



Restaurants with a jaw-dropping 'wow factor' are always a thrill, but sometimes the best designed places are those where the surroundings are so user-friendly that they enhance the dining experience without making a song and dance about it. Canteen, in the new Foster + Partners Spitalfields market development in east London, is one such place; it oozes the essence of 'good design' that was so enthusiastically pioneered during the post-war years. Canteen opened in October 2005 and is part of a new wave of restaurants championing British regional produce and cooking that have opened in the UK in recent years.

The trio behind Canteen – Patrick Clayton-Malone, Cass Titcombe and Dominic Lake – considered their 'democratic eating house' concept, which would celebrate the best of British food and craftsmanship, for 18 months before they appointed Universal Design Studio to execute their comprehensive 80-page brief. 'We were very prescriptive', says Clayton-Malone. 'Ultimately we wanted an emphasis on simple, high quality materials that reference the optimism of mid-century design and the classlessness of community spaces like the Royal Festival Hall, town halls and libraries. Longevity was important, we wanted it to last and not date'.

Universal Design Studio, perhaps better known for their retail projects for Stella McCartney and Juicy Couture, were chosen for their 'sensitivity of simplicity'. The multi-disciplinary practice is headed by architect Jonathan Clarke, together with Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby, the successful furniture-design duo. Universal achieved the

honest, 'minimum of frills' look that the clients desired through an economic palette of classic, durable materials – oak, linoleum, ceramic, cork floor tiles and Portoro Italian marble inside and out – which all lend a somewhat nostalgic sense of longevity. Furniture is beautifully basic; simple oak communal refectory-style tables (larger scale versions of BarberOsgerby's 'Home' table) are paired with the designers' 'Portsmouth' benches. The more intimate window seats are made cosier by banquettes upholstered in an olive green fabric by Bute.

Canteen manages to feel utilitarian without being overtly industrial, and democratic without being cheap. Jonathan Clarke of Universal explains, 'We wanted democratic efficiency, but we didn't want to create a fast-food restaurant with high seating or harsh lighting; it needed to reflect the quality of the food. We've made it far more luxurious and comfortable through subtle things, such as lower seating levels, the depth of seating and the thickness of the tables.'

The past proved a rich source of inspiration when looking to satisfy the owners' request that the restaurant be informal, efficient and user-led. 'We studied the materials and design of railway carriages, when train travel was a glamorous experience and thought about how there were always places to put your things,' says Clarke. The results are in the details such as the handy coatrails slotted between each window seating 'compartment', the sliding Corian trays (for keys, mobile phones and the like) and the ceramic 'Hector' lamps that add a warm glow to the window-side tables.

The space – essentially a glass box glazed on three sides – presented a challenge for lighting. 'It was tricky because there's an abundance of natural light,' says Clarke, 'so we dropped the lighting levels, creating warmth and intimacy. Some people have compared it to a Hopperesque diner feel.' All lighting elements were custom-made and deliberately understated. Three metre (9 feet 8 inch) wide horizontal linear pendants in a folded aluminium design are suspended to hang low above the large communal tables. 'The design is about subtlety and simplicity, and by focusing the lighting on the food and diner's faces and hands this character is given to the restaurant,' says Simpson. Such considered lighting also manages to create a sense of intimacy even when diners might be eating communally among strangers.

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Echoes of Nighthawks: an external view of Canteen in the new Spitalfields market development.

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LEFT Ceramic 'Hector' lamps help create a sense of intimacy and warmth despite the floor-to-ceiling glazing.

RIGHT Nostalgia for early train travel led the designers to create 'places to put your things' such as sliding trays and coat rails.

