

GRUB STREET

Meet the Restaurant World's Newest Go-To Designer

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"One of the things that I love about Carbone — which nobody has ever talked about — is that we were playing around with this idea of cops and gangsters." Photo: Melissa Hom

Translating a chef's vision into the design of a restaurant offers its own share of challenges. Yet many of the restaurant industry's leading designers, like [Roman and Williams](#) and [hOmE](#), have succeeded by establishing signature looks and identifiable design details — like subway tiles, casement windows, filament bulbs. But Glen Coben of New York-based firm [Glen & Co. Architecture](#) takes a different approach: Each of the restaurants he designs looks entirely different — and it's almost hard to believe one person is behind them all. In the past few years, he's been chosen for more and more high-profile projects for this exact reason — eschewing a signature vision in favor of giving his customers exactly what they want.

Coben recently oversaw the buildout of [Gabriel Kreuther's eponymous restaurant](#) — a grand space that features elements like a curved platinum ceiling, a bar lined with green onyx, a custom-designed mobile with 42 hanging crystal storks, and a door handle made of 19th-century bronze casting of a duck. Then again, Coben is no stranger to luxury: He also designed [Carbone](#), [Bâtard](#), [Del Posto](#), and he's working on the renovations of both [Dovetail](#) and [Fishtail](#). Grub caught up with him to talk about the "boot camp" that chefs put him through, how he controls sometimes-overlooked elements like [noise](#), and the little, barely noticeable details that keep his work surprising.

You've had a long career, starting with Nike in the '90s. When did your work in restaurant design begin?

I was principal at the [Rockwell Group](#), and we were doing really big projects, like the Kodak Theater for the Academy Awards. But I had never done a restaurant — my background was in retail, sports, architecture. So the first restaurant project I did was Vong in Chicago, for Jean-Georges and Rich Melman, and I loved the fact that a restaurant is really a story. As a designer or as an architect, I'm the person who is given the opportunity to translate the chef's story and make it three-dimensional.

And then you left to start your own firm.

I left Rockwell Group after three years, and I started my own firm in 2000. I got a call from a friend of mine who designs kitchens and he said, "I've got a chef. He's interested in working with a young architect who isn't going to be too expensive or too opinionated, and who doesn't have a big ego. Would you want to meet with him?" It ended up being Jonathan Waxman. So, truly, my first restaurant project as a solo architect was at Washington Park.

To work with Jonathan was amazing, because he basically said to me, "I could have hired anyone. The reason I hired you is not because you were the least expensive." He then put his arm around me and he pointed to the room, and said, "It's a small room. I have a pretty big ego, so there's no room for yours. This is about me and my vision, and you'll put your own soul into this, but it really has to reflect who I am." We went to London together. We went to Paris. We spent a lot of time together, and I began to really get a tremendous education.

What I find interesting about your work is that you have no signature look or style. If you're clued into design, you can fairly easily identify a Roman and Williams restaurant, or an AvroKO one.

There's no distinct style. And when I interview, I tell people, "You're going to get something that I believe, if you could draw, if you could do it yourself, it would look like what you want. And I'm going to leave my ego out of it, and we're going to find the soul of your project." That soul is the most important element — and that's kind of the secret sauce, because everyone can talk about the soul, but how do you extract a soul from the project? How do you execute it without it seeming trite, or without it seeming like a one-liner? Like, "Oh yeah, we'll hang a stork in the middle of the restaurant and we'll call it Alsatian."

One of the things that I love about Carbone — which nobody has ever talked about — is that we were playing around with this idea of cops and gangsters. In the back room of Carbone, there's this blue mohair material, and it was inspired by a cop's peacoat jacket. We also bought vintage police uniform buttons, and used those for the button tops in the back room. There's never been a photograph of it, but my client knows that it exists, and customers might discover it. I love being able to deliver on that, so that the story is consistent from beginning to end.

Where I think that designs start to fall apart is if you don't have a cohesive story. The decisions that are made at the end of the project become random. We turn down a lot of work. It's not because we can't take it on. I feel like we're getting better at identifying the clients that are willing to share their stories.



The Gabriel Kreuther project took 18 months.
Photo: Paul Wagtuicz

How does a project begin for you?

First, I interview. So, for a project like Carbone, I know that Roman and Williams interviewed. I often interview against AvroKO. I love all their work. But the point is that a meat hook with a light bulb hanging from it is not necessarily part of the narrative. It's a wonderful image, but is that really expressing a story about who the chef is and what they're concept is? The way we started that project is that Jeff [Zalaznick], Mario [Carbone], Rich [Torrissi], and I went out to Italian-American restaurants in Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan.

Did you go to [Rao's](#)?

We went to Rao's. Part of it is boot camp. We're getting a feel for each other. For me, it's more important to go to a restaurant with chefs and see how they're evaluating how the food is served. The hard part about restaurant design is understanding the circulation and flow, with service happening. When we did [Del Posto](#), Joe [Bastianich] and Mario [Batali] had just come off of getting a three-star review for Babbo, and they really wanted a four-star dining restaurant. Their ambition was straightforward, and the way to get that fourth star would be to elevate service. So before we even started designing the dining room, we had to understand things like where all the dirty plates and glasses would go. Where's the door to the kitchen? Where's the bar going to be laid out? ... There are too many restaurants out there that just don't function properly. We try and be geeks about it from that standpoint.

It's especially important when a restaurant's as theatrical as Carbone.

Yes, it's theater. Each one of these restaurants is kind of like a mini stage set, because we're providing a stage for the food, and a stage for the performance, which is the service. When [Pete Wells wrote in his review](#) that it was like going onto a Quentin Tarantino set, that's pretty good. That means that someone really got the vision.

You must make a million decisions for each restaurant. How do you break that down for the chefs?

We're involved with every decision. With Gabriel [Kreuther] and his partner, for instance, we sat down and said, "There are probably about 5,000 decisions that will need to be made — how many of those do you want to be involved in?" And I outline what the decisions are: the pattern of the tile on the floor, the door handles, the lighting, the light switches go, the cutlery dividers in the drawers, the height of the weight stations ... Some people want to be involved in all of them, but what mostly happens is that they see the pattern of the decisions at the beginning, and they say, "All right, you understand what we're after here." We become the ambassadors.

It seems like you gravitate toward projects, like Gabriel Kreuther, that are quite grand. For an expensive, fine-dining restaurant like that, how do you avoid making it feel stuffy?

It's part of the secret sauce, right? It goes back to spending time with the chef. His restaurant is not a critique of [the Modern](#), because [the Modern](#) is beautiful, but this represents his vision and his background — how he integrates New York with his Alsatian roots. Carbone is truly a dialogue about Mario and Rich's upbringings in Queens and Long Island, or wherever they grew up, and about 1950s Italian-American food. I went to Mexico City with Alex Stupak, and I could go into [Empellón al Pastor](#) now and taste bits and pieces of the journey that we had.



Coben traveled to Mexico City with Alex Stupak while designing Empellón al Pastor.
Photo: Daniel Krieger

To me, nothing's more annoying than when a restaurant is too loud. I remember that Alex Stupak did an overhaul on the acoustics of [Empellón Taqueria](#). What's your approach on noise?

When we did [Bâtard](#), I sat down with Drew [Nieporent] and John Winterman and Markus [Glocker] and said, "How do you want this restaurant to feel?" Markus and John wanted a neighborhood restaurant. The characteristics of a neighborhood place are that it may be a little louder than a fine-dining restaurant. So we took out the carpet and put down a wood floor, and I said, "The room is going to be very loud, and we should flatten out the ceiling and put some sound-proof acoustics in there." It's interesting, because some people feel that it's a loud restaurant, and some people feel that it's an energetic restaurant. It's hard to find the balance between those two. But acoustics are very planned. Just the same as the comfort of the seats.

And with seats, how do you feel about the David Chang model — make people uncomfortable so they won't linger?

It's a little harsh. But at Al Pastor, we debated how many seats we were actually going to put in. The true nature of Al Pastor is, it's street food.

What are you currently working on?

We're working with John Fraser now to redo Dovetail. We just did the renovation of [Empellón Cocina](#), which is still as significant as doing something like Gabriel Kreuther, which took 18 months. We closed it down for two and a half weeks, and it's a whole new restaurant ... We're doing something for the Burke Group out in Brooklyn. We've been working with them on their Silver Spot Theater expansion. We're in the process of redoing Fishtail, and we're also doing a big hotel project up in Saratoga Springs, which will have a major culinary component to it. I can't announce that yet, but it will blow people's minds