

# OBSERVED

hospitality

Adonis

interiors

*“We could have done Ali Baba’s den, complete with Persian rugs.”*

## A Taste of the Mediterranean

**Subtle design references echo the menu at this New York restaurant.**

When it came to designing his first restaurant, a Mediterranean eatery in New York, Nasser Nakib was not going to opt for clichés. “We could have done Ali Baba’s den, complete with Persian rugs,” the architect says, smiling wryly. “But we wouldn’t do that.” Indeed, a lack of subtlety would be out of character for Nakib, who began working alongside society decorator Bunny Williams after starting his own high-end residential practice in 1993. So for Ili, a 300-seat space owned by chef and childhood friend Philippe Massoud, Nakib drew upon classical references and Lebanese mythology to create a shimmering jewel box with quietly luxurious touches.

Modeled after a Greek basilica, the restaurant centers around a long double-height dining room. Wrapped in a red-cedar framework, the space is flanked by a dining alcove and lounge on the ground floor and a private dining area on the second. Copper screens, glass insets, and mirrors are scattered throughout the wood grid, providing **continued on page 54**



The main dining room has a gridded theme, including the floor’s flamed black granite and oak.

Bilyana Dimitrova

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Nakib used translucent metals to filter light throughout the restaurant. Copper screens (left) wrap the main dining room, while strips of steel conveyor belt cover the glowing bar (left and below) in the lounge area.

Lebanon in the springtime, when Adonis was killed, and are said to be colored by his spilled blood.”

With the shoestring budget, there was no possibility for the “very expensive shopping” Nakib is used to doing for his clients. To save cash without compromising quality, he custom-made all of the restaurant’s furnishings. Take those red dining chairs: “When I started looking, I saw [Poul Kjaerholm’s] PK9 and said, ‘This is it!’” he recalls. “Then I found out they were \$2,500 each. So we made our own.” The resulting seats—Knoll wooden stacking chairs covered with padding and upholstered in rouge-colored leather—were an elegant solution at a fifth of the cost. Other features, such as the cloth scrims on the walls of the lounge and private dining areas, were similarly improvised. Lit on all sides, the fabric—which is threaded through with copper filament—adds color and sparkle, and helps absorb sound.

Although elements of hospitality design continue to migrate into residential spaces, Nakib says his experience with Ilili reinforced that each specialty is a different beast. Homes are far more intimate and subtle. “It is where you kick off your shoes and unwind,” he says. “You don’t have to put on a show.” Restaurants, by contrast, are grander in scale and ambition. “They’re huge rooms that need to dazzle you—but only for two hours, then you are gone.” —Julie Taraska



each room with privacy but still allowing tantalizing glimpses into the other spaces. Nakib and his Beirut-based collaborators, Yasmine Almachnoug and Sibylle Nasrallah, picked natural materials—metal, stone, and wood—because of their ability to age gracefully. He also gave them richer and warmer palettes by illuminating them with amber light, directed in equal amounts from the ceiling and the walls. This particular lighting layout, which is intended to make diners feel like they’re inside a glowing lantern, has two purposes. One, it’s a tip of the hat to the light over the Mediterranean Sea at sunset. And second, “It gets rid of under-eye shadows and makes everyone look beautiful,” the architect says.

The story of Adonis, a Greek god of vegetation, also informed the room’s look. “Adonis was actually Lebanese, and he was born in a cedar forest,” Nakib says. “On an abstract level, you can think of Ilili’s wooden grid as tree branches, through which you can see sunlight and the sky.” The deity is also paid tribute in the design of the tables, rounds of ebonized French oak surrounded by armless red chairs. “These elements were inspired by coquelicots, wild poppies with black centers and red petals,” he explains. “They come out in

Top left, Bilyana Dimitrova; others Christopher Goodney