

# INTERIOR DESIGN

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make room





text: **edie cohen** photography: **matthew millman**

# reservations recommended

**The food isn't the only thing getting rave reviews at San Francisco's Bar Agricole by Aidlin Darling**

**In food-obsessed** San Francisco, Bar Agricole is a must-have reservation. That's largely thanks to *San Francisco Chronicle* reviewer Michael Bauer, who named the restaurant one of his top three newcomers redefining fine dining. But major thanks also go to Aidlin Darling Design, which reinvented a corrugated-zinc warehouse from 1912 as a hip temple to aesthetics at once industrial and crafted. It's identified as a "modern urban tavern" on Bar Agricole's own Web site. Joshua Aidlin, for his part, talks about "exuding permanence and the sensuality of the human hand."

Gutting and retrofitting the three-story interior, Aidlin Darling completed the project in two phases, for separate clients, under very different circumstances. First came an upstairs office for the property's owner-developer, Matarozzi/Pelsinger Builders, plus tenant space. A year and a half later, restaurateur Thad Vogler leased 4,000 square feet on the ground level, and Aidlin returned as lead architect with David Darling on the sidelines as editor. (The two ➤



**Opposite:** The bar area's custom banquettes combine 1-inch-thick ductal concrete, precast on steel molds, with reclaimed oak, wormholes intact. Tabletops are the same wood.

**Above:** Forest Stewardship Council-certified red cedar boards enclose the front patio's Xavier Pauchard chairs, custom concrete tables, and redwood bench.

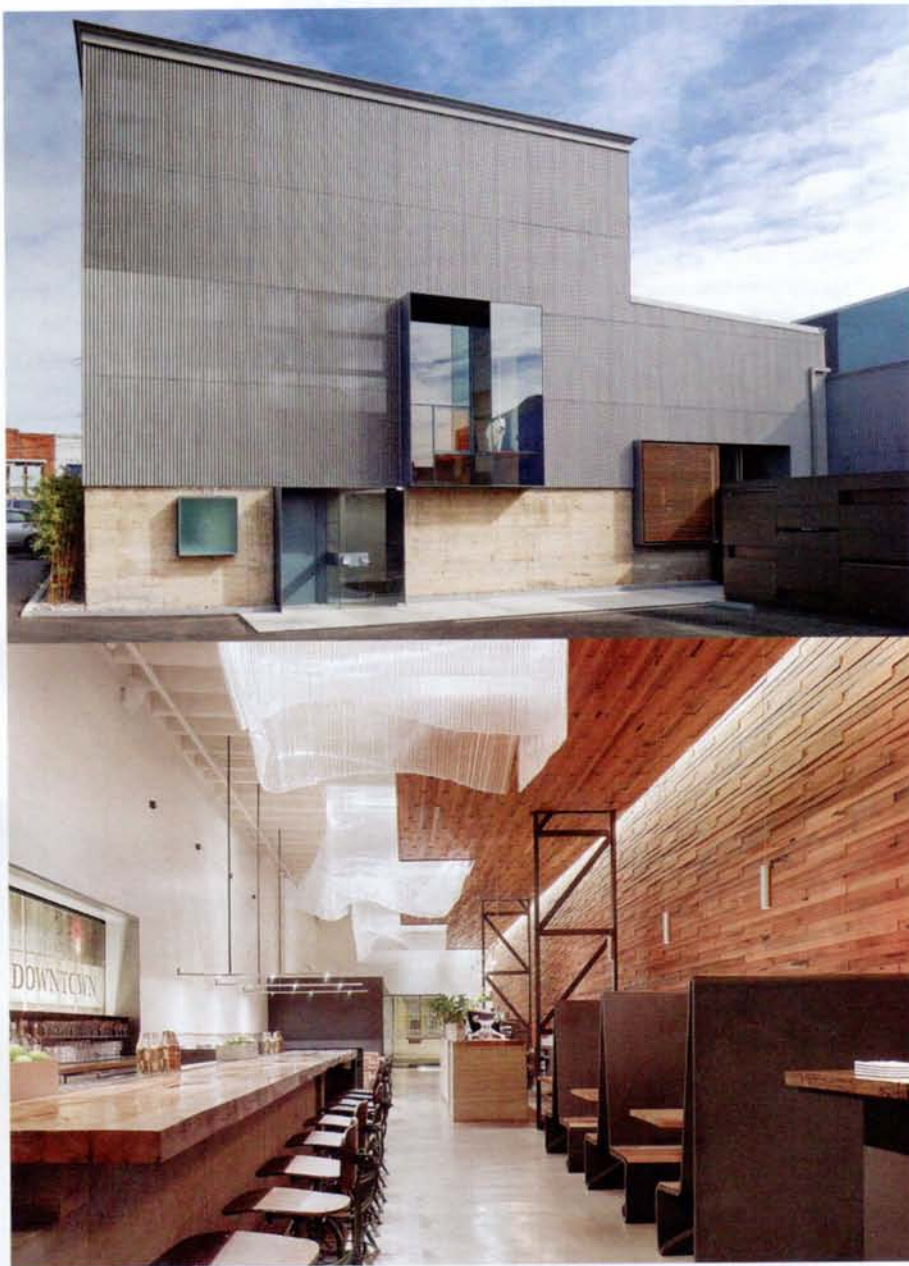
partners always split their firm's projects.) This time, however, Aidlin didn't simply sign on as talent for hire. Vogler's creative counter to the recent economic doldrums, a period that has seen restaurants shuttering faster than opening, was to reduce the need for conventional investors by instituting a design-dining co-op. Aidlin Darling and a group of craftsmen in wood, metal, and glass would put their sweat equity into the interior and end up as part-owners.

They can now toast their joint accomplishment over Bar Agricole cocktails spiked with dill and fennel grown on the cedar-enclosed dining patio. Aidlin sacrificed half the front parking lot for this opportunity to bring the restaurant outdoors—San Francisco's sunny days may be few and far between, but it dazzles when they occur. Then he and a metalworker on the team gave the entire facade a scrim of perforated corrugated zinc, a visual taste of what's to come.

Using concrete and oak as foils for each other, the interior walks a delicate line between tough and inviting, cool and warm.

A suspended canopy that runs the length of the space, bringing down the scale of the 18-foot ceiling, is clad in strips reclaimed from whiskey barrels. The same strips surface the adjacent sidewall. "We mocked it up 10 different ways and finally settled on a fish-scale effect," Aidlin explains. "Then we nailed the strips to the plywood. It's very low-tech." Together, the two perpendicular wooden surfaces remind him of a boat's hull upside down. Oak from 100-year-old barn beams and Napa Valley wine casks can be found, meanwhile, in the form of the simple tables and chairs in both the main dining area and the private dining "grotto." The latter is down a split level, alongside the kitchen and back-of-house.

For the floor, concrete was a ▶



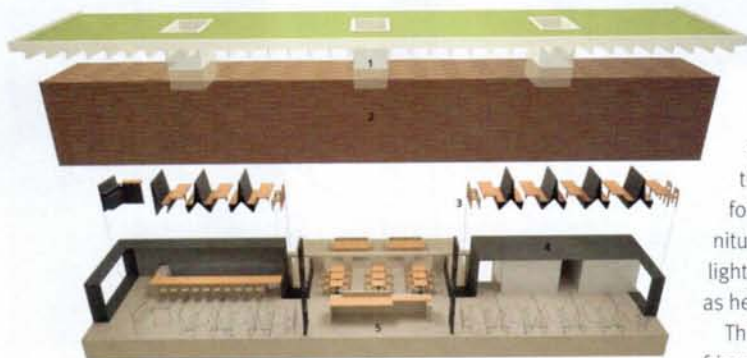
**Top:** The restaurant occupies the ground level of a converted 1912 warehouse, now largely concealed by panels of custom-perforated zinc. **Bottom:** Flooring is polished concrete.

**Opposite:** Mounted behind the bar is Thomas Winz's photographic triptych of San Francisco.









foregone conclusion, installed and polished by a contractor in the partnership. The two bars have bases of board-formed concrete. It's topped by oak at the cocktail bar in front and at the central coffee bar, which doubles as a service station. But concrete for restaurant seating? It turns out that the bar area's ribbonlike banquettes are comfortable enough for a multicourse meal. That's because Aidlin, who's also a furniture designer, added oak seats to the precast ductal concrete, lightweight *and* durable, and gave as much thought to ergonomics as he did to style.

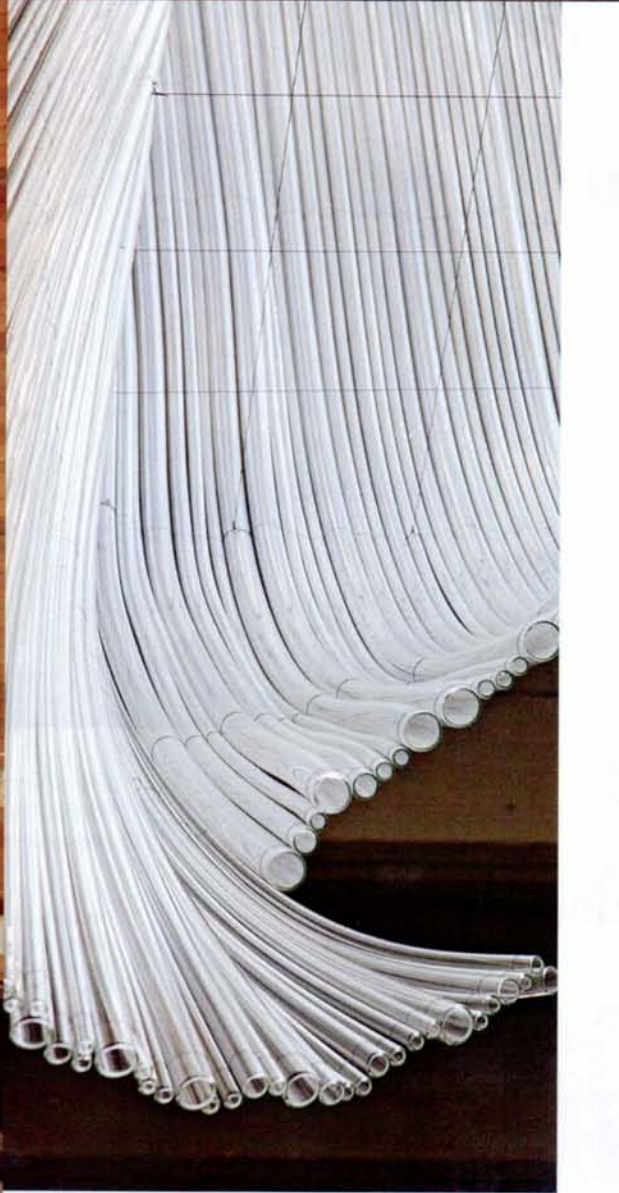
The third key material is glass provided by Nikolas Weinstein, a friend of Aidlin and Vogler who'd been working mainly in Asia and finally got to collaborate with them at home. "There were three skylights in this big, long space, and Josh had punched holes in his wooden canopy to let the sun through," Weinstein explains. His suggestion was to extrude the skylights down as

*Below:* Oak strips from whiskey barrels are nailed to one sidewall.

*Opposite top:* Next to the bar, stairs descend to private dining, the kitchen, and offices. *Opposite bottom:* To make three sculptures, Nikolas Weinstein Studio thermoformed 84-inch-long industrial glass tubes, then interwave stainless-steel cable.









**Top, from left:** The host's stand is the same concrete as the bar's banquettes. Each of the sculptures' glass tubes hangs from a custom aluminum hook around the perimeter of a skylight; photography: Bruce Damonte.  
**Bottom, from left:** Private dining has a view into the main dining area, with its custom Sebastian Parker chairs. The built-in concrete sink in a unisex restroom stretches 10 feet wide.  
**Opposite:** An existing steel Z wall helps provide seismic bracing. Photography: Bruce Damonte.



billowing glass curtain sculptures suspended from the perimeter of the apertures. He started out with regular industrial tubes of clear glass, super-size versions of what you'd find in a chemistry lab. "They have more visual interest than sheet glass, and they're a lot lighter," he adds. To give the curtains their gentle curves, he thermoformed the tubes in a huge, scorchingly hot kiln at Nikolas Weinstein Studios. He also torched the ends of the tubes to create luminous accents at the bottom of each curtain before the tubes were woven together with stainless-steel cable less than 1 millimeter thick.

The glass curtains' ability to amplify sunshine from skylights is one of the building's many eco attributes. It already won a spot on the AIA/COTE

Top 10 Green Projects list, and Aidlin Darling has now applied for LEED Platinum certification for Bar Agricole specifically. As for that *other* rating, the *San Francisco Chronicle* issued the restaurant three out of four stars for its seasonal menus of hand-grown food. 🌱

#### PROJECT TEAM

ROSLYN COLE (PROJECT ARCHITECT); ADRIENNE SWIATOCZA; SHANE CURNY; ADAM ROUSE; AIDLIN DARLING DESIGN; REVOLVER DESIGN; LIGHTING CONSULTANT. SIMON & ASSOCIATES; SUSTAINABILITY CONSULTANT. CHARLES M. SALTER ASSOCIATES; ACOUSTICAL CONSULTANT. BERKELEY STRUCTURAL DESIGN; STRUCTURAL ENGINEER. MHC ENGINEERS; MEP. CHRIS FRENCH METAL; SWERVE; METALWORK. CABINET WORKS CO.; WOODWORK. METROPOLITAN GLASS CORPORATION; SUPREME GLASS COMPANY; GLASSWORK. CONCRETWORKS; CONCRETE CONTRACTOR. CROWIN CONSTRUCTION; LANDSCAPING CONTRACTOR. NORTHERN SUN ASSOCIATES; GENERAL CONTRACTOR.

#### PRODUCT SOURCES

FROM FRONT TECH LIGHTING. PENDANT FIXTURES, TRACK LIGHTING (BAR AREA). TOLIX STEEL DESIGN THROUGH DESIGN WITHIN REACH; CHAIRS (EXTERIOR). BERGHOFF LUMBER; FENCING. AIRSTONE CORP.; PAVERS. UMICORE; SIDING. YENTANA ALUMINUM MANUFACTURING COMPANY; CUSTOM WINDOWS. THROUGH RESTORATION HARDWARE; STOOLS (BAR AREA). SEBASTIAN PARKER FURNITURE DESIGN; CUSTOM CHAIRS (MAIN DINING). AMERICAN STANDARD; SINK FITTINGS (RESTROOM). DANZE; SOAP DISPENSER. AMERICAN CLEAN; TILE. THROUGHOUT RESTORATION TIMBER; LUMBER SUPPLIER. BENJAMIN MOORE & CO.; PAINT.



