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B L E
A R T

DISRUPTING THE COURSE
WITH JORDAN KAHN



TEXT BY ROBERTO CROCI



Good architecture makes our social world better. Architects are great storytellers. They educate, integrating design, concept, aesthetic, lighting, color, material, space, energy consumption, and east-west orientation into their tale. And art. And history. And past and future.

Just consider the Waffle Building, in Culver City, California, a twisted 5,500-square-foot tower designed and engineered by Eric Owen Moss Architects. If you look at it from the outside, you could never imagine that the entire building is in fact a restaurant called Vespertine, run by a chef like no other, Jordan Kahn. Born and raised in Savannah, Georgia, Jordan has been cooking professionally since age fifteen. At seventeen he worked at The French Laundry under Thomas Keller. Then he moved on to Keller's Per Se in New York, before heading to Chicago to help Grant Achatz launch Alinea. . . . No, no, scratch that. Let me give you it to you another way.

As long as I can remember, I've never had any difficulty writing a story, showing you what I went through, so that you see the places and people that I just experienced. Well, that was until now. And not because I do not have words and feelings to convey, but simply because I do not want to rob you of the experience I just had, the complete experience. At the same time, I almost don't want to give anything away. So much life went through a meal that fed not only my stomach, but also my mind, my imagination, my creativity, my hunger, for what I don't know. What is the unknown love in everyone's life? Yes, I cried, I laughed, I thought, I actually had to wander with my mind . . . and for what? For that surprising, engaging, and refreshing conversation with chef Kahn, a fucking crazy normal human being, who pushes his limits, who uncovers his fear in search of his intellect, who wants more all the time, who, at the end of the day, puts in the work himself, 24/7. Whether he is foraging for pine cones and fir in the early AM (after closing) in the middle of a national park, or while fermenting (twenty-seven times just to get it right) some crazy yet bubbly delicious Kombucha, or confabulating over Moroccan or Syrian red wine with Terence (go and introduce yourself to him), or trying to lie with elegance to his floor captain Gloria, who just would love to go on vacation, for once.

I am talking about Jordan Kahn and Vespertine, a one-of-a-kind dining experience, along with bites of architecture, billowing whispers of culture, anecdotes, and lots of glitter worn by the servers, impeccably dressed in modern Samurai uniforms. Although you are surrounded by windows, everything you see and feel is intimate, starting with the outdoor garden of mounded earth and flora, concrete tables and heated benches, where you wait until you go to the entrance, the elevator which takes you to the second floor, where you are greeted by the man himself, Jordan Kahn (who, by the way, knows way ahead of time every detail of your life, dog included).

Then it's a whirlwind of food: giant kelp and sea lettuce crackers, hanging from a tree branch, to be dipped into chickpea spread with oxalis leaves, paired with passionfruit-flower-bedecked, redwood-infused wine. Not bad as an appetizer called "Chips and Dip." Followed by a burnt onion cracker spread with blackcurrant jam sprinkled with chive flowers and other blossoms. Fantastic. (Jordan drives the Los Angeles environs to forage for most of his ingredients. Malibu for kelp, the Santa Clarita Woodlands Park for Douglas-fir pine). Third, milk bread wrapped in black garlic leather with abalone mushrooms and sheep's milk cheese. Unbelievable. Then back to the mezzanine level, the main dining floor, an intimate setting with seating for twenty-two patrons. And that is where I stop. I really hope that you go and experience for yourself the exquisite palate and inventiveness of Jordan Kahn. The price for such an evening starts at \$250 per person. Jordan can explain for himself why it is worth it.

How did you discover this building?

Jordan Kahn: The first time I saw the place, it was still under construction. I didn't know anything about Eric Owen Moss, the architect, but this astounding structure became an obsession. I had never been impressed by architecture in this way. At the time I was still working at Red Medicine, my first restaurant, so one night I decided to have an illegal peek. I jumped the fence, entered the building, immediately felt its vibes. I got scared by my footsteps and decided to put on my headphones, and, eerily enough, I became part of the surroundings. It was like a dream. Everything made sense. I then contacted the developers of the area, Laurie and Frederick Samitaur-Smith (a couple of visionaries responsible for developing the Hayden Tract Area), and they led me to Eric Moss, who was excited by the idea of a restaurant in a space he conceived for other purposes. After that, I had to create a narrative with other artists to make Vespertine a reality. I wanted to have a place where creativity, in all forms, was the force behind it all.

Is it true the tables on the top floor are workbenches?

JK: Yeah, the furniture on the roof is designed by Eric Moss. His process is really fascinating. He's irreverent in a lot of ways, and he points to a lot of historical areas in the world that have had an impact on his work. Of these, one of my favorites is the Medusa Head. There was a Greek temple in one of the Roman-conquered parts of Greece whose columns almost looked like those of the Pantheon except that on top of them were Medusa heads, enormous. And so after the Romans took over, they didn't just tear the temple down and build something new, they took the columns, turned them upside down, and put them underwater as part of a cistern that still exists, near the Hagia Sophia. It was a way for the Romans to say, "We took something Greek, turned it upside down, and put it under water to show our superiority." So they left these architectural traces embedded in history instead of removing them, and left the evidence of their superiority—a fascinating concept that Moss appreciated. So the furniture on the roof of Vespertine consists of three traditional Scandinavian woodworking benches that Eric bought and then chopped up to make his own furniture. He even left the original tags on them when we first opened. It was almost a "fuck you" to Scandinavian design. It's an interesting idea Eric had. I love him.

How do you describe Vespertine?

JK: Let me start by saying that even for me it's very difficult to describe, whenever anyone asks me what it is, I usually respond with, "How much time do you have?" It is at its most basic, a multidisciplinary experience where the ritual of dining becomes the conduit for experiencing other things. We have essentially synthesized an environment that allows people to feel things differently than they usually do when they eat, and through the act of eating, which is highly intimate, it allows the guests to experience other things than just tasty food.

Jordan, this is like the final frontier, to boldly go where no one has gone before.

JK: I think it works largely because the restaurant is not based on any particular cultural platform or reference point that people can grab onto. So that going to eat at Noma, for example, you'd say you'd be going to eat at a Nordic restaurant. To us, that would not be an accurate description. We don't have any identifiable cultural reference or fundamental platform driving Vespertine that the guests can discern or know about. The only model people can look to is something not of this world, so they often come up with various space analogies, but that just means that their imaginations are trying to cope with something they don't recognize.

Take me through your connection with design, shape, form, sound, even silence. How did you get to the point in your life that you wanted to create something like this?

JK: Typically, when I'm going through a creative session, developing new ideas for ingredients and dishes, things like that, I generally put myself in an environment that promotes creative thinking. I can point to one example, though there are many. When I was in New York, I worked for Per Se, and on my days off I would go spend time in a gallery owned by an artist named Alex Grey, a place called The Chapel of Sacred Mirrors, in the West Side industrial area. Grey turned the entire apartment into a studio that housed his entire body of work, and for five or ten bucks you could go in and spend as much time there as you wanted. There were pillows all over the floor where you could sit, people would meditate and things like that. I always had a profound reaction to being in that space. His art is very spiritual, even sacred in nature. I'd bring a notebook and sit in that environment with my thoughts. The pen would just pour out ideas and things, food-related, real things that were hard to describe, but it was all through this idea of dining as ritual. From that moment on, I've basically spent my entire career asking, "How do I take what I feel, synthesize it, and give it to other people?" I wanted everybody to feel this, I kept asking myself how do I do that? At Vespertine we essentially created a world that stands alone, a world we can give, a world that people can walk into for a few hours, leaving behind their thoughts, lives, the planet, whatever, and then walk around in that world and absorb it, engage it, be a part of it.

How do you come up with stuff?

JK: We're constantly working on ideas and things, constantly trying to expose ourselves to as much shit as possible. Every idea we come up with differently. A lot of it is just being sensitive and exposing yourself to things most people wouldn't. We're very investigative. What does "sour" mean, and how many different types of sour are there? Let's try



to create as many different types of sour as we can, almost like an artist's palette. Sour from a lemon tastes different from sour from a plum, which tastes still different from an unripe plum, so you develop this whole language of ingredients and flavors. For us that's the job of the chef, to try to articulate what you want. So a lot of our dishes have a purpose before they have ingredients. Sometimes they come from very weird places, like the scallop dish we serve, which is part of the all-black dish. The most powerful flavor in that dish comes from plum. I wanted that dish because it's so minimal, so stark and unusual. My idea about it was that you feel like you're eating a bolt of lightning. Our thinking was that acidity is considered a really sharp flavor, but acidity from citrus is very different from what we had in mind, so we looked at acidity from plum, which has a strong umami quality and really takes over your palate well. That's how we came up with that dish. And that's just one example.

Talk to me about the music at Vespertine. What kind of experience do you want it to be?

JK: We don't talk about the restaurant in the usual ways that people talk about restaurants. For us it's more like a film. And there are films with no music that are amazingly beautiful, but music really adds a layer that allows people to feel emotions more intensely. I'm building a restaurant where I want people to feel, so for me it's not even a question, there has to be music. That's the way we go about it. I invited those people who are musical influences on my work to contribute. The musicians who wrote the score weren't friends of mine. I didn't know these guys, they're a famous band, but I asked them, and they said yes! The band is called This Will Destroy You, and I first saw them in Bennett Miller's film *Money Ball*, with Brad Pitt; they did the main title scene. Since then they did part of the score for *Foxcatcher*, another beautiful Miller film, and they also did *Room*.

There are lots of restaurants that are really enjoyable and delicious, but you could compare them to a blockbuster movie—big, in your face, and when it's gone it's gone. But a movie like Bennett Miller's sticks with you for weeks, months. We feel our restaurant is like that.

I totally agree. You can't even call it ambiance. It's feelings, knowledge, experience, all of that. As far as choosing artists to collaborate with, what do you look for? Are they from around the world?

JK: Yes I find people who influence my work and I ask them to contribute, and when they ask me how, I say however you want. At the time we were

conceiving Vespertine, and it was starting to take shape, I wrote a kind of narrative or story that I'd give to each of the artists I asked to collaborate. I don't speak the same language as a lot of these artists, they're all very different, so I'd ask them to fill out this story with their art in whatever way they thought best. That was it. There would be a bit of back-and-forth during the collaboration, but for the most part I wanted them to feel they had total freedom in what they did. And yet the result was very cohesive, because I curated the people but not the content. That's the key.

How about your tableware?

JK: It's the work of the legendary Japanese potter, Ryota Aoki. He makes glazes like nobody else in his little studio on a mountain in Toki. I tried to contact him several times but never heard back. So we flew to Tokyo, took a train to Nagoya, a bus to Toki, and drove up this huge mountain. We talked to him for an hour, and he saw that we were serious. Then he introduced us to Yuichi Takemata, a very good cutler. The staff uniforms are by designer Jona Sees, based in Brooklyn, very Japanese. The aprons are a work of art, charcoal-dyed and woven on an 800-year-old Japanese loom used for samurai undergarments.

You wrote, "Ironic how the quiet produces the loudest results." What do you mean?

JK: That really comes down to process, and my process involves extreme quiet, silence, so that the noise of the moment ceases. Quiet helps channel any thought, like a form of meditation. Subtlety and nuance develop against a background of silence, and they produce the most powerful, lasting effect.

Make me happy, Jordan. What do you have in your refrigerator that you can use to whip up some Italian shit?

JK: A really good friend of mine is the owner of The Cheese Store of Beverly Hills, Norbert Wabnig. One of his employees came to dinner at Vespertine, maybe three weeks ago, and Norbert sent him with a gift package for me. So in my fridge right now I have some off-the-boat guanciale and would probably do something with that. I also have a brand of pasta called Il Mulino di Gragnano (which I gave him as a token of my heritage). That's the brand the Pope eats, so I'm thinking maybe an amatriciana made with Pope pasta.

Thank you, Vespertine. As their motto says: "a gastronomical experience seeking to disrupt the course of the modern restaurant. Reservations now available."

—R.C.



