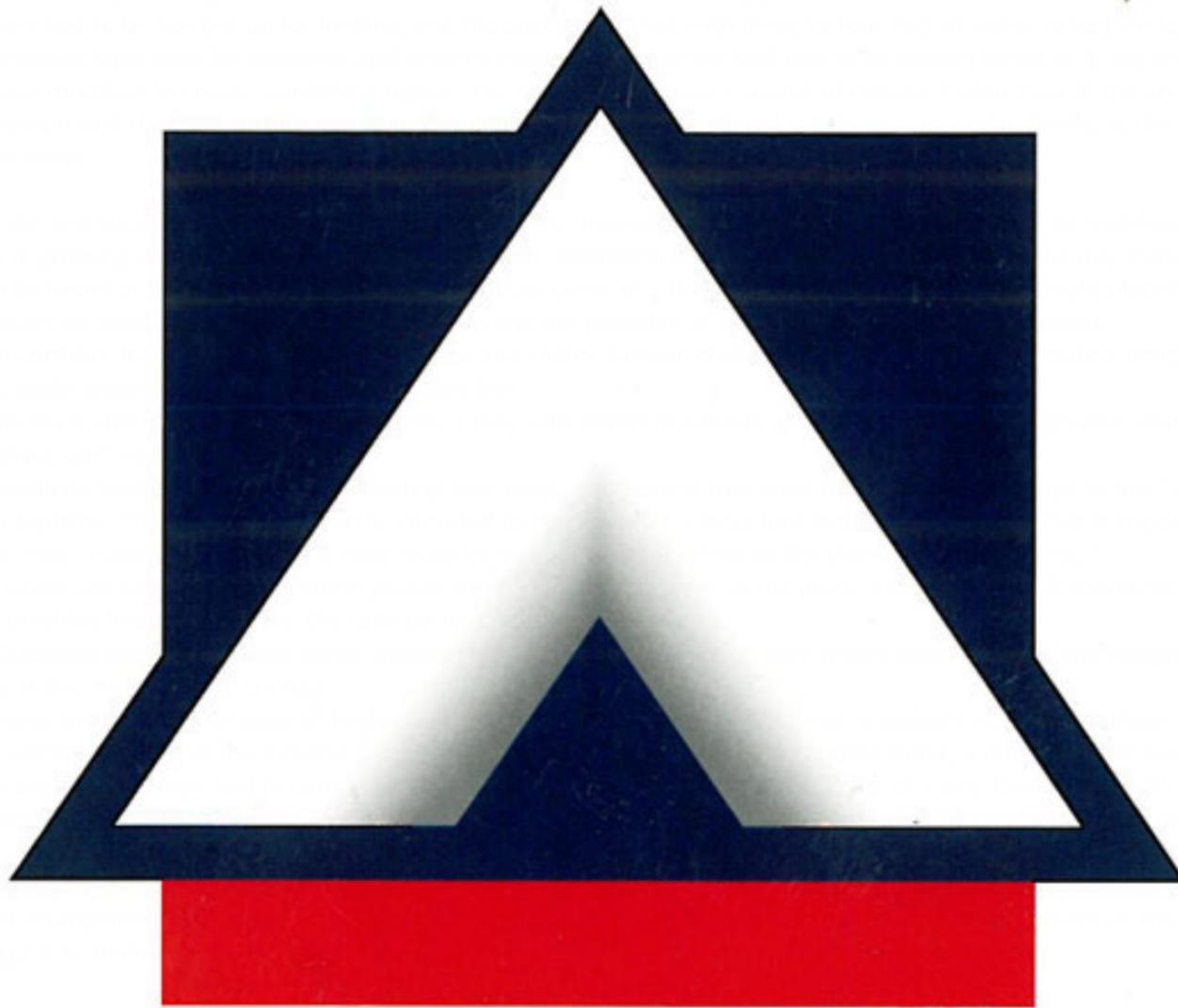


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features

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Sevva Hong Kong ranks
high on the looks scale



Facing page A Murano chandelier from the 1950s, which once hung in the British Embassy in Rome, now hangs over Miss B's sweets counter • Top, from left Harbourside view area with curved ceiling detail by architect Calvin Tsao of Tsao & McKown, New York • The cosy Taste Bar lounge also offers patrons privacy to discuss business. A collection of Australian contemporary artwork hangs on the wall.

TEXT. NOELLE LIM

PHOTOGRAPHY. COURTESY OF SEVVA HONG KONG

Serving style and character

One of the places to be seen in Hong Kong, Seva ranks high on the looks scale

WHEN ONE OF the most stylish women in Hong Kong opens a restaurant in one of the most expensive pieces of real estate in the city, it naturally attracts a lot of publicity. Seva Hong Kong, located in the penthouse of Prince's Building on Chater Road Central, is the brainchild of Bonnie Gokson, socialite, style maven and former image and communications director at Chanel Asia Pacific. She is also the sister of Joyce Ma of Joyce Boutique fame (now part of Lane Crawford), who introduced luxury brands to Hong Kong.

Gokson's forefathers had owned a bank and properties in Shanghai but the family coffers have since been divided up. The name "Gokson" is an Anglicised version of her grandfather's name.

Gokson could easily pass off as Chinese-Eurasian but she is quick to clarify that she's pure Chinese. Speaking in a well-modulated voice with a hint of an American accent, Gokson says: "Seva [pronounced say-va] is derived from the Sanskrit word 'seva'. Another 'v' is added to seva because it 'pulls' in energy and sounds more catchy. I used to attend meditation and yoga classes at the top floor of Prince's Building, and I believe it is no accident that the place became my restaurant."



Gokson beat several international big names to secure the lease of the penthouse. The real estate is highly desirable as it boasts a spectacular, almost 360-degree view of Hong Kong's skyline.

Sevva, which opened early last year, is divided into three distinct areas – Bankside, Lounge and Harbourside. As its name suggests, the Bankside area of Sevva overlooks prominent landmarks HSBC and Standard Chartered Bank along Queen's Road. Lounge overlooks the important Legislative Council Building while Harbourside overlooks the city's trademark harbour view.

Each of the spaces boasts its own design theme, mood and ambience and they all adjoin a large terrace that is superb for outdoor parties, al fresco dining and cigar-smoking sessions.

Conceptualising Sevva

Gokson gained a reputation as a stylist when she designed Joyce Cafes in Hong Kong, Taipei and Bangkok many years ago. After much persuasion by friends to replicate her culinary venture, Gokson said she would if there was a good, sizeable venue. "A friend reminded me that the top floors of Prince's Building had been vacant for awhile. I emailed one of the directors at Hong Kong Land, the owner, to enquire. Within hours, a reply came back and asked if I could have it ready by Christmas!" recalls Gokson.



This page, top and bottom Patrons can relax at the terrace area and enjoy the view of Hong Kong's harbour • The terrace overlooks landmark buildings in Hong Kong, namely HSBC Bank, Bank of China and Standard Chartered Bank on Queen's Road

Facing page Bonnie Gokson, the proprietress of Sevva Hong Kong • Afternoon tea with sweet cakes and finger sandwiches • Peppercorn Wagyu Steak with Porcini Salt Dusting



It took 16 months from conceptualisation, to doing the structural and interior works, and obtaining permits and licences. This is a 1960s building, so extensive renovation was needed. Four-tonne steel bars had to be hoisted up for loading, and the space was filled with three to four feet of water to test for leaks. The steel railings at the perimeter of the terrace were replaced with glass for aesthetic and security reasons. Parts of the wall had to be broken down to fit big window panes and the original ceiling, which was only about 7ft high, was modified to create something higher. The ceiling design was a source of debate. Calvin Tsao of the architects Tsao & McKown of New York had suggested using glass but Gokson said the hard surface would not be suitable if music was played in the restaurant. So, finally, at the Harbourside, for instance, Tsao designed a unique curved ceiling detail.

A place like home

What Gokson has attempted to do, and successfully achieved, is to create a warm, unpretentious yet classy

showpiece where its well-heeled patrons can feel at home. She is obviously inspired by memories of growing up in a family with old money, where discretion and refinement are the order of the day. Personal keepsakes from her sister, Ma, whom she speaks of fondly, can be found at Sevva – these include the silver bear cover of a chopping board. Fashion and art books placed on the low tables at Sevva reveal Gokson's jet-setting life and passion for visual arts (she visits Tate in the UK and the Museum of Modern Art in New York for ideas).

The Lounge area sits in a longish corridor. Instead of packing it with tables and chairs, Gokson chose sofas and low tables to create a delightful break in the decor. The sofas and cushions, in lilac, burgundy, apple green and turquoise, lend a breezy feel.

"I did not want a place that is hip, stark and trendy, which dates quickly. I play with different colours and textures. Do we use granite stone for the table? And what colour should the carpet be to lift the place up?" says Gokson.

"I believe our space should be colourful especially when we are dealing with food... something that gives



This page and facing page Colourful plush sofas and tables are placed in the lounge area to create a homely feel while the side grass wall adds life and colour to the interior • Heavy use of vintage lilac in the Bankside area helps 'bring' out the colour in patrons' faces. Large print works by Candida Hofer, a famous photographer, hangs on the wall.



that vibrancy of energy to life." If you wonder why the Bankside area is awash in vintage lilac, Gokson explains: "The choice of colours is intended to make people's faces look better or stand out. This is important for businessmen who come here and discuss business over a meal. I could have taken the easy route by maybe choosing white as the theme, which is boring."

The quirky fixtures and fittings, which are certainly conversation pieces, definitely add character to the place. Take the Murano chandelier from the 1950s; once hung at the British Embassy in Rome it now presides beautifully above the cake corner, Miss B's Sweets.

Also think plush, double-faced Duchesse satin and vintage sofas, discovered in London by Tsao, and horn chairs made in Africa and bought in Paris. A half-century-old timber industrial table stands discreetly in the middle of the Lounge.

Along the hallway near the entrance are sketches on glass of lively scenes at Sevva, by Gladys Perint Palmer, a globally respected fashion illustrator who's worked with the fashion greats, and has had her works exhibited at the

Victoria & Albert Museum in London. Pieces by Candida Hofer, a photographer famous for her perspective works, are also displayed. As Hofer's works are large, 10 men had to carry each piece from the basement and up 24 flights of stairs. Over 40 Tom Dixon lights hang in the glamorous industrial-like box space of Sevva's Taste Bar. The dome ceiling lighting was created by Sydney's lighting artist, Ruth McDermott, whose works are inspired by Australia's natural environment.

Constant re-upholstery and paint jobs are imperative to keep Sevva looking fresh and tidy, and there is constant updating of accessories like crystal and silver objects and art books, and restyling using flower arrangements. Gokson had also considered feng shui aspects like ensuring the correct placement of the woks in the kitchen and placing a fountain at the corner of the terrace to maintain positive energy flow.

Food and music go together

Like many restaurateurs eager to share their culinary tastes, Gokson's menu is a collection of her favourite

dishes, inspired by her search for the quintessential gourmet experience in the world's top restaurants as well as the tastiest treats at the street stalls of Hong Kong. Some dishes have delightful names like Eleanor's Way (a northern chicken hotpot with wonton), Yin Yang Prawns, Roasted Heirloom Tomato Bisque, and Pasta Named Desire. According to Gokson, the signature favourites are Baked Crabmeat in Shell, south Indian dosas, Claypot Rice and Wagyu Beef Cheek & Ox Tongue Pie. The dishes are intended to reflect the multi-cultural side of Hong Kong, served uncomplicated and agreeable to the palate. Taste Bar offers signature cocktails and wines together with a small-plates menu of over 25 varieties. Sevva changes its menu three times a year and the strategy is to complement it with daily specials and seasonal promotions like white truffles or lime caviar to keep customers interested. Some patrons, Gokson says, come two to three times a week due to the variety of food. Average prices of main dishes are HK\$200 (RM92) to HK\$400.

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Gokson is also big on packaging and who better to design Sevva's chocolate-brown food packaging collateral but former editor-in-chief of Vogue Living and Vogue Entertaining & Travel, Sharyn Storrier-Lyneham, a close friend of Gokson's.

Throughout the day, the selection of the music changes at Sevva, starting with lighter classical, New Age tunes in the earlier part of the day, to jazz, R&B, and lounge music in the evening. On one occasion, Latin and Cuban music were played during brunch.

Although there have been numerous offers, there are no immediate plans to open Sevva outside Hong Kong. Gokson's other artistic ventures include designing limited-edition home ware (think python-skin photo frame), called BG At Home, for corporate clients. Eventually, she hopes to publish a coffee-table book on food, entertaining and lifestyle.

Right now, all her artistic efforts appear focused on this successful restaurant. ☑

STOCKISTS directory



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