, sensual quality that he finds sexy and "puts you over the top."

As his reputation grows, and his clients trust him more, Mitchell's work is getting progressively kinder — and more successful.

"I like when people see the places, they're not able to describe them," he said.

The mix master

AT Mitchell's compact Third Street office, just down the road from Lana, his young and stylish five-person staff assembles pictures, swatches and sketches to give clients a sense of what cannot be put into words. They call the hipster zeitgeist, from movies, music and especially fashion.

The leather-topped "corset" bar at Chi is a "kick" straight from a recent Christian Dior collection. The restaurant's proposed (but financially unfeasible) chandeliers were modeled after Kartana's latest Asian jewelry line.

The wall covered in railroad spikes at Catana came after thinking of the spiked character in the "Hellraiser" movies, a pachinko machine and finally, the artsy playthings of mailheads that hold the impression of whatever you press into it.

Mitchell and staff are working on a Miami restaurant and lounge called Dirty Harry's by imagining a Ford alligator bag influenced by rock 'n' roll and 70s exploitation thrillers, said Christian Schulz, a D&M design director.

Hard to imagine? Mitchell has another description: "It's 7,000 square feet of pure debauchery. It's one of the most sensual places ever."

To tempt everyone into the action, Mitchell gives passers-by more than a glimpse of the scene inside. Dolce, dark as it is, is ringed by enormous windows.



LAWRENCE K. HO/LOS ANGELES TIMES

CABIN CHIC: Among the designer's projects is 25-year-old Le Dome in West Hollywood, completely renovated with a log-cabin theme in one part of the restaurant's dining area. The overall result, he says, is a "cluster of styles."



LOUI SHERRILL/LOS ANGELES TIMES

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS: Dodd Mitchell, standing near the fire pit he designed at Chi, has no formal training. He was a set designer when friends of friends set him up in his first job 10 years ago.

At Le Dome, glass doors edge a sidewalk patio that's open to the bustle of Sunset Boulevard. His proposed pool, bar and room remodel at Hollywood's Hotel Roosevelt involves a large, join-the-party fire pit surrounded by cabanas with two-story curtains. To "get the community together," he's designing a movie screen near the pool. Bronzed mirrors will reflect the action above and around the pool and turn social moles into party animals.

"When people go out, they want to be seen," Mitchell said. Clear sight lines open up his restaurants, to the delight of celebrity rubbernecks.

If Mitchell boasts that he has the phone numbers of casino executives on speed dial, flies in private jets and has booked about \$225 million of projects this year, it's not arrogance, said his best friend and mentor, Adolfo Suraya, an owner of Gaucho Grill and Dolce.

"It's because he's insecure," said Suraya, who knew Mitchell as a struggling designer. Now valets park Mitchell's shiny new 480-horsepower Aston Martin Vanquish ("The James Bond car") and wonder at its price tag (\$250,000 or so).

Both men are doing very well. Mitchell's

redesign of Gaucho Grill in Brentwood doubled the sales there, Suraya says. Dolce is packed. Zen Grill is already a hot party spot. Suraya and Mitchell have plans for a spa on Hollywood Boulevard and for making the Bristol Hotel at 8th and Olive in downtown L.A. a hip hotel.

New projects propose to surround clients in the Mitchell mystique whether they're eating, drinking, sweating, sleeping, floating or flying. He's doing the interiors of charter jets and yachts for firms called Estasky and Eastasen. Two spa projects are in the works. Developer Richard Weintraub tapped him for a redesign of the legendary Scandia restaurant on Sunset and of a proposed spa resort in Malibu.

But for now, whether you're having skewered snacks at Katana, a drink at Dolce or sake at Sushi Roku, Mitchell is making the experience a little more friendly and a lot more theatrical. Rather like a French bistro where tables are tight and demand sharing personal space, it becomes nearly impossible to ignore your fellow diners — they're often an elbow's length away. And often enough in the flickering candlelight, they're rather attractive.



LAWRENCE K. HO/LOS ANGELES TIMES

NO MORE DOLCE: Space-age meets Gothic Tuscany at the bar in Le Dome. Mitchell also had a hand in designing the restaurant's menu.