

design project

BY TOM LAZARUS  
Photography: Murray Fredericks

# Taste

**ADDRESS:** 275 Kent Street (entry on Sussex Lane), Westpac Place, Sydney

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**HOURS:** Mon-Wed 7am till 6pm, Thur-Fri 7am till midnight, closed weekends



ANYONE WHO KNOWS the despair which comes from having a minus sign in front of an otherwise impressive bank balance will be happy to hear that the banking district in Sydney's CBD is in a much better mood since Taste opened.

The hybrid bar, bakery, café and restaurant has hoisted a super-fresh baguette up its mast and makes a pretty good case for being Sydney's first new 'laneway bar' and eatery, situated as it is on Sussex Lane, one of the 'hot' back alleys slated for council re-development.

The owners are Hieu Luong and Madeleine Cheah, Hieu a baker from the age of 13 and later an IT consultant who became so jaded with the floppy sandwiches in the city that he quit and opened Taste bakery and restaurant on Foveaux Street in Surry Hills. With a bit of dough behind the operation, he and Madeleine have now

taken the concept to a second space, underneath the architecture award-battering Westpac HQ on Kent Street. This time they had the finances to incorporate a bar element into the mix, as well as a lounge and fine dining area. Designers of The Lincoln, Peckvonhartel (with a design team of Rachel Luchetti and Stuart Krelle) were brought in to create a "characterful, warm and feminine interior" with a French colonial bent.

## BEST POSSIBLE TASTE

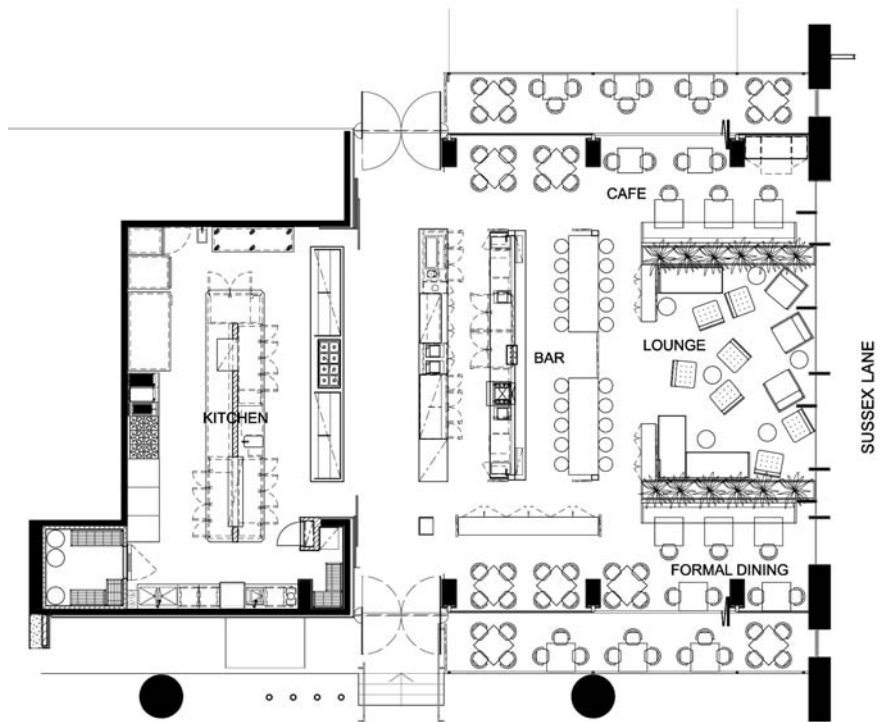
All up, the design budget was a cool \$1 million, for 248 square metres of space, glazed from floor to lofty ceiling on three sides and somehow catching the late afternoon sun, despite being surrounded by vertiginous towers of glass and steel. Within the fish tank-like space, PVH created a visually interesting blend of drinking and dining areas to suit different



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occasions, be it a quick cup of heart starter and a pastry on the outdoor terrace, a full French dining experience on the white tableclothed tables in the restaurant, or a spiced Daiquiri and some shared bar food on the high stools.

The open kitchen remains from the Surry Hills site, but here it can be screened off by sliding wallpapered panels when not in use. The focus of the room thus becomes the bar, with a built-in glass display case for the patisserie on one side and a back-lit onyx bar top and reclaimed timber cladding to the wet side. The whole is defined by a structural timber framework, designed to reflect the host Westpac building and capable of supporting a mezzanine seating level which is now in the pipeline. "We have queues out the door on Thursdays and Fridays," explains Hieu. "The thinking is we can put some fine dining tables upstairs, and free up the space for more bar drinkers downstairs." ▶





The tiles which clad the kitchen servery and wrap the structural columns were sourced from an apartment floor in Vietnam. "It was a friend of a friend's house," says Madeleine. "We swapped their old tiles for new ones, which they preferred – so everyone's happy!" As luck would have it, the flower design matches the Taste logo perfectly.

Architectural antiques (sourced from a mix of overseas suppliers and Salvage in Sydney) add character to the new space. Old planter boxes are re-employed as menu and tray holders, Argentinian timber shutters are used as false ceilings and the 200 year old tables in the bar were formerly used as a hybrid table/bed by a family in rural Vietnam.



At present, Taste operates pragmatically, with customer numbers in the bar and dining areas determining music volume levels and atmosphere.

**CONTINENTAL SHELVES**

The Taste aesthetic is described as "rustic French", with its artfully rusted ironwork detailing and hanging baskets, but there are some distinct Asia-luxe touches too, such as the potted banana palms, timber screens and painted birdcages. "The design brief was really to blend old and new – it's a very European combination," elaborates Hieu.

GM, Peter Bell (former Sommelier at Quay) says this European tone is a fitting backdrop against which staff introduce customers to some of the more interesting products, particularly from the floor-to-ceiling wine display cabinet. "Last Thursday and Friday we went through 18 bottles of a rosé wine from the south west of France that no-one had ever heard of," he reports. Hieu seconds this; "We concentrate on

selling boutique brands – not ones you can just buy at any liquor store."

Bartender, Dion Morrow has joined the team from Astral at Star City and is taking a step-by-step approach to modifying the cocktail offer. "I didn't want to jump straight in with infusions and molecular stuff," he explains. "This is very much a wine crowd."

"Everyone is very passionate about their work here – it's a great team," concludes Madeleine, pointing out that the decision to close for Saturdays and Sundays has given the staff that rarest of incentives in hospitality – weekends off.

With the team and design in place (the latter has just been nominated for a 2008 Interior Design Award), Madeleine and Hieu now have plans for a group of Taste restaurants, bakeries and bars across Sydney City – basically anywhere the wilted sanger and the warm Martini still rule. Look out. ■

**selected suppliers:**

**ARCHITECT/DESIGNER:**  
Peckvohartel 02 9232 6969

**RECLAIMED FITTINGS/IRONWORK/LIGHTING:**  
Salvage 02 9699 1005

**TIMBER** (bar cladding/framework):  
Ironwood 02 9818 1166

**STONE** (bar/counter tops):  
WK Granite & Marble 02 9772 2377

**FABRIC** (upholstery, wall panelling):  
Baresque 02 9966 8470  
South Pacific 02 9327 7222  
Warwick 02 9518 8688

**FURNITURE:**  
Kim Snow 02 9319 2011

(outdoor seating):  
Sebel 02 9780 2222