

hd awards

wave of the future 2017

HDexpo
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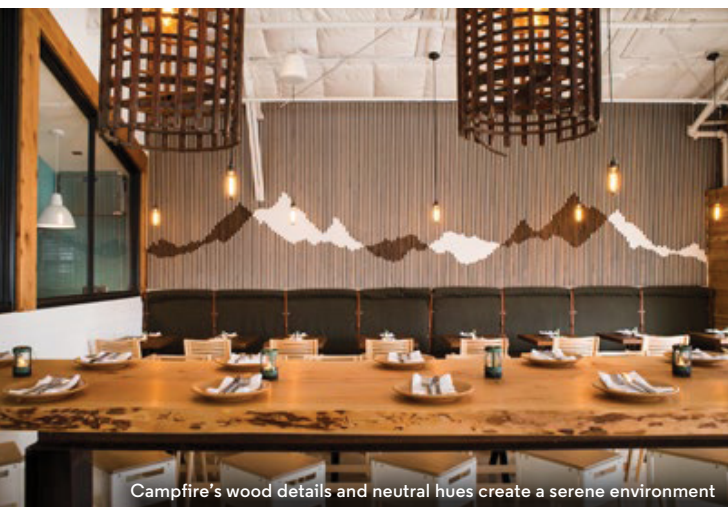
wave of the future

jason st. john and barbara rourke

Cofounders and Principals Bells + Whistles Los Angeles

Growing up in a small beach town in New Jersey, Barbara Rourke's first love was not design but "the ocean, and all the out-of-this-world creatures that lived in it." Soon, her passion shifted to dressing and designing the houses for her Barbies, turning her onto fashion design with her sights set on the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. Before venturing to Manhattan, however, she took a year off after high school and ended up in San Diego, where she launched her own handbag line.

That's when she met Jason St. John, a San Diego native who grew up in the beach community of Point Loma, in a bar. Even though he had aspirations of being an astronaut, art was his true calling, as he'd been drawing and sculpting longer than he can remember. "My mom used to take me to museums as a young kid; I was staring at



Campfire's wood details and neutral hues create a serene environment



Bold red and teal tones mix in Bâcoshop

Photo by: VUIDILA ZOTOVA AND WONHO FRANK LEE

Picassos, Braques, Nevelsons, Brancussis, and Judds since the age of 3. They had a lasting influence over me."

He was enrolled in a furniture design/building class at a community college (among others), and Rourke decided to follow suit. That move ultimately changed their lives. Urged by a professor to start their own shop, they launched Bells + Whistles in 2000. "We were young and dumb enough to listen, and we just never gave up," says Rourke. "We figured it out step by step and always kept pushing forward." Their first gig was designing the furniture for a coffee shop owned by a few friends. "It taught us that our clients needed more representation between them and the contractors, help with the design process, and advocacy," says St. John.

Their big break (and the project they are most proud of) came in 2007 with Starlite in San Diego. "It was one of our first full interior design jobs and every single thing in the space was designed and handmade in

our studio," explains Rourke. "We literally touched every square inch of that place with our own hands and there will never be another project like it by our studio."

It would be the first of many restaurants, their specialty. In 2012, they moved their office to Los Angeles and pivoted more toward designing spaces than crafting everything inside. "It was fun but dirty and exhausting, but at one point we realized that we needed to step away from the power tools and focus solely on designing," Rourke says. "That was a big turning point for us, and we still struggle with sitting at a desk and not being hands on."

That fabricating knowledge still informs their designs, spaces that seamlessly mix textures, materials, and details. Their résumé includes outposts for innovative chefs including Ray Garcia (Broken Spanish, B.S. Taqueria) and Javier Plascencia (Bracero Cocina), big-name companies such as the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, and offices for

Facebook and HP. Next up: a winery in Temecula, California, common spaces for a new 400-unit condo in San Diego, and a 4,000-square-foot restaurant in Dubai.

Fast-casual restaurants like the unconventionally designed Juice Served Here are a growing market for the duo. "Making a fast-casual restaurant that doesn't feel like a cookie-cutter chain is hard enough but making a super-efficient, easy-to-understand concept has a whole host of challenges," St. John says.

Both say making their clients successful is what makes everything worth it. "When designing restaurants, most people will tell you the most rewarding part is opening night, but for me it's the two-year anniversary. Year three, four, and five means we did our job and we helped our clients make a good brand," says St. John.

Indeed, it seems the colorblind St. John who sticks to blue, gray, and black hues, and Rourke, who is "a big fan of the chic potato sack look—oversized, asymmetrical, and architectural, but always comfortable and effortless," are a perfect match.

Select Past and Future Projects

Starlite, San Diego
Broken Spanish, LA
B.S. Taqueria, LA
Bracero Cocina, San Diego
Juice Served Here, LA and Orange County, California
Campfire, Carlsbad, California
Bâcoshop, Culver City, California



Antique farm tools from Guadalajara hang on the wall at Bracero



Ceramic lamps and plants add a cozy touch to Broken Spanish's austere concrete wall



A graphic wall is a surprise detail in Juice Served Here