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Eat Your Art Out: Curating Destination Dining

In today's museums, are restaurants becoming destinations in their own right?



Café Jacquemart-André - Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris

The formula is simple and easily reproduced. In conjunction with a remodeled building, build out large, open plan **destination dining** on the ground floor. Add doors onto the street to ensure easy access to passersby. Hire a buzzy, young restaurateur. Furnish with modernist furniture and hang art from the collection on the walls—food-related, if you can manage it.

That was the concept at Untitled, the ground floor restaurant at the revamped Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. (It should be noted that Untitled is owned by Union Square Hospitality Group, which owns **over 17 cafes and restaurants**, two of which are at the Whitney and three of which are at MoMA.) Surrounded on two sides by full glass windows, the restaurant is strategically positioned at the corner of Renzo Piano’s aluminic new building and next to the High Line entrance for maximum exposure. And just in case you’ve forgotten where you are, a Robert Indiana sculpture from 1964 graces the wall next to the bar, proudly proclaiming “EAT” in lit bulbs.

Ditto for Esker Grove, the Walker Art Center’s new eatery helmed by Executive Chef Doug Flicker, formerly of nationally-acclaimed Minneapolis restaurant Piccolo. Here, the restaurant operates parallel to the museum: dinner is served six nights per week; on five of these evenings, the galleries close at 5 p.m. This exemplifies what the *Star Tribune* **deems** “destination dining.”

“We’re both important cultural institutions. We want to preserve tradition yet move ahead, so there’s a synergy in our values.”

Niki Russ Federman
Russ & Daughters

MoMA was the first museum in the U.S. to have a restaurant open even to those with no intention of touring their galleries, when it hired restaurateur Danny Meyer (of Union Square Hospitality Group) to open The Modern. “Before we opened The Modern, I’m not sure there had ever been a museum restaurant in America that was a destination in and of itself,” Meyer wrote in his book *Setting the Table*. It was conceived to serve “as a restaurant both for New Yorkers and for museumgoers whose choice was to sit down, eat well, and also be taken care of.” It was to be, in other words, a restorative locale that happened to be in a museum.

As with all the best concepts, that of being able to dine at a museum is far from new. The **Victoria and Albert Museum** in London claims the oldest museum restaurant. In 1868, the V&A’s first director Henry Cole opened the Morris, Gamble, and Poynter rooms on the premises, pinning the old teatime adage “There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy the good of his labour” up on the wall. It didn’t take the popularity of the rooms to prove that Cole was on to something—what better venue to pair with reflection and conversation than a

museum? While the notion scandalized the establishment at the time, the popularity of museum restaurants would make it a scandal not to have one.

Older museums, without the luxury of an all-new building, are seeing what they can do to get in on the epicurean action, too. Last year, the Brooklyn Museum remodeled their restaurant, rechristening it "The Norm." It was reportedly "inspired by the museum's maze of secret and mysterious storage spaces," with paintings hung salon-style behind glass walls echoing the Museum's signature open storage rooms on floors above. The Jewish Museum in Manhattan similarly retooled a pre-existing basement space to welcome the first uptown (and completely kosher) outpost for **Russ & Daughters**, the iconic Lower East Side deli. Upon the partnership's announcement, owner Niki Russ Federman **commented** to the *New York Times*, "We're both important cultural institutions. We want to preserve tradition yet move ahead, so there's a synergy in our values."



Marisol, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago - Lou Stejkal

Museums aren't the only ones to notice their synergy with the culinary arts. Performing arts spaces have long offered beverage service pre- and post-shows, not to mention the intermission snack break. Recent innovators, like **The Lounge** at Los Angeles' REDCAT, and **Front Bar: Coffee and Drinks** at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, have normalized cocktail hour as part of the theater experience, and vice versa. Zoos are also expanding their dining boundaries: the San Diego Zoo's **Sabertooth Grill** focuses on fresh local ingredients and sustainability initiatives in an effort to lead Zoo dining "into a new era."

But in the cultural landscape, museums seem to be distilling this practice down to a science (or, more aptly, an art). The artful dining experience—a notion many chefs promote, and which is undoubtedly part of the draw when attracting **a big-name restaurateur to a museum venture**—offers something for a broader audience, catering to food- and art-lovers equally. It is no longer just a space that attracts fatigued museum visitors, but can now be the primary destination.

Many museums are even putting their collections on the menu, as if a reminder that there is more to experience at the institution. In Paris' Musée Jacquemart-André, the **Café** is located in the former dining room of the collector's-mansion-turned-museum and serves brunch, lunch, and tea, with a menu that takes inspiration from current exhibitions. The décor, painted ceiling, enormous works hanging from the walls, and tea service give diners a further taste for the museum's holdings without requiring an additional admission fee.

“Audiences today want a space where they can come together and interact.”

Madeleine Grynsztejn
Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

Perhaps this concept is no better exemplified than by the **Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago**. On the heels of a successful multi-million dollar capital campaign, the museum is currently constructing a new wing and street-level entrance meant to entice more than just those looking for art. The extra space won't be devoted to more galleries, but instead to more public space, the centerpiece of which is a restaurant. Called Marisol after the Venezuela-American artist by the same name whose gift was the first in the MCA's collection—and whose favorite dishes inspired some of the menu—the restaurant, which recently opened, will also accompany what's being called "a hybrid lounge-workshop-performance space" dubbed, appropriately, the Commons. And of course, all of it will be street accessible, no admission required.

Marisol, Untitled, Esker Grove, and more all exemplify a trend toward greater—and intentional—emphasis on a museum's dining program. But this trend is about more than the food; it's about the experience – a notion borne out by the **Culture Track '17** study, where more than half of respondents

identified food and drink experiences as culture. As MCA Chicago Director Madeleine Grynsztejn **said** to *The New York Times* when the expansion was announced, it's all about "finding new ways to bring art, learning, and food together, reflecting how people like to experience culture today."

The more significant merging of fine dining and other cultural experiences seems to have only just begun. In addition to the MCA Chicago, other upcoming museum buildings will make food and drink a priority. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has **two restaurants and a café**, and it is set to feature another café in its **new wing**, as well. "Audiences today want a space where they can come together and interact," Grynsztejn told *The New York Times*. "We are finding that people are really hungry for civil and civic dialogue—now more than ever."

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