

FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOREFRONT

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Here: Browning the hand-rolled (chicken) fried chicken (left) in a wok with Bay Area mobility company before being garnished with a subtle touch of sesame oil and soybean sprouts. Finally, after taking a few minutes, the chef rolls the chicken in a wok.

First Flight

KITCHEN SPOY IMBUE WITH AN AESTHETIC GLEANED FROM HIS PEDIGREE CAREER, FLEDGLING CHIEFOWNER COREY LEE HAS APPOINTED HIS WELL-CONSIDERED BENO AS A SERENE REFUGE AMID THE URBAN CACOPHONY OF SAN FRANCISCO. CAROLYN JUNG REPORTS. PHOTOS BY JENNIFER MARTINE.

Tucked away behind massive iron gates, past a serene park courtyard dotted with Japanese maple trees and a profusion of flowering vines, the restaurant that may very well have been the most highly anticipated new establishment this year in California—if not the nation—opened its doors last month in the heart of San Francisco's historic South of Market neighborhood. That restaurant, set inside a historic 1911 building, is *Benu*. Its name, reflecting ideas from the Egyptian word for phoenix, the grand mythical bird that is a natural symbol of new beginnings. And it epitomizes precisely what this project represents to chef-owner Corey Lee, 33, the James Beard Award-winning former chef de cuisine of *The French Laundry* in Yountville, California, who set out to create his own restaurant for the very first time here.

"I always wanted a name that summed up what we're going through," says Lee, whose older sister stumbled upon the name after more than a year of combing through books and song lyrics to find the perfect one. "It stands for renewal and rebirth, and also longevity, which is so hard to achieve in this industry. The name is a constant reminder that those things are vitally important."

Lee sets not only a long life but a new life for this spot, originally home to a printing press, then more recently to two David Gunn restaurants—*Harbore Lane*, which the chef modeled after his Richard Block, the New York City architect who masterminded the look of *Mano* (San Francisco) and *Dave-*



tail and Le Bernardin (New York City), gutted the space before fashioning and dressing *Benu* into a veritable SoHo loft of a restaurant during four months of construction. Bloch calls this project the most custom he's ever crafted—from the 30 sculptural subway and glass wire lockers to stone private vestiges for *Benu*'s investors, and the one-of-a-kind porcelain serving pieces created by the pioneer Korean ceramics producer Kwang Jo's, to the luxuriously plush, gray-blue wool carpet in the dining room hand loomed in Thailand.

Tan Harrison of Harrison & Kocfler in Mill Valley, California, who's constructed impressive back-of-the-houses for *The French Laundry*, *Per Se* (New York City), *Lin* (Chicago), and *Citronelle* (Washington, D.C.), oversaw *Benu*'s from scratch, including its centerpiece, a cutting-edge Viking stove manufactured specifically for Lee.

With all these lofty touches, Lee is coy about how much *Benu* cost. His parent company owns 90 percent of the restaurant, while the remaining 10 percent is split among 18 individual Bay Area investors, who ran the gamut from lawyers and high-tech moguls to his mentor, Thomas Keller. "I did it to support Corey," says Keller, who gave Lee access to his chief financial officer and chief operating officer, as well as business advice, as did fellow chefs Grant Achatz, Michael Mina, and David Chang. "He did a tremendous job at *The French Laundry* and became a colleague, friend, and now partner. It's a privilege and honor to help him take the next step."

Lee set out to build a fitting setting for his elegant progressive American cuisine that reflects his Korean heritage, as well as his classical training at *Lespérance* and *DB Bistro Moderne* (New York City) and his nearly nine years at *The French Laundry*. It's a place designed to spotlight inspired à la carte (\$21 to \$27) and tasting menus (\$100)

dishes such as abalone terrine with wood ear mushrooms; rigatoni with braised sea cucumber, root, star anise, and red wine; and lobster hot pot with chrysanthemum, tofu, and leech mushrooms. After all, he says, conception begins with the food. "It has to. It's like if you want to make Krieger-Kreme doughnuts, you can't just buy any machine. You have to know what your product is to design the factory."

Bloch couldn't agree more. Before he would consider Lee's project, he had to experience his food. When Lee was still at *The French Laundry*, Bloch came in one night to dine alone at a table inside the kitchen. He was Lee's only cover that evening. After a 10-course repast, Bloch knew all that he needed. "It was spectacular," Bloch recalls. "The level of detail was extraordinary. Everything on the plate had meaning. The same is true with this design. We tried to throw out everything that wasn't necessary. There was a process of pruning everything down. The thing about simple, though, is that you can't hide behind anything. This was a challenging design."

Lee's cooking style also factored heavily into his decision about location. During his two-year-plus search, Lee considered opening his restaurant in New York City, where the Seoul native grew up. But he soon realized that for him the breadth of top-notch produce and other specialty ingredients found in the Bay Area just couldn't be matched there. After weighing 40 to 50 possible spots, the majority in San Francisco, Lee found what he was looking for at 22 Harbore Street. All it took, he says, was stepping inside the striking, bohemian-style courtyard, a rare oasis of tranquility in the heart of this supremely urban setting. This soothing entryway set the tone for the rest of the restaurant he envisioned.

An off-seat private dining room with a wall of steel-trimmed windows overlooks its own dedicated garden, while the main 88-seat sunken dining room of color, gray, and brown hues is designed to set off strange splashes of color such as the haunting green ringed stems on Güstner Veltliner glasses. Tabletops—an array blend of steel and two kinds of wood—are bare, save for handcrafted wooden water and rest. All the better to set off the 32-piece porcelain line in matte white, matte black, celadon, and transparent glazes. Among them are cloches with hand-etched designs of lobsters and sea anemones to hint at what's inside. Lee's mother, an artist, had to lend a hand for one piece, though. She created a painting of a truffle to guide Korean porcelain makers who had never set eyes on one before.

The dining room staff, which makes up a third of *Benu*'s employees, don custom uniforms by Andrea Lenardo Madden of A&M Project in Los Angeles, an architect and designer who is the creative director for *Sprinkles Cupcakes*. The outfits reimagine the look of an apron, a sartorial reminder that the staff serves at the old of two restaurants.

Benu takes up half the footprint of the old *Two* restaurant. The kitchen sits where the former restaurant's foyer was, while *Benu*'s dining room fronts what used to be *Two*'s kitchen. Lee intentionally moved it up to take advantage of certain existing architectural details, including a dramatic light well at the back of *Benu*'s main dining room that provides a peephole into the art gallery upstairs in the building. The well has been shrouded in three sets of sheer drapery, which obscures the view with an ethereal touch. Two imposing K benches, built to shore up the space against earthquakes, get a creative



Opposite: Portrait of an artist as a young chef entrepreneur: Corey Lee in *Benu*'s kitchen. Clockwise from below: Shaded the custom artwork through the light-walling wall of windows in the background, they will see cooks gathered around the custom-made Viking cooking suite, main center of *Benu*'s kitchen. Small steam-provide treatment of *Benu*'s dishes: a Korean *Thononchi*, a *Pho* with *Wolau* and, and *Vita-Mix* blender.

Equipment

- Blender: **Vita-Mix**
- Cooking suite: **Viking**
- Drip coffee machine: **Clover**
- Espresso coffee machine: **La Marzocco**
- Hoods: **Gayford**
- Ice cream maker: **Carlisle**
- No. 10 mixer: **Scotsman**
- Immersion circulator: **PolyScience**

- Pasta Hobart
- Pasta extruder: **LaManFerrina**
- Reach-in refrigerators, freezer: **Thermait**
- Thermomix: **Vorwerk**
- Vacuum boiler: **Amular by Promax**
- Water filtration/carbo-nation system: **Nature**
- Whipper: **ISI**



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENNIFER MARTINE



Left: Lee commissioned the Korean ceramics producer Kwang Jo's to craft *Benu*'s serving pieces. Right: Lee, not sparing no detail, artist Richard Bloch calls *Benu*'s main "the most custom" he's ever designed.

makeover. The floor-to-ceiling rigging one in the main dining room was left visible, creating an almost modern sculpture-like focal point. The one in the kitchen was walled over, but niches were punched into it to create clever cubbies for printers and computers.

Benu's kitchen, which takes up a little less than half of the restaurant's total square footage, is much smaller than what Harrison typically works on. But the refined look and feel of it, with its gleaming white tiled walls and seamless, flush counters, he says, is similar to what he created at *The French Laundry* and *Per Se*. *Benu* lacks some of their sumptuous finishes, though, since its kitchen equipment budget was significantly less than *Per Se*'s.

Even so, *Benu*'s kitchen boasts two hallmarks of a Harrison design. First, the legs were removed from every piece of equipment, so that it could be mounted atop a raised curb. That way, dust never accumulates underneath. Second, the kitchen was configured to have multiple access ways within it and leading to the dining rooms. "We design so there's always more than one way out, so there's no cul-de-sac," Harrison says. "The last thing you want is to need something, but have to push someone out of the way to get to it."

Benu's kitchen also has a rare feature—a wall of windows covered in opaque film, with a pattern of cutouts so that passersby on the quiet street can still glance in. "Most kitchens have no exterior windows, especially in urban areas," Harrison says. "Chefs here can work in an area where they can look outside. It makes all the difference in the world."

When it came time to choose the stove, Lee considered the prized and pricey Bonnet, the hand-built French favorite, as he's cooked on

six different ones in his career. But in the end, Viking made his offer he couldn't refuse. A traditional Viking stove is designed to have the most heat at the front with very little graduation in temperature. The custom stainless-steel island suite Viking created for Lee sports heat diffusion similar to a European stove with the apex of heat at the center and temperature gradually decreasing outward from it. Rather than the traditional cast-iron grill, and garde-manger, kitchen stations are based on functionality of courses. So, one sous-chef might oversee two first courses, while another the next two. Even the pastry department is called upon to do a savory course, Lee says, so that it becomes a much more integral part of the team.

Instead of walk-ins, which have so much wasted space at their center, *Benu* has four Thermomix reach-ins. One each is dedicated to produce, meat, fish, and freezer to avoid cross-contamination. They are steps from the kitchen's delivery entrance and near the prep island with two Imperial stockpot ranges that are backed by a glass partition to provide separation yet visibility from the rest of the kitchen. All compressors and condensers are located in the parking lot, so as not to take up valuable space in the kitchen and add to the noise and heat. Drains in the kitchen are recessed two inches into the floor, which is covered by black synthetic rugs rather than rubber mats for hygienic and aesthetic reasons.

Lee is particularly proud of three other features: a super-speed two-gallon Vita-Mix blender to puree vegetable and fruit trimmings for nutritious shakes for staff lunch; a covered Clover drip coffee machine, no longer for sale since Starbucks bought the company, but which is on loan to him from Lamill Coffee Institute in Los Angeles; and an advice solution to an awkward support column space: it was turned into a staging niche with four rows of shelves to hold 18 plates at a time, something he always longed for at *The French Laundry*.

"I've been so involved in every process that I can't think of a detail that I haven't considered and reconsidered," he says with a proud smile. "Sometimes I look around and think, 'I can't believe all this is here just to cook some food.'"

But there, it takes a lot for a phoenix to rise.

Carolyn Jung, a James Beard Award-winning former food writer for the *San Jose Mercury News*, now blogs at FoodGal.com.