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Cool Bars

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Forward-thinking or retro, sleek or cozy, these local hotspots have one key thing in common: design that focuses on the details

Bruno Brazeau cares about bars. Their size, shape, the people who drink there. Even the surface on which you put a glass is important, says Brazeau, whose business, Cabinet Brazeau-Brazeau, has designed dozens of Montreal bars and restaurants over the last 15 years. His work has won, among others, the prix Capitale, Montreal for pullman (2005) and CMA (2005), and the Concours Commerce design Montreal prize for Le petit Italien (2002) and Bay Kian (2006).

Pullman is owned by Brazeau, who knows well enough to use wood as a surface for glass ("not to fix bars," he says, "rather too anti-sterile"), but he also likes to put shelveware to a completely unorthodox use — in pull-man's case by creating an imposing chandelier made entirely of upturned champagne and wine glasses.

Brazeau created the wine bar in 2004, after a decade of designing that began when he was asked by Bizzy Di Salvo, who in the 1970s opened the legendary Montreal bar Neil Marguez in old Montreal. The late father of Brazeau's 2005 singer James was looking for someone to take his ideas and make them concrete. Brazeau says, and mutual friends recommended him, "he wanted me to create a three-dimensional space, some visuals inside his old bar" (talks on Pine Ave., Brazeau says). "He wanted a model but didn't know how to do 3D modelling."

Brazeau was used to doing photographic work for theatre, often with budgets of \$10,000 or \$15,000. "Bobby told me the budget would be \$750,000," he says. Needless to say, the learning curve was steep, doing the construction, with Brazeau spending all his time on the site, often taking advice from contractors who would steer him away from impractical ideas.

"I learned a lot," Brazeau says of that first experience in 1995. He is 43 now, and has since worked on more than 70 projects — restaurants, clubs and bars. The design for each bar, from the diminutive Big in Japan bar on St. Laurent Blvd. to the popular lobby bar at Auberge St. Gabriel in Old Montreal, changes for each place because the spaces change," he says. "Functionality is most important, and after that I always think of the interaction between customers — although sometimes you can never tell."

Most important are the needs of the client. "In Big in Japan, we tried to make something more austere," he says, with its puzzle-shaped bar, masses of lit candles and array of Japanese whiskey suspended above the bar by decorative hobbles. "I used the idea of how surfaces are used in reflection. I captured all the walls and added no decorations so that the people in the bar would be the focus of all the reflection, and the bottles. They are part of the decor."

At the storied Club Chasse de Pêche in Old Montreal, "we tried really decor," he says. "When you know the owner, you can try to be more radical. It's very important they take the risk with you." Opened in 2009 by chef Claude Pilonier and maître d' Hubert Marsolais, who is a good friend of Brazeau, it has been described by Gazette restaurant critic Louise Charbonneau as a "cross between a Zone home-wear boutique and the famed Laurentine auberge La Sapinière."

That said, Brazeau makes a confession: "I don't like decor, and I hate gyroc. To me, it's an empty wall."

Instead, he likes to use glass to show the old skin of an interior. "I like to repurpose glass," he says. At Pullman, he used 35 layers in front of the old wall, encasing it in glass to show the provenance of the building, exposing brick, plaster and lathing.

A feature like the shelveware chandelier, for instance, becomes a vital talking point. "I like to have custom conversation pieces, something that can be seen from the outside so people stop and say, 'Look at that!'"

Knowing the provenance of a place was also the motivator for Alexandre Babin, co-owner of the thriving Montreal bars Baldwin Barbecue and Dominion Square Tavern, along with partners Nicole Lenoir and Alexandre Wroblewski.

"We did these bars ourselves," says Babin, who has dabbled in graphic design and photography. "I hope I can say I have good design taste, so I've been told."

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Their first bar, Baldwin Barbecue on Laurier Ave. W., was conceived as an homage to a pharmacy in Mile End where Baldwin's grandfather worked more than a half century ago. "I was raised by her," he says. "The pharmacy had closed down years before, a place on the corner of St. Urbain and St. Laurent, so when I decided to make a bar, I wanted to make it like an old-fashioned apothecary. She would have loved the environment."

Baldwin explains the link between bar and apothecary: "One hundred years ago, you could go to the apothecary to get tonics, which at that time was mainly booze. It was the answer to all your ailments."

He opted for an eclectic mix of styles for the interior, incorporating the design styles from 1950s to 1970s with lamps based on flowers, amber lighting, orange banquette. "It's a white-black-orange mix," he says. "The bar is all white with some gold. Winning, some people say that it has the look of Stanley Kubrick's Space Odyssey. For me it has more of a mid-century retro feel."

The stools are from the 1960s, and alcohol is served in old syrup bottles, Baldwin says. "You get your eight or 16 ounces of gin or vodka or tequila in these bottles, and you can get liters of beer in old glass milk bottles, the old style of a milk to the Quartered Pine. Milk bottles in the downtown area — at All Deco steel wall, lower. It's the shape of a milk bottle — so our stamp says Guaranteed Pure Milk. It all has a sense of the old pharmacy."

Five years ago, the partners began working on the restoration of the Dominion Pub, a sports bar on Metcalfe St. that tagged its decor to the early 1960s — big screen TVs, poker machines and a marble bar in the centre. Built in 1927, it had been called the Dominion Square Tavern and was one of the oldest taverns in Montreal, Baldwin says.

"So that's what we call it, although it's just a historic reference since taverns don't exist anymore. Now it's a bar where you can eat or a restaurant where you can drink," he says, acknowledging the draw of chef Eric Dupain's culinary talent.

They were able to bring the place back to its origins because the shell was there, the ceiling and walls, through the windows and coats of the privolets that hang on the walls had been fixed by giant TVs. "The banquette floors and the ceiling look just like they did then," he says. "We had to reproduce the washrooms, when it first opened there were no women's washrooms, since women weren't allowed in taverns. Most history, in the 1980s, the building housed one of the first gay bars in Montreal."

Now the space near Dominion Square so resembles its origins that it feels like it should have paintings flickering over the period furniture — heavy chairs from the 1920s and counters made from old wood. "I think you can really feel in the place that there was someone here before us, and there will be someone after us," Baldwin says.

Cocktails are also inspired by the era: rye, Cognac, brandies and bitters. "Shut" you would have drunk at the time," Baldwin says. "We serve a Canadian Old Fashioned that we make with rye and cherries."

Retro is not on the menu at Wunderbar at W Hotel, in Montreal's Quarter International. This historic cocktail bar, designed by hotel-bar management company TFC, was discovered by TFC's Peter Chase when it opened in 2004 as a re-emerging "low glam club of ice." It features a vintage Barstool ceiling meant to evoke the Northern Lights and a tri-fold wall where the images depict various aspects of nature — the original images were microscope magnifications of snowflakes.

"Focusing on the 'cooler' elements of nature was a little tricky when I look back on it now," Chase says, but bartenders are so warm and hospitable, and the nightlife scene is extremely hot. "I took it to the end it was the right design direction." Perhaps it's the music, courtesy of eclectic DJs and bands, or the unusual cocktails, says Duane Hixler, managing director for Wunderbar and its sister bar, the Plateau Lounge, also in the hotel. "Our Placo Sour, Bitter End, Thistle and Complex D'Angeles are very popular," he says. "Or perhaps, it's the room itself, a unique space where the little bottle can still be able to provide a big club feel while maintaining an incredible level of intimacy."

- Pullman**, 3424 Parc Ave., 514-285-7775, www.pullman-emi.com
- Baldwin Barbecue**, 10 Laurier Ave. W., 514-276-4282, www.baldwinbarbecue.com
- Dominion Square Tavern**, 1234 Metcalfe St., 514-564-5094, www.dominionsquare.com
- Wunderbar at W Hotel**, 501 Square Victoria, 514-356-3103, www.wunderbarmontreal.com

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