

perspectives trends **fast-casual dining**

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EASYGOING EATS

Fast-casual dining is on the rise—and the spaces are more creatively designed than ever. Here’s a look at a few upcoming and recent additions to the fold.



Uncle Sam’s Burgers

After launching two outposts in Beijing, Uncle Sam’s Burgers is jumping on New York’s infatuation with burger joints, opening a place on 5th Avenue not far from the Empire State Building. Design-wise, local firm Alvarez+Brock Design turned to a “bucolic image of a cow out in the grass for pasture against a beautiful, white cloud-filled sky—but upside down,” explains co-founder Rafael Alvarez. “I wanted something simple and elegant to elevate the idea of a burger

1. Geometric lights hang beneath a teal ceiling installation at Uncle Sam’s Burgers in New York.

2. Timber, concrete, and marble elevate the casual experience in Riverside Food Court in Brisbane.

chain.” Especially one with an Asian twist.

A former Italian restaurant that’s narrow at the front and opens toward the back “in a very touristy area,” explains Alvarez, “we knew the space had to be comfortable, fun, informal, and attractive from the outside.” Mirrors, white ceramic tile floors, and colors (think red, white, and teal-green) juxtapose with angled wood wall paneling “to maintain the scale of the space against a very high ceiling,” Alvarez says.

That ceiling is brought down thanks to a few abstract cow references. The top part of the walls are done in white, backlit and perforated, suggesting cow spots; and 36 random geometric-shaped lights in red and silver, to represent

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3. A rendering of Omaha's Flagship Commons, marked by reclaimed barn wood and various seating options, set to open late this year.

4. Suspended metal wires create the look of noodles drying overhead in the Noodle Rack in Changsha, China.



clusters of grazing cattle, all hang beneath a teal ceiling installation, which is "symbolic of a grassy pasture," Alvarez says.

Riverside Food Court

Located at Brisbane's business hub, Riverside Food Court is a trendier alternative to the classic food court experience. Instead of generic brands and plastic chairs in a bland environment, designer Patricia Szonert of local MMO Interiors chose resort-style furniture and reworked seating arrangements for a more flexible experience.

Circles, a motif throughout the Harry Seidler-designed Riverside Centre skyscraper that's iconic to the Australian city, are referenced "in our signage, lighting design, and graphics." It's a highlight, she says, that "reinvigorates the previously tired space." Szonert opted to bring in natural light (also usually missing from food courts) by removing existing glass balustrades and heavy blocks of marble. By doing so, the views overlooking the Story Bridge came into focus, creating "a strong visual link to the Brisbane River through corridors between each pod."

But those pods also proved challenging. Each one is individually tenanted, "and we weren't in control of the design," she says, "so we consulted [with the owners] on some design details," while also highlighting the features that make each food spot unique, streamlining the overall look. Raw yet simple and luxurious materials like timber, concrete, and marble complement the freshness of the food choices, while the carefully considered placement of copper creates a canopy of connecting elements that "act as way to tie the place together," she says, while the copper lighting systems heighten the experience of walking through the space.

Noodle Rack

Often hawked in outdoor fast food stalls, in

Asia, noodle soups are usually eaten as a snack with customers drawn to quality over the establishment's design. But Christina Luk of Shanghai-based Lukstudio hopes to change that with the Noodle Rack, a roughly 540-square-foot diner in Changsha, the capital of Hunan province in south central China.

Located in an outdoor commercial strip, "there is absolutely no storefront design coordination, resulting in a mix of bold logos and kitsch motifs everywhere," says Luk. "We focused on a subdued storefront with a hidden surprise in the interiors."

Divided into three zones, the restaurant's foyer contains the order and cash counter, as well as a waiting area for takeout. Behind it is a tiny kitchen. The third zone is the dining area, which includes a central communal table with benches for two, a banquette running the length of the back wall, and a couple of tables along the façade. Bifolding doors with glass insets allow for semi al fresco dining on warm days.

Composed in vertical bamboo-patterned cast concrete, the façade is interrupted with two weathered steel boxes that function as openings for the entry and dining area, respectively. The pattern is reiterated inside on the counter's front, while a rustic architrave outlining the dining area outside transforms into an architectural grid with suspended metal wires and hanging bulbs inside. Wooden crates in various sizes are inserted into the grid to highlight decorative porcelain wares. The overall effect is like sitting underneath a swath of noodles as they are spread out to dry.

"It was not easy to fit different programs and types of seating comfortably in a small plan," acknowledges Luk. "However, the high ceiling was definitely welcome as it allowed us to play with layers and raise the dining area for better definition. As it's an open design, you can still see through all the layers to the black-painted ceiling and ducting."

Flagship Commons

Omaha may not be widely regarded for its culinary scene but a new fast-casual concept is seeking to diversify it. "There isn't anything like Flagship Commons anywhere in the Midwest," says Tom Allisma, president and founder of Flagship Restaurant Group, "so right now is the perfect time for a food hall in Omaha." Allisma is also a licensed architect and manages all design and construction for the locally based company, which was approached for the project, opening this fall inside Westroads Mall, by General Growth Properties.

The hall is housed in an existing, 21,000-square-foot traditional food court space, which Allisma is reimagining with locally based interior designer Alley Poyner Macchietto Architects. Each stall—including a coffeehouse, sushi, pizza, and falafel stands, and a German-style beer venue that offers a full-service and quick-dining option—will have a different look. "We purposely designed the space this way as we want each concept to be independent from the others," Allisma says.

In the main dining area, polished concrete floors, 16,000 lineal square feet of reclaimed barn wood, LED Edison bulb lighting, and white subway tiles come together for a "rustic-modern look," he says. There's also a variety of seating—banquettes, booths, hightop communal tables, counter seating, and more traditional two- and four-top tables—while a central bar will be available for guests to grab a drink and relax by an oversized fireplace surrounded by lounge seating. **hd**