

# ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

The background of the cover is a photograph of a modern university building at night. The building has a large, curved glass facade that is brightly lit from within, showing interior spaces and people. A prominent feature is a cantilevered upper floor that extends over a lower section. The sky is a deep blue, and the foreground shows a dark green lawn and a paved walkway.

## **MAKING THE GRADE** University Buildings

**America's  
Top Architecture  
Schools 2014**



# Saison

San Francisco

Jiun Ho

By Lamar Anderson



**OPEN PLAN** An exposed white kitchen spills into Saison's dining area (opposite). To minimize the room's height—which peaks at 30 feet—interior designer Jiun Ho suspended steel frames from the exposed oak ceiling (above). Outfitted with movable gimbal fixtures housing LED MR16s, these serve as the restaurant's primary lighting system and act as a lower second ceiling.

**NESTLED** IN a 19th-century brick warehouse that once served as a power station for San Francisco's formerly industrial South of Market district, the Michelin-starred Saison feels more like a communal eatery than a place where cultish foodies drop \$400 on an 18-to-20-course dinner. A rack of firewood, which doubles as a visual screen for the entrance, looks like a neaten-up version of a woodpile. Bare wood tables offer an unobstructed view into a bright white kitchen lined with polished copper pots. Radio hits from the '80s and '90s play at an unobtrusive volume. "Often when you think about Michelin-starred restaurants, it's for a very formal occasion," says Jiun Ho, the project's interior designer. "The whole idea here is more casual. It feels like home," adds Ho, who also designed the restaurant's furniture. "You can touch anything." And you want to: the warm house lights bring out the richness of the textures, from Ho's walnut tables to the cashmere throws draped over the backs of the chairs—a signature of chef Joshua Skenes' hospitality.

Back in the spring of 2012, when Skenes began thinking about a concept for the warehouse, he envisioned one big room without the usual divisions between kitchen and dining areas. "I wanted to break down the barriers of the traditional format," says the chef, who had outgrown Saison's original space in the Mission District. "The dining room is the kitchen; the kitchen is the dining room. But it's really neither." Skenes, who prepares ingredients like wood pigeon over open flames and embers, also wanted a lighting scheme that would cast a warm glow on his food.

The designers had a good shell to work with, thanks to a just-completed renovation by HKS (part of a development that added four stories of apartments over part of the building). But the long, rectangular interior felt cavernous, peaking at 30 feet beneath the gabled roof. Without altering the wood- and steel-supported masonry structure—protected as part of the city's South End Historic District—the team needed to cut the tall space down to human size.

Using light in tandem with color to create a more intimate scale on the ground, Ho suspended a series of rectangular steel frames from the exposed oak ceiling and fitted each one with movable gimbal fixtures housing











LED MR16 lamps. This system acts as a second ceiling by being physically lower, and creates a contrast between bright light and shadow to keep visitors' attention on one plane, much as a theater's lighting rig does. As Saison's primary source of illumination, the LEDs make the structure above the tracks seem to dissolve into the background. A coat of charcoal paint on the ceiling aids the disappearing act.

If Saison is a performance space, the kitchen is no backstage. To make the room pop against the dark void of the dining area, the designers dropped the ceiling to 12 feet, painted it white, and concealed the HVAC equipment, grease traps, and plumbing above the soffit. They also

brought the cooks into the dining room by lining up refrigerators along tables and pushing a prep station past the soffit's edge. Weaving kitchen functions around the tables gives everyone a view of the action, says Michael Gibson, a New York-based architectural consultant on the project. Without preferential spots like a kitchen bar or chef's table, "there's no hierarchy," he says. And since the prep areas, dining room, and bar are each defined by an overhead steel frame with the same LEDs, there's a spatial balance even as the kitchen's brightness begs for attention.

The lighting turns each table into an island. Waitstaff reconfigure the seating nightly,

#### WORKFLOW

The designers dropped the ceiling over the kitchen to a height of 12 feet, painted it white, and concealed HVAC, grease traps, and plumbing above the soffit. A narrow concrete loft that houses wine storage and other back-of-house functions recedes from view under a coat of charcoal paint.





based on reservations, and adjust the MR16s to bathe each group in a pool of light. The designers chose full-spectrum LEDs, which render deep reds and violets (hues that have been difficult for manufacturers to perfect) particularly well. "They have a very warm color, and really make the food look fantastic," says Ho. Each LED is powered by a single chip, which generates a clear, sharp beam. "Wherever you sit, you feel like you're in your own space within the bigger space," says Gibson.

In a city where dinner out is a cultural activity, Saison trains its spotlights on the plate and turns eating into a performance. ■

#### SETTING THE SCENE

Though the bright white kitchen commands attention in the loftlike space (above) the dining tables are also bathed in light to stage a personal experience for guests.

#### credits

**INTERIOR DESIGN:** Jiun Ho, principal

**CONSULTANTS:** Michael Gibson (architectural); Tim Harrison (kitchen)

**GENERAL CONTRACTOR:** Yanscape Construction

**CLIENT:** Saison Dining Group – Joshua Skenes, chef

**SIZE:** 3,712 square feet

**COST:** withheld

**COMPLETION DATE:** January 2013

#### SOURCES

**LIGHTING:** Soraa (LEDs); Lutron (dimming controls)

**APPLIANCES:** Molleni (kitchen range)

**PAINT:** Benjamin Moore

**UPHOLSTERY:** Maharam