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# Front of the House

## DESIGN SPOTLIGHT

### Vesta Dipping Grill: *The art of turning a minus into a plus*

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By David Mack

Josh Wolkon faced many obstacles during his conversion of a 19th-century coffee roasting plant-turned-spice warehouse into his stylish yet casual Denver restaurant, the Vesta Dipping Grill. But he and his creative partners -- architect Jeff Sheppard of Roth Sheppard Architects, and designer Patrick Ryan of Goog, as well as a number of local artisans -- succeeded by learning to turn the space's shortcomings into the new restaurant's strengths.

Vesta Dipping Grill is a 135-seat operation occupying 4,300 square feet in an historic building in Denver's Lower Downtown area, or "LoDo", an historic district of factories and warehouses that recently saw an influx of sports bars and microbreweries following the opening of nearby Coors Field. The restaurant has an additional 40 seats at its exotically curvy concrete bar, as well as 20 outdoor patio seats on the rebuilt sidewalk in front of the restaurant's tall and dramatic glass-and-steel fa ade.

Inside, the space is long and divided in half by a row of enormous, hewn-wood pillars. To the left of the pillars is the bar, and to the right is the dining room. At the rear of the space, a stage for jazz performers is nestled in the back left corner; when live music isn't being performed, the mood is kept upbeat with a mix of what owner Wolkon terms "funky, up-tempo mood music," mostly acid jazz. Beyond stage right, a warm glow emanates from the kitchen, from behind the slope of a canted wall.

The restaurant's natural brick walls and rough-textured hardwood floors have been in the building since the turn of the century. The space's earthy, natural ambience is reinforced by the blond-colored wood used on the fourtops and the walls of the large, circular booths situated between the last three central pillars of the dining room. Hanging above the round booths are red lycra-nylon pendant lights, shaped like inverted cones and tapering off to a point adorned by a white crystal. Illuminating the periphery of the dining room are wall sconce lights draped in copper and aluminum mesh. The reddish glow from the pendants combines with the golden hues of the sconces to fill the entire space with a feeling of warmth and comfort.

Separating the bar from the dining area is a roughly 4-foot-tall slab of steel that extends for the length of the bartop. The top of the slab is adorned with cutouts of abstract shapes and swirls, lending a sensual, feminine character to what would otherwise be a very masculine type of barrier.



*Vesta Dipping Grill's most dramatic interior elements are the large, round booths, over which hang distinctive spiral pendant lights.*

Vesta Dipping Grill's design evolution was inspired by the mythology of Vesta, the Roman goddess of the hearth. In order to emphasize the restaurant's inspiration by a goddess, "we tried to invest a lot of sensuality throughout the design, so there are a lot of curves at the bar and within the lighting," Wolkon said. "The lines throughout the restaurant try to capture the same curves that the logo had in her hair."

The mythology is further expressed in numerous references to the Vestal Virgins associated with the restaurant's namesake goddess. The six lights mounted on the bartop and the six stanchions that help support the soffit over the bar each represent one of the six Virgins, who also are depicted in an abstract sculpture built into the base of the host stand.

Roth Sheppard Architects envisioned and drafted the original plans for Vesta Dipping Grill. Goog, a Denver-based custom design and fabrication firm, together with the other artisans hired by Josh Wolkon, executed and interpreted those designs. Sometimes the pieces were crafted exactly as rendered, but just as often the craftsmen used the designs merely as starting points in their development of Vesta's overall design.

"It was really about looking at all the details and putting a real evidence of the hand into everything," Goog designer Ryan recalled. "Things wanted to be very hand-crafted and not necessarily rough, but certainly natural, meaning not feeling overly manufactured."

Above all, the design of Vesta Dipping Grill was about teamwork. Wolkon and his collaborators constantly inspired each other to improve upon one another's ideas, and everyone knew that their opinion mattered. "Vesta looks the way it does because it didn't have some hard-and-fast plan that everybody was just stuck to," Ryan said. "There was a lot of latitude there for us to experiment and make suggestions that would change the way something was originally envisioned and turn it into something that was more in line with the direction the restaurant was taking."



*The exterior of Vesta Dipping Grill features a custom-fabricated steel-and-glass storefront, designed by Roth Sheppard Architects and constructed by Goog Custom Design.*

Wolkon's vision began to take shape once the artisans started to produce the many small pieces that give Vesta its personality. The rough, industrial heritage of the LoDo area inspired the creation of water glasses cut from the bases of empty wine bottles, as well as the fashioning of napkin rings from simple copper tubing.

Wolkon's parents in Boston made the restaurant's highly popular menus, which are aluminum with copper plating and have the Vesta Dipping Grill logo laser-etched onto them. "People always try to buy them from us," Josh Wolkon said. Wolkon's father also hand-made each of the restaurant's foot-long, black stainless-steel skewers.

The back bar shelving and host stand were created by a shop in Boulder, Colo., called Candle Opera, which specializes in hand-dipped candles and custom candle holders. Consequently, the back bar shelves have candle holders built into their wrought-metal design. Richard Madrid, a waiter at Vesta Dipping Grill who volunteered his talents, crafted the "whimsical figurines" that act as restroom signs, as well as the menu board and the bar's ever-changing floral displays. The restaurant's logo and custom typography were produced by Wolkon's cousin, Denise Korn of Korn Design, Boston.

"As we put more and more work into the space, it started to take on its own feeling and its own life, and I think even the architects were pleasantly surprised at the

result," Ryan said. "I don't think anyone started with that specific image in mind, because much of the work that we did was created as the need and as the problems arose."

Much of the impact of Vesta Dipping Grill's interior design is the product of its sensuous lighting. While soft, recessed overhead lights provide general illumination in the bar and dining room, one's eye naturally is drawn to the warm pools of light spilling around the copper-mesh-wrapped wall sconce lights, and the rosy halos that seem to surround the conical pendant lamps over the large circular booths. Patrons at the bar can bask in the glow of a half-dozen unusually shaped, inverted pendant lights mounted on poles jutting up out of the concrete bartop.

The pendant lights, which are made of nylon, infuse a fiery color into the restaurant's palette and personify many of Vesta's design themes. The inner tube of burgundy-hued nylon is twisted into a long, spiralling coil, at the bottom of which is a prism that bends and splits the light into a shimmering spectrum of colors on the table below. That inner coil is wrapped with an outer layer of white nylon, helping to diffuse the illumination into a warm, cheerful glow. The finishing touch on each light is a small crystal that is suspended from the tip of the outer nylon sheath.

"We knew how we wanted the pendant lights to feel," said architect Sheppard. "We wanted them to penetrate from the ceiling, to drip, to ooze sex just a little bit. And that was an idea that could be interpreted by the craftsmen."

"The pendant lights were designed simply as cones," Wolkon noted. "The artist hired to make them went and added the prisms and the crystals at the ends. ... And that was something that was not designed, but that the artist was inspired to do at the last minute."

One of the most visually striking elements in Vesta Dipping Grill is its almost 40-foot-long, organically wavy-edged concrete bartop. Designed by Roth Sheppard Architects, the bar is integral to the concept of Vesta Dipping Grill as a hearthlike environment in which people can gather and be comfortable together.

"At Vesta, because of the bartop's curvilinear shape, people could actually be sitting almost sideways at various points in the curves, and that way they wouldn't just be staring straight into a back bar brick wall," Sheppard said. "They could actually start looking at each other, face-to-face, because of the curved shapes. So those shapes and forms have a lot to do with getting people to meet one another."



*Vesta Dipping Grill's concrete bartop is wavy and undulating, allowing patrons seated there to look at one another and at the restaurant, rather than simply at a back bar wall.*

The bartop did, however, pose a considerable challenge for the custom-fabrication team at Goog.

"We had to engineer a means of supporting all that weight, and we had to decide how it was going to be fabricated, and how we were going to handle the serious weight [during transport]," Goog's Ryan recalled. "In order to bring it in through the front we had to use cranes and floor cranes and a number of other tricks. ... That was something the likes of which none of us had ever done before, and we were all very happy we pulled that one off without killing somebody."

Although there were no human casualties, owner Wolkon recalled the bartop suffered minor damage during the last-minute installation. A section of the bartop "cracked as

we were moving it from the truck to the restaurant," he said. "We didn't have many options at that point; we couldn't get another piece fabricated in two days, so we put it down and we patched it. That's one of the beauties of our restaurant; because it's such a cross of modern and rustic, we can get away with cracks and patches. It almost adds to the character."

The decision to preserve the hundred-year-old floor in Vesta Dipping Grill was based both on economics and on aesthetics. After uncovering the original hardwood floor surface, Wolkon and his team discovered that the antique floor was marred in several locations by patches of wood rot.

"Roth Sheppard was going to replace the old floor with a brand-new, oak wood floor," Ryan said. "That was something I didn't particularly like at all, from looking at the original plan. I thought that was really going to take a lot of the feeling out of the space."

Wolkon and Ryan worked together to repair the damaged floor. "We spent a lot of time playing with different materials and having fun with it," Ryan said. "One thing we did was we stained it. Most people don't notice it has a huge, arcing stain that goes from the front to the back, and that's because of the way everything sits inside the restaurant, looking front-to-back. But if you stand off to one side, from one side it's more red, from the other side it looks more yellow. It's just a mixture of different floor stains, but it brings out a lot of detail in that floor."

Even after the wood floor had been refurbished, however, there was still the problem of how to repair the gaps left by the wood rot. The solution to that dilemma led to the creation of one of Vesta Dipping Grill's most popular design touches.

"What we did was commission from Goog some sculpted stainless-steel grates to fill the spaces," Wolkon said. "People think they're heating grates, but they're actually a little more sophisticated than that. Then, working from the restaurant's basement, Richard Madrid put some curved stainless steel under the holes in the floor, and then shone red lights on the steel plates. It makes a really cool effect as this glow shines through the floor, and it's become, of all our design features, the one that keeps people entranced the longest."

"I think my floor has a lot more character than any brand-new floor could ever have," Wolkon added. "Of course, the tables wobble a little bit, but you can't have everything."

See what's [On The Menu](#) at Vesta Dipping Grill.

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